

China's not alone in environmental crisis

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Abstract (Summary)

Multinational companies received contracts to help build China's infrastructure - the power plants, electrical grids, railways for coal transport, natural gas pipelines, highways, ports, and airports.

Full Text

(700 words)

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BEIJING

LEADERS FROM around the world gathered these past two weeks at the Bali climate change talks to chart our collective future. Looking out my window in Beijing through the dense haze that envelops this powerful city with world-record levels of smog, dust, and deadly pollution, it is easy to understand why many there perceived China as the Godzilla of global warming. As a country choking on its own "success," now producing over 20 percent of global greenhouse gases, China makes for easy scapegoating. However, targeting China does little to address the fundamental causes of climate change, mitigate its consequences, or provide lasting solutions.

The West has worked long and hard to transform China into what it is today: an industrial platform for the world where some of the most noxious, occupationally hazardous production processes are concentrated. Western governments and corporations have not only benefited, but have helped lead China down this road of energy-intensive, environmentally destructive development with resulting rapid increases in greenhouse gas emissions.

In addition, Western consumers have directly profited from the inexpensive products that pour from China's factories. Fundamental to the rise of China's emissions is the rapacious growth of consumption, and the championing of it - especially in the West. The carbon dioxide embedded in China's exports to the United States in 2004 alone is estimated at 1.8 billion tons, equivalent to 30 percent of the US total.

The World Bank, Japan, and Western donor countries have provided more than \$200 billion in loans to China since the early 1980s - the largest global flow of development aid during this period - to create the infrastructure that has enabled China to become the world's factory. Multinational companies received contracts to help build China's infrastructure - the power plants, electrical grids, railways for coal transport, natural gas pipelines, highways, ports, and airports. Combined with its large, mobile, low-cost workforce of rural peasants, China became highly attractive to globalizing companies.

Simultaneously, Western leaders have promoted neoliberal economic policies increasing capital mobility. For 25 years, corporations moved factories to China, often partnering with local companies and subcontractors to take advantage of lax environmental and occupational conditions and achieve higher profits. In moving manufacturing jobs to China, footloose corporations have de-industrialized other parts of the world.

China's global integration was further enabled by Beijing's own devotion to rapid growth at any cost, averaging more than 10 percent per year for over two decades. Paradoxically, the resulting environmental destruction threatens that very growth, with hundreds of protests around the country every day reflecting the big divide between those who reap the profits and those who suffer the consequences of China's far-flung production networks. While the greatest benefits fill corporate coffers in China and abroad, the real costs are imposed upon local environments and Chinese workers' bodies.

The long-term destructive environmental consequences of China's development path are well known to the country's leadership and citizens. Official statistics point to pollution as the primary cause of death. And global warming's catastrophic consequences for China provide strong incentives for action. The rapidly shrinking Himalayan water tower foretells a dire future for billions in China, India, and Southeast Asia as Asia's rivers dry up. This helps explain China's increasing engagement with the international community at the Bali talks.

But China's global integration means its footprint of environmental destruction does not stop at its borders. The world's companies pull global resources through China from far-flung corners of the planet - timber from Siberia, Mozambique, and Burma; petrochemicals and minerals from Sudan, Indonesia, and Bolivia. The impacts on global warming through deforestation, as just one example, are magnified far beyond China itself.

The West must acknowledge its own role in shaping and benefiting from China's global integration and rapid increase in consumption of resources. Instead of being diverted by the relatively easy and therefore attractive answer of blaming China or any single country for rising greenhouse emissions, we must focus on the real root of the problem: a highly unequal and unsustainable international system of production, distribution, and consumption that insulates winners from losers, and delivers the greatest share of the benefits to a lucky few while jeopardizing the future for everyone else.

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