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Hong Kong's Response to Climate Change: Waiting for A Green Light from Beijing

By Paul G. Harris

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In December, diplomats will meet in Copenhagen in an attempt to complete what many hope will be a strong agreement to fight global warming and climate change. They will grapple with how to address these problems in light of new scientific evidence showing that the adverse effects of global warming are happening sooner and are more severe than scientists predicted only a year or two ago.¹ Hong Kong could play a significant part in both national and international efforts to mitigate global warming and combat the effects of climate change, particularly by acting as a role model for other Chinese cities and regions. However, whether or not it will do so is likely to be decided in Beijing rather than in Hong Kong itself.

Some countries, notably in Europe, have started to take serious steps to limit and in several cases reduce their emissions of carbon dioxide and other greenhouse gases. However, those efforts have been very slow in coming, and any politically realistic scenarios for action by industrialized countries to reduce their greenhouse pollution in the next decade or two will be swamped by increased emissions from the developing world, especially China.

One reason for the world's slow and weak response to climate change is a game of "you go first" being played between rich and poor countries, particularly between China and the United States. Those two countries now agree that much more needs to be done—the United States no longer denies the problem, while China has come to acknowledge its major role. But, at the same time, China rightly expects the United States and other wealthy countries to do much more to reduce their pollution and provide aid to help developing countries grow more sustainably and cope with the effects of climate change. After all, China's average per capita emissions of greenhouse gases remain well below those of the developed world – although far above levels in the world's least developed countries.

Even as China's per capita emissions remain relatively low, the total is enormous. As a result of its large population and rapid economic growth, those emissions are ballooning. In 2006 China overtook the United States to become the largest national source,² and its emissions will continue to increase unless there are major new policies and actions.³

China and Three Dilemmas of Climate Change

How can the world reconcile China's new status as the largest polluter of the atmosphere with its justifiable expectations for continued economic development? In answering this question, we might start by thinking about three dilemmas presented by a rising China:

A Practical Dilemma: China's efforts to limit its carbon dioxide emissions, while commendable, are nowhere near enough to reduce national emissions substantially. Pollution will increase, albeit at a somewhat slower rate, as China's economy grows. Without much more robust Chinese action in the near future, all Western efforts to prevent climate change's worst effects will fail. Industrialized countries understandably are not enthusiastic about doing what is necessary, including implementing economically and politically disruptive policies at home, if nothing is gained. Thus, avoiding concrete and measurable action is no longer a practical option for China – not if the world is to make substantial progress in fighting climate change this century.

An Ethical Dilemma: China has argued for decades that developing countries should not be required to slow their development to fix environmental problems caused by the industrialized world. Its argument that rich countries should substantially reduce their greenhouse pollution and provide developing countries with aid to address climate change seems unassailable. Rich countries caused the problem and they ought to fix it before requiring developing countries to act. But this argument applies only if we think narrowly in terms of governments and states. If we think in terms of people, China's argument is much weaker. After all, many millions of Chinese, including the seven million in Hong Kong, are now living affluent lifestyles just like those of people in the West. If it is wrong for London and New York to pollute the atmosphere, it must be equally wrong for affluent Hong Kong and Shanghai to do so.

A Political Dilemma: while industrialized countries are indeed responsible for most of today's climate change problem, many millions of affluent Chinese are, and increasingly will be, responsible for much of the future's problem. It may be politically impossible for Western governments to ask their citizens to change their lifestyles substantially, and pay more for energy, when they are bombarded with television images of Chinese people joining the global consumer class – something for which the Chinese government is rightly proud, but which has profoundly negative consequences for the global environment.

How can we escape these dilemmas? The solution to the you-go-first mentality of climate change diplomacy may be found in an acknowledgment by Beijing that not all Chinese people are poor. Affluent Chinese have a responsibility to act now to fight climate change even if China as a state justifiably continues to reject such a responsibility. Put another way, all of China need not wait until Americans and Australians go first. Affluent people in China can act alongside Americans and Australians. To be sure, most Chinese people are poor and can be expected to use more energy, as is their right. However, until clean-energy alternatives are much more widely in use, affluent Chinese should cut back alongside most Westerners.

China could be a leader in the battle against climate change without limiting its economic development. By formally agreeing to have its wealthier people reduce pollution, it could break the diplomatic deadlock and remove the last excuse that Western governments use to avoid meeting their responsibilities. By doing so, Beijing would send a powerful message around the world. And this is where Hong Kong can play, if it chooses to, a key role in rescuing the international climate change regime. If it stepped up and took the lead among Chinese cities and regions by reducing its own greenhouse pollution, the world – and indeed affluent cities on the mainland – would see affluent Chinese people sharing the climate change burden. This could have great political impact in Western countries and in the international negotiations on climate change.

Hong Kong's State of Denial

Hong Kong and its affluent residents are obliged to act because they can do so; it is unethical for them to ignore the suffering wrought by climate change on the world's poor and vulnerable people and countries. To be sure, Hong Kong already has responded with

several small steps. It belatedly joined the C40 group of cities aiming to lead efforts to address climate change,⁴ and has put in place some modest measures to reduce the city's environmental impact.⁵ But so far Hong Kong and its affluent people have not begun to match their strong capability for taking action against global warming and climate change with a strong willingness to do so; the tiny steps to address these problems are far too few, given the territory's tremendous wealth.

The Hong Kong government seems to be in denial regarding local responsibility for global warming and its potential as a leader in combating climate change. During a visit to the Legislative Council in July 2009, the chief executive, Donald Tsang, was criticized for his administration's failure to take climate change more seriously and for his unwillingness to attend the Copenhagen conference. In response, Mr. Tsang tried to direct blame at the United Kingdom, saying that it, not Hong Kong, "must work harder"⁶ – despite a plethora of new climate change initiatives at all levels of British policy making in recent years.⁷ He described Hong Kong's reduction in energy *intensity* (the more efficient use of each unit of energy) as a sign that it was doing its part to address climate change, despite a continuing emissions increase. He used precisely the same argument made by former US President George W. Bush, who said the American economy's more efficient use of energy was a sign that it was doing its part, even as US emissions continued to rise. The chief executive has also suggested that Hong Kong's contribution to climate change is too small to really matter – only about 0.2 % of total global greenhouse gas emissions⁸ – overlooking the implication that we should therefore ignore the emissions of every city around the world, which would mean ignoring pollution from half the world's population.

The chief executive compared Hong Kong's per capita carbon emissions with those of the United Kingdom. Because the latter exceed the former, he argued that Britain deserves more blame than Hong Kong. While there may be much truth in criticisms of the British and other Western governments, Mr. Tsang failed to acknowledge that the per capita carbon emissions of Londoners are half those of the UK as a whole, putting Londoners' emissions almost exactly on par with those of Hong Kong people. Meanwhile, Hong Kong's per capita emissions are twice those of China. If we assume, as the chief executive seems to do, that we can justifiably look at cities without considering their larger environmental footprints, then Londoners are setting an excellent example for the rest of the UK, while Hong Kong is setting a terrible example for the rest of China.

The Tsang remarks in recent years parrot the official position of the Chinese state. For example, in 2007 he said that "developed countries have the responsibility to provide leadership under the core principle of common but differentiated responsibilities" (and, in contrast to his remarks two years later, he cited the UK as being an example of this leadership!).⁹ He said that addressing global warming must be "spearheaded by the strongest and wealthiest nations."¹⁰

Strangely, in the same speech that blamed developed countries for climate change and called on them to lead action against it, Mr. Tsang said "combating climate change will only be successful if we all face up to our responsibilities" and "every individual can and must play a part to protect the environment for future generations."¹¹ This leaves one asking why the Hong Kong Government is not doing more to persuade, prod and require affluent Hong Kong people to play the part he describes. The probable reason, apart from the usual resistance from entrenched economic interests that obtains almost everywhere, is that doing so might set a precedent for other parts of China and would go against the grain of official state policy of refusing to acknowledge any duty to limit greenhouse pollution while demanding that the West cut its own emissions and finance cuts in China. In other words, this issue touches on the sensitive topic of foreign affairs; the Hong Kong government does not want to be seen as going it alone and setting standards that other Chinese cities might be asked to follow. Hong Kong's explicit position is that it is part of developing China, implying that it should be treated like a poor city in a relatively poor

country.

Thus, rather than acknowledge that it should and can do more, in keeping with its level of development and affluence, the Hong Kong government's official view is like that of Beijing: blame the world's wealthy countries for the problem. Beijing may have a case for doing this, but Hong Kong does not. And as millions of Chinese people join the global consumer class, even Beijing's case grows weaker. It is becoming increasingly difficult for China to simultaneously tout its growing economic and political status globally while hiding behind lingering domestic poverty as a way to escape explicit legal responsibility for environmental action. The pressure on Hong Kong (and possibly Shanghai and other wealthy Chinese cities) to take the lead, even while the rest of China focuses on economic growth and eradication of poverty, is likely to grow quite rapidly in coming years.

One thing that makes Hong Kong's resistance especially curious is that if it were still a British colony, the chief executive would likely be making the same case for action as came from London recently: much more needs to be done, and laws and regulations need to be put in place to nudge capable and affluent individuals toward doing their duty to reduce atmospheric pollution. If Hong Kong were still ruled from London, Hong Kong people would effectively share that duty with the people of Britain. But when sovereignty was transferred to Beijing, those obligations were instantly removed. This is ethically absurd, but it is the official view and the legal reality, with policy to match. The Hong Kong government appears to be a willing, even eager, hostage to the national and international climate change policy of Beijing. If it were still hostage to London, Hong Kong's policies would likely be much more proactive, consistent with recent changes in British policies.

Waiting for a Green Light toward a Green Future

Hong Kong could lead the rest of China if it chose, but it probably requires a green light – and probably a very sturdy push – from Beijing before it will do so. Until Beijing decides that affluent parts of China should behave in a way consistent with their affluence, there is unlikely to be robust action in Hong Kong. Indeed, other Chinese cities, such as Shanghai, are more likely to become the Chinese leaders in addressing the problem.

The Chinese city or cities that take on this leadership role would help address the practical, ethical and political dilemmas of international climate politics. They would help move China's affluent millions toward less polluting lifestyles, thereby bringing forward the date when China's greenhouse gas emissions stop increasing and start falling. They would end the ethical absurdity of China's increasingly affluent classes hiding behind China's developing-country status. And this in turn would send an important signal to people and governments in the West that affluent Chinese citizens are behaving as responsible global citizens. This would make it politically more difficult for people in the West to ignore their responsibilities and make it politically easier for Western governments to require their citizens to do the right thing. The overall outcome would be a move toward reconciling China's growing wealth and global pollution with its rightful demand that its poor citizens not be burdened with responding to climate changes started in the West.

There is still a bit of time for Hong Kong to be the climate leader in China. But time is rapidly running out. Hong Kong's failure to behave in a way that is consistent with its affluence suggests that Beijing will have to show it how. Because China now has the unenviable status as the world's number-one polluter, Beijing may hold the key to a future in which the Earth's climate is more benign than many scientists fear – but only if affluent people in prosperous parts of China, including Hong Kong, accept that they are part of the problem.

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1. See, for example, "Climate Change Likely To Be More Devastating Than Experts Predicted, Warns Top IPCC Scientist," *Science Daily*, 15 February 2009, <http://www.sciencedaily.com/releases/2009/02/090214162648.htm>.
2. Netherlands Environmental Assessment Agency, "China contributing two thirds to increase in CO2 emissions," 13 June 2008, <http://www.mnp.nl/en/service/pressreleases/2008/20080613ChinacontributingtwothirdstoincreaseinCO2emissions.html>.
3. Global Carbon Project, "Carbon budget and trends 2007," 26 September 2008, <http://www.globalcarbonproject.org/carbonrends/index.htm>.
4. See "C40 Cities Climate Leadership Group," <http://www.c40cities.org/>.
5. See Government of HKSAR, "Climate Change," <http://www.gov.hk/en/residents/environment/global/climate.htm>.
6. LegCo, Official Record of Proceedings, 7 July 2009, <http://www.legco.gov.hk/yr08-09/chinese/counmtg/floor/cm0707-confirm-ec.pdf>.
7. See Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, *UK Climate Change Programme: Annual Report to Parliament, July 2008*, available at <http://www.defra.gov.uk/environment/climatechange/uk/ukccp/>.
8. Government of HKSAR, "CE's speech at International Conference on Climate Change," press release, 31 May 2007, <http://www.info.gov.hk/gia/general/200705/31/P200705310254.htm>.
9. Ibid.
10. Ibid.
11. Ibid.

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