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Tackling the black mark in China's growth

By Michael Richardson

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China is rapidly emerging as a key player in climate change politics, both as a major cause of the greenhouse gas emissions that are warming the planet and as a partner in international efforts to curb emissions.

China's role as a leading contributor to global warming was underscored by the recent spurt in growth recorded by its already super-charged economy. The unexpected rise of just over 11% in GDP for the first quarter means that the world's most populous nation could overtake the United States as the largest emitter of greenhouse gases this year or next, at least a year earlier than the International Energy Agency had predicted just five months ago.

China's rise as a "dirty" power is impelling it to take more effective action to cut emissions. It's own position on global warming has evolved significantly in recent months. In the past, it has adopted a stonewall posture, blaming the US, Europe, Japan and other advanced economies for the mess and asserting that they should be responsible for cleaning it up.

China can argue that while it may be an economic powerhouse now, it has contributed less than 8% of the total emissions of carbon dioxide from energy use since 1850, while America is responsible for 29% and Western Europe 27%. Carbon dioxide, or CO₂, is produced by burning fossil fuels like coal, oil and gas for heat, power and transport. Many scientists say it is the main contributor to global warming.

China can also argue that although it may soon overtake the US as the top emitter of CO₂ - largely because it gets around 70% of its energy from coal, the highest carbon-emitting fuel - its per capita emissions remain far below those of wealthy countries. Beijing has also made the point that much of the growth in China's emissions is to produce goods consumed in the West.

Yet the scale and scope of Chinese pollution far outpaces what occurred in the US and Europe during their industrial revolutions. If it continues unchecked - and other big emerging economies, like India and Brazil, follow a similar high-carbon growth path - the impact on the health of the planet could be catastrophic.

China agreed this month (April) with Japan to take part in negotiations on a framework for limiting global warming after 2012. This shift in position is a potentially important step forward in tackling global warming. It shows that China is ready to engage in international talks on limiting emissions. The existing accord – the Kyoto Protocol signed in Japan a decade ago after two years of negotiations – only binds 35 developed nations and the European Community to cut CO2 and other greenhouse emissions by 5% below 1990 levels by 2012. The US and Australia refused to ratify the deal. They argued it would damage their economies and that major carbon polluters in the developing world must also join.

China is shifting ground because it realizes it must be a player if it wants to shape any post-2012 framework. Chinese scientists are also warning that China will suffer badly from the adverse consequences of a warmer planet. Its own water and air pollution are already among the world's worst. Large parts of the country are short of water and this will become even more serious as glaciers on the Qinghai-Tibetan plateau – a vital source of fresh water for about 750 million people in China, India and other parts of Asia – continue to melt. The Chinese government's first national assessment of global climate change warned bluntly in December that economic growth and development could be undermined.

China, like Australia, the US, Europe and many other countries, has a poor record in making cuts and applying policies that are economically and politically painful. To encourage it to do so, a number of developed nations have offered substantial aid and technical assistance to China for emission control.

The first significant pointer to whether the big polluters will do any better in future will come in June at a meeting of the Group of 8 advanced economies plus Russia, chaired by Germany. China and four other big emerging economies will also attend. Climate change will be a key issue.

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