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Green goals take pride of place

China stands as a torchbearer in the global effort to tackle environmental pollution through sustainable development

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For *China Daily Asia Weekly*

As China works toward its 2020 goal of a “moderately prosperous society”, there is growing attention on the government’s ecological policies and the people’s aspirations for a better environment.

The country has made great strides in environmental protection in recent years, and building on these achievements will be a key focus for the country. Speaking to the 19th National Congress of the Communist Party of China last month, General Secretary Xi Jinping highlighted the successes and called for more.

“The construction of ecological civilization has achieved remarkable results,” said Xi, also president of China. In a detailed speech, he urged the “vigorous promotion of the construction of ecological civilization” and a more thorough implementation of “green development” concepts.

The Xi Jinping Thought on Socialism with Chinese Characteristics for a New Era, now enshrined in the Party’s Constitution, holds the promise of addressing “unbalanced and inadequate development”.

“The real economy awaits improvement, and we have a long way to go in protecting the environment,” said Xi. “Taking a driving seat in international cooperation to respond to climate change, China has become an important participant, contributor and torchbearer in the global endeavor for ecological civilization.”

China is a signatory to the Paris climate agreement, which entered into force in November 2016.

Of the 195 members of the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change, 169 had ratified the accord as of October. The Paris agreement requires countries to make “nationally determined contributions” to lower carbon emissions.

China’s commitment to lower greenhouse gases and its push to strengthen environmental protection have gathered momentum, with the country’s global leadership role crystallizing in the wake of the Paris agreement.

As part of the deal, China committed to take steps that went significantly beyond what the global community expected. China is working to reduce carbon emissions by 60 to 65 percent per unit of GDP by 2030, compared to 2005 levels. The



Horses graze near wind turbines in North China’s Inner Mongolia autonomous region. China is turning to green sources of energy to build a sustainable economy. AFP

country also plans to phase out the manufacturing of cars powered by fossil fuels.

Over the past few years, China has emerged as a leader in environmental protection, both domestically and globally. This is at a time when the US announced its withdrawal from the Paris climate accord, and as other countries struggle to cut emissions and slow down climate change.

For China, better environmental governance and protection are closely linked to the type of development that Xi is working to ensure. In his own words: “Green mountains and clear water are equal to mountains of gold and silver.”

“President Xi’s words are very vivid and suitable; everyone wants to enjoy green mountains and clear water,” said Zhou Xiaojian, principal and managing director in China for environmental consultancy Ramboll Environ. “That’s why the government has been emphasizing environmental policies.”

These include increasing the fines for violating related regulations and strengthening administrative accountability.

“For companies and projects, the

fine for not meeting the environmental protection standards can be 1 to 5 percent of the entire investment now — much more than the previous maximum amount, and individuals can be held responsible for misconduct as well,” Zhou told *China Daily Asia Weekly*.

“Local governments are motivated by the central government in enhancing the administration of environmental protection, and people have realized the importance of, and are paying more attention to, preserving green mountains and clear water,” he said.

“Rather than paying the large fine and losing profit over production suspension, factories surely prefer investing that money in improving anti-pollution measures.”

Speaking to the United Nations in Geneva, Switzerland, in January, Xi underlined China’s willingness to take a leadership role.

“The Paris agreement is a milestone in the history of climate governance. We must ensure this endeavor is not derailed,” Xi said. “All parties should work together to implement the Paris agreement. China will continue to take steps to tackle climate

change and fully honor its obligations.”

China wants to replicate its many successes in economic development and poverty reduction to improve the environment.

“We have to understand that to protect the environment is to preserve our productivity, and to improve the environment is to develop our productivity,” Xi said back in 2013.

“We should be fully aware of the urgency and difficulty of protecting the environment and reducing pollution, as well as the significance and necessity of improving the environment ... We should take the responsibility for the sake of our people and our children.”

During the 18th Party Congress in 2012, the Communist Party of China listed ecological civilization as one of its five priorities.

Xi highlighted this priority again in April this year during a trip to Nanning, the capital of South China’s Guangxi Zhuang autonomous region. During a tour of the Nakao River, he noted that development at the cost of the environment is meaningless and protecting ecology and

harmonious growth should be a core principle.

This theme, which Xi has highlighted time and again, was evident during the latest Party Congress and took pride of place along with other key priorities, such as developing a moderately prosperous society.

China has emerged as an active participant and leader in global governance issues linked to various areas of development, including climate change and energy security, said Eric Fishwick, head of economic research at CLSA, an independent brokerage and investment house.

China’s 13th Five-Year Plan (2016-20) puts significant emphasis on environmental management and protection, as well as clean energy and emission controls, ecological protection and security, and developing green industries.

“This demonstrates a clear focus on charting a sustainable course for the economy in the long term and the desire to play a global role in curbing greenhouse gas emissions,” Wu Qing and Sally Audeyev, partners at King & Wood Mallesons, said in a note. The law firm carries out extensive work in China.