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U.S and China Environmental Policies: Same Planet; Different Worldview

By David A. Schwerin Ph.D.

My first visit to China was in 2001. I was struck by the laser-like focus on economic growth and the lack of concern for the environment. I constantly heard that the environment would have to wait until more people were lifted out of poverty. On the surface, this attitude seemed reasonable. But I tried to convince the audiences I addressed that there would be serious consequences if environmental issues weren't given prompt consideration.

During each of my six trips to follow, I noticed changes. Today the emphasis is much different. There are new priorities and strict regulations on how people and industry can impact China's land, water and air. Rather than stressing economic development exclusively, the government acknowledges that sustainable development must include the proper relationship between man and nature and see nature as essential to the country's quality of life. The environment could no longer be indiscriminately exploited.

We should reconcile industrial development with nature and pursue harmony between man and nature to achieve sustainable development of the world and the all-round development of man.

Statement by H.E. Xi Jinping
President of the People's Republic of China
At the General Debate of the 70th Session of the UN General Assembly
New York, 28 September 2015

I attended a U.S. State Department function around the same time President Xi gave his UN presentation. President Xi's speech at the State Department reemphasized his respect for the environment and determination to bring nature and people back into harmony.

Recent changes in China reflect the President's stated philosophy. Responsibility for protecting the environment is now under a new Ministry of Ecological Environment, an expanded version of the old Ministry of Environmental Protection. The ministry's mandate includes efforts to curb greenhouse gas emissions, a challenge given China's position as the world's biggest greenhouse gas emitter. The ministry will also take charge of protecting water resources, another significant issue in China. Consolidating oversight powers into a single ministry should strengthen environmental policy. In addition, a new Ministry of Natural Resources will oversee land use and urban planning as well as allocation of rights to water, grasslands and forests. Given the competition over land rights between farmers and developers this is a positive development.

These changes should result in better enforcement of environmental regulations and resource protection by consolidating and streamlining formerly scattered regulatory authorities. Of equal importance, the new regulatory bodies will have the power to fulfill a mandate that is of great political importance to China's leaders.

China's one-party system enables government mandates to be affected quickly. Unfortunately, such accelerated action often results in short-term improvements given priority over long-term structural changes. Often, hastily researched initiatives create inefficiencies, unattainability and waste.

Under the current administration in the U.S, environmental policies are moving backwards, absolutely and relative to most other countries. The 1960's saw laws and regulations enacted to protect the environment and rehabilitate sectors of the ecosystem. The focus on sound environmental stewardship continued, with occasional bumps, for more than 50 years. Then, almost from the beginning of the Trump administration in early 2017, priorities shifted dramatically. Jobs, jobs, jobs became the mantra. It reminds me of what I heard in China at the turn of the century.

I am committed to keeping our air and water clean but always remember that economic growth enhances environmental protection. Jobs matter.

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Reducing unemployment is one of governments' highest priorities. Now that unemployment is at historic lows, it is not necessary or wise to decrease environmental efforts in the name of further job creation. As a matter of fact, in any economic scenario, growth is of little value if air is not breathable, water not drinkable and land not fertile. Notwithstanding the current positive economic environment, the current administration continues to decimate ecological regulations and backtrack on prior environmental commitments. There is clear evidence that more frequent and violent hurricanes, tornadoes, floods and droughts adversely affect millions. In the view of the current administration, these "acts of nature" don't seem to rise to the same level of importance as more jobs. Nor is much attention being paid to increased incidences of asthma, skin cancer, cholera, dysentery and many other illnesses. It is not a coincidence that 2017 was one of the most expensive in U.S history for natural disasters. It shouldn't be surprising that many scientists attribute the unusually intense weather to climate change. Moreover, the fact that green policies also create lots of jobs seems to get lost in the discussions. Reducing pollution also lowers illness-related absenteeism, improves productivity and enhances a company's reputation. Employees feel better working for a company that cares for the environment and are, therefore, more committed and motivated. As I told my Chinese audiences in 2001, if you don't take care of the environment, the price for that neglect will be steeper and sooner than most expect.

The unconventional Trump administration has brought many changes—both realized and anticipated—to U.S. environmental policy. Many of the actions roll back Obama-era policies that aimed to curb climate change and limit environmental pollution, while others threaten to limit federal funding for science and the environment.

Based on a continuously updated list compiled by *National Geographic*, policy reversals include:

- The Trump administration rejected the Paris climate agreement and an array of prior U.S. policies designed to study and mitigate the effects of climate change, and instituted cuts to research on renewable energy. In addition, President Trump announced that the United States will no longer regard climate change by name as a national security threat.
- EPA Administrator Scott Pruitt and U.S. Secretary of Transportation Elaine Chao announced that the EPA will reconsider the Obama-era emissions requirements for vehicles with model years between 2022 and 2025.
- The Trump EPA has dropped "once in, always in" (OIAI), a Clinton-era EPA policy that aimed to lock in reductions of hazardous air pollution from industrial sources.

- EPA Administrator Scott Pruitt declared that he will sign a proposal that would eliminate the Clean Power Plan (CPP), claiming that “the war on coal is over.”
- President Trump has signed an executive order revoking federal flood-risk standards that incorporated rising sea levels predicted by climate science.
- President Trump’s 2018 budget calls for massive cuts in scientific research and in many environmental programs that protect air and water.

In comparison, the Chinese are strong advocates for:

- the Paris agreement
- restricting driving at certain times and in certain locations
- curbing coal use whenever possible
- launching a national carbon market, which will be the largest in the world once operational
- relying on scientists to inform their environmental policies.

All is not lost. Almost immediately after the Trump administration withdrew from the Paris agreement, more than 1200 governors, mayors and businesses promised to do whatever they could to help the U. S. meet the previously-agreed-to climate goals. Over 30 states have targets for how much of their electricity needs to come from renewable or alternative energy sources. California has a cap and trade system to put a price on emissions. New York City is one of several working to increase energy efficiency by updating building codes and improving mass transit and electric vehicle charging stations. Apple and Google have stated goals of getting all or almost all their energy from renewable sources. Numerous utility companies plan to close coal-fired power plants.

America’s top automobile makers want Trump to accept that climate change isn’t a “hoax” and that the standards his administration puts into place must take that environmental threat into account. The Alliance of Automobile Manufacturers (AAM), the industry trade group that represents auto leaders like GM, Ford and Volkswagen has sent a letter to President Trump urging him to consider the environmental implications of his changes to the EPA. The automakers told Trump that climate change is real and can’t be ignored.

Automakers remain committed to increasing fuel efficiency requirements, which yield everyday fuel savings for consumers while also reducing emissions — because climate change is real, and we have a continuing role in reducing greenhouse gases and improving fuel efficiency.

David Schwietert

AAM’s Executive Vice President of federal government relations.

The U.S. and China have come full circle in their understanding of humanity’s relationship to nature and their respective approaches to the environment. In broad terms, the U.S. has reduced, rejected and dismantled environmental policies put into effect over many decades by numerous administrations, both Democratic and Republican. China, on the other hand, is augmenting, strengthening and enforcing environmental policies to reduce pollution and to be a responsible world citizen. It will be easier to make the necessary changes in environmental policies now than be forced to make them from a position of weakness. As the Chinese learned well, remedial, social and health costs can be very high when the environment is neglected.