

China's actions on the environment in 2017 show firm commitment to the ideal of modernization characterized by harmony with nature

By DAVID HO in Hong Kong
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The environment and the importance of fighting, and perhaps reversing, climate change took center stage this year for China and President Xi Jinping.

China's role as an environmental leader became that much more important after United States President Donald Trump's decision to withdraw from the Paris Agreement on climate change. Trump, who was elected in November 2016, announced in June this year that the US would pull out of the agreement, but it cannot formally leave the accord until 2020.

Xi, in his keynote speech in January 2017 at the World Economic Forum in Davos, Switzerland, made it clear that safeguarding the environment is a key priority for China. "All signatories should stick to it instead of walking away from it," Xi said of the Paris Agreement, "as this is a responsibility we must assume for future generations."

Speaking in October to the 19th National Congress of the Communist Party of China, Xi mentioned the environment 89 times, and quickly focused on the issue of building an "ecological civilization".

"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," Xi said. "Any harm we inflict on nature will eventually return to haunt us."

The goal, he said, is to "develop a new model of modernization with humans developing in harmony with nature".

China is backing those comments with firm action. The reforms unveiled last week to the country's carbon market is a key example.

A new program allows companies to sell their unused carbon allocations, encouraging them to reduce carbon dioxide emissions.

Companies that emit more than 26,000 tons of carbon per year would qualify. Those who pollute less would be able to monetize their unused quota by selling it to others through a cap-and-trade system.

China's carbon market is already the world's largest and includes about 1,700 companies in the power sector. This already means that more than 3 billion metric tons of carbon emissions will be affected.

The exchange will eventually encompass around 6,000 companies across eight industries.



Visitors look at an electric bus during the green vehicle industry expo in Hangzhou, East China's Zhejiang province, on Sept 15. The nation's efforts to tackle environmental matters accelerated in 2017. IMAGINECHINA

Green push pays off

The development of this carbon market fulfils part of China's commitments under the Paris Agreement.

In a push to develop more environmentally friendly transport, government departments were recently told to set an example by adopting domestic green energy vehicles.

China's pursuit of more green energy has been a huge success for Xi and the country in 2017.

A goal to generate 105 gigawatts of solar power by 2020 was met in July. According to the National Energy Administration, the country had a photovoltaic power generation installation capacity of 102 GW by the end of June and then added another 10.52 GW to its national total in July to cross the goal line.

At the start of the year, China stated that it would invest \$360 billion in renewable energy by 2020.

"I do notice a trend toward clean energy sources. The past seven years have had an impact on traditional energy industries, particularly coal, as people are becoming increasingly aware of its effects and the government works toward protecting citizens from it," said Zhu Hongwen, a partner at Sunshine Law Firm.

As a lawyer focused on the energy sector, Zhu has seen a lot of investments in renewable energy like solar and wind. She expects the growth to continue.

Ambitious projects include the 1 billion yuan (\$151 million) investment by China's Three Gorges New Energy Corporation to construct the world's

largest floating solar power project, a 150-megawatt power plant in the eastern province of Anhui. Construction began in July and is expected to be completed by May 2018.

China is also working to reduce its dependence on coal, even if challenges emerged after a rushed attempt to switch from coal to natural gas for heating this winter.

Huang Wei, a campaigner for environmental conservation group Greenpeace East Asia, said some local governments waited too long to build the necessary natural gas infrastructure and acquire supplies, which led to a shortage. China's ministry of environment issued an urgent notice telling people to burn coal for heating if necessary. Despite these hiccups, the central government remains committed to making the switch.

A recently released five-year plan intends to phase out coal-fired appliances in the north of the country by 2021.

"They have also shut down coal plants in Beijing by March this year and moved them to the western regions to bond with more renewable energy resources, like solar and wind power," said Huang.

"The Chinese government has been taking on environmental matters at an unprecedented level this year, which is great news," said Huang, who believes policy signals are crucial in accelerating change in the mainland.

Another promising sign is the cen-

tral government's push against air pollution. A surge in air pollution in Beijing in late 2016 set the tone for efforts this year.

In January, the mayor of Beijing said the capital would keep PM2.5 (hazardous airborne particles of 2.5 microns in diameter or smaller) at an annual average of around 60 micrograms per cubic meter. Although the level is still above the World Health Organization's recommended standard of 20-25 micrograms at most, it would mark progress.

The concentration of PM2.5 pollutants went from more than 100 micrograms per cubic meter in Beijing in 2012 and 2013 to around 75 in 2016, based on US embassy monitoring data. Huang said the government took measures to seriously tackle the problem this year.

"They found that scattered smaller factories contributed to the rise in pollution, as over 60 percent did not have the proper filtering equipment or were located in places they shouldn't be."

Huang also commended efforts that make local officials accountable for the pollution in their districts, which she said show "great determination" in the central government's ongoing crackdown on air pollution.

The central government also issued a guideline this year for ecological red lines in the country, with the aim of clearly defining protected zones where development is strictly prohibited by 2020.

Zhang Jing, a food and agriculture

campaigner for Greenpeace, said the concept was first floated in 2012.

"The guidelines issued in February this year show that the government is really stepping up conservation efforts. It's a creative concept and attempt at environmental conservation. Fourteen provinces have been told to draw up the red lines by the end of the year," said Zhang.

A landfill project in Tiaozini, in East China's Jiangsu province, is currently under Greenpeace's watch. The area is located along the East Asian-Australasian Flyway, one of the nine major routes for migratory birds worldwide. It is also home to a few endangered bird species.

Greenpeace has been working to get the Jiangsu provincial government to include Tiaozini within the province's ecological red lines.

For other areas, Zhang foresees a lot of negotiation between government, conservation groups and corporations over the red lines before the 2020 end date. But the campaigner is hopeful that the government's efforts to go green this year will translate to better outcomes, not just for flora and fauna but also for the rest of the world.

"If other countries can see the sustainability and concrete benefits of these efforts, hopefully they will adopt it as well," Zhang said.

As Xi said in his Party Congress speech in October: "The modernization that we pursue is one characterized by harmonious coexistence between man and nature."