

EU-China: New Partnerships for the Anthropocene

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Since the 2009 UN Climate Change Conference in Copenhagen, the fight against climate change has been perceived as a global political failure. In the United States, there was growing disillusionment reflecting the frustration and bitter politicization of the topic domestically. The shattered dreams of activists, the fierce opposition of special interests, the reigning mantra of energy independence, and traditional exceptionalism and isolationism all formed a unique American narrative. This mixture of denial and foot dragging spilled over into the way the world perceived the global prospects for dealing with climate change at the international level. Recent declarations and initiatives of the US government have, however, sparked hope that something might be changing ahead of COP21. The joint announcement by Presidents Obama and Xi has given climate action new headlines and new momentum.

While the US government projects renewed energy in dealing with the climate crisis, the political realities in the United States have not sufficiently changed, warning us to not become overly optimistic about official declarations. There is, however, another potential power partnership that may be more suitable for the kind of action necessary to reign in the climate crisis—one between the EU and China.

Through this book project I aim to explore how a dynamic EU-China partnership could represent a more effective paradigm shift and demonstration of global leadership. Both parties have already shown a tangible commitment to renewables. The EU in particular has defended its commitment to a legally binding and rules-based approach to international action on climate change while implementing an ambitious action plan to diversify its energy mix and promote emission reductions and resource efficiency in its own territory. It has used regulations, taxation, outreach programs, standards, policies, laws, directives, media, and politics to create a narrative of economic opportunity while continuing to protect the ecosystem.

China, too, since its tenth Five Year Plan, has begun to implement far-reaching policies for the protection of the environment, has adopted energy efficiency measures, and has reduced its energy-intensive industrial production while consolidating its energy industry. It has invested heavily in the production of renewables for its domestic market as well as for export, has embarked on the creation of a carbon trading scheme, and, most recently, has announced ambitious measures to combat air pollution rates in the capital and other major cities across the country.

If the EU and China would pool their resources, coordinate their efforts, and demonstrate joint leadership to combat the climate crisis, gradually drawing in other countries, might this provide sufficient impetus towards a lasting and deep international collaboration? This is a complex question with many ramifications that suggests an alternative paradigm based on the building of new power alliances. My project aims to explore the political, economic, and societal forces at play in order to understand such a potentially fundamental international development.