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Central versus Local

U.S. and China face mirror-image problems in dealing with climate change

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Coal power plant. Photo by Bruno D. Rodrigues (CC).

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The latest report by the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change has focused attention on the world's two largest emitters of carbon dioxide—the United States and China. More than any other countries on Earth, these two giants hold the key to whether humanity can put the brakes on its greenhouse gas emissions and avoid the dire consequences of global warming.

Tension has been growing in both countries between local and central government approaches to climate change. In the United States, while the Bush administration has been slow to address the problem of carbon emissions, state and local governments have taken it upon themselves to address the issue through new legislation and initiatives. In contrast, China's central government realizes the unsustainability of its pollution-intensive growth, but is having difficulty overcoming the corrupt relationship between local officials and power companies.

United States: From Oil to...What Exactly?

George W. Bush finally acknowledged the existence of climate change in his fifth State of the Union Address. He also called for a 20 percent reduction in gasoline use and a search for "alternative fuels." There was no mention of helping to fund research and development of renewable energy technology such as wind and solar power.

It is questionable, however, whether this emphasis on alternative fuels would result in significant emissions cuts. The European experience with generating electricity from palm oil is a case in point. As *New York Times* reporter Elisabeth Rosenthal pointed out, the increased demand for palm oil to make biofuel led entrepreneurs in Indonesia and Malaysia to cut down rain forest to clear land for palm plantations. The result was a net *gain* in carbon dioxide emissions.

While there's certainly more that can be done to turn agricultural and industrial waste into energy, a switch to large-scale use of biofuels can only be accomplished through either deforestation or shifting of agricultural lands from food production to fuel production.

But biofuel is not the only source of alternative fuel. One idea that has been under discussion in the U.S. is coal gasification—turning ordinary coal into fuel that can be used in cars. This is actually old technology that was first developed in the 1920s in Germany, which used it in a desperate attempt to keep its military vehicles running during the waning days of World War II. In recent years, North Korea has used coal gasification to try to overcome its own fuel shortages.

Coal is cheap and, at least in the United States, readily available. But it is also the dirtiest form of fuel available. Pouring it into American gas tanks would greatly increase carbon emissions—a problem that would be exacerbated by the cheapness of the fuel, which would encourage Americans (already enjoying the lowest fuel prices in the industrialized world) to drive even more.

With the lack of leadership on the federal level, state governments have taken it upon themselves to address the problem of climate change. In the most ambitious example, New Jersey Governor John Corzine signed an executive order requiring the state to cut its emissions totals to 1990 levels by 2020, with a further goal of an 80 percent reduction from current levels by 2050. In California, Governor Arnold Schwarzenegger signed a bill to provide subsidies for rooftop solar panel construction, part of an overall focus on environmental issues that was

largely credited for his reelection last November. Seventeen states and 59 cities currently offer incentives to build greener buildings or require certification under the Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design.

These initiatives are having an effect on corporate America. A group of energy CEOs recently visited Capitol Hill to press lawmakers for mandatory emissions caps. A big part of their motivation is the desire to level the playing field by having a single, federal guideline instead of a variety of state and local regulations. Many companies also hope to cash in on research and development of cleaner energy sources. They feel pressure from investors, who increasingly factor companies' contributions to global warming into investment decisions. The insurance industry is also worried about the huge losses that are likely to result from natural disasters induced and strengthened by climate change.

With this growing alliance between environmental activists, corporate shareholders, and local and state governments, it seems likely that recognition of the need to address climate change will eventually trickle up to the federal level in the United States. But half a world away, in the world's second largest emitter of carbon, exactly the opposite problem is emerging.

China: The Limits of the Top-Down Approach

China's rapid economic rise is being fueled by oil and coal, and a 10 percent annual growth rate has quickly propelled the Middle Kingdom to the front of the line of emissions producers. The central government has acknowledged the environmental problems caused by its rapid growth, and particularly by its reliance on coal, but its ability to address this on the local level has proved lacking.

Jennifer Turner, who runs the China Economic Forum at the Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars, explained in an interview with Radio Free Asia:

> The success of China's economic reforms came from the decentralization of power to local governments. That has meant that local governments are motivated to make money, and local governments also own most of the local industries. So there's clearly no incentive for them to regulate pollution coming from their own industries.

The central government has tried to address these problems by building larger, more efficient power plants to replace smaller, dirty ones, enforcing environmental regulations, and even pioneering a Green GDP system. But their efforts are often thwarted by local officials with close, often corrupt, ties to the very polluters they're supposed to be regulating.

Compounding this problem is the lack of those institutions—a free press, an independent judiciary, and a vibrant civil society—that function to expose and punish corruption in a democratic society. While China in recent years has become somewhat more tolerant of environmental NGOs, it continues to view any organization that is not under direct government control as a potential threat to one-party rule. This deprives the central government of the essential public watchdogs that would otherwise be allies in its attempts to reign in rogue local officials.

The recent murder of Lan Chengzhang, a journalist investigating an illegal coal mine in Datong, has highlighted this problem. Questions have been raised whether Lan, a junior writer with a minor newspaper, may have been trying to shake down the mine owners for a bribe in exchange for not reporting on their activities. Journalists have acknowledged that such cases are common, pointing to the government's tight control of the press as a contributing factor in such corruption.

Thus while China and the United States remain the primary culprits in global warming, they also offer a study in contrasts. There is reason to hope that, in the United States, grassroots activism will eventually force the federal government to take much-needed action on global warming. In China, no real change is likely to happen until the central government begins to loosen its grip and allow civil society to flourish. Ultimately, then, the real answer to climate change may be greater democracy.

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