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China's Underwhelming Effort to Enforce Environmental Protection

by Siyu Cao

China is the world's biggest carbon emitter as air pollution has reached shocking levels in popular cities such as its capital Beijing. However, for many years, the Chinese government has downplayed the severity of pollution, claiming that it is an unavoidable consequence of economic growth. After citizens starting voicing their concerns with the environment and the surge of smog in multiple cities, the government declared a "war against pollution." During the 2014 Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) Summit, Chinese President Xi Jin Ping promised to reduce greenhouse-gas emissions by 2030. In the same year, the National People's Congress belatedly updated the environmental protection law for the first time in 25 years and estimated that air quality would improve in about 5 to 10 years. According to their revisions, authorities now have stronger enforcement powers such as the right to detain persistent violators for up to 15 days and to enforce stricter punishments for factories that pollute. Moreover, the Communist Party now evaluates officials not only on their economic performance but also on their environmental record.

The new policies may aid China's situation but cannot fix the consequences that have already occurred or are occurring today. China's carbon emissions have contributed to global warming, caused wildlife damage, and impacted human healthy negatively. The consequences are costly, and the World Bank believes that the total cost of environmental degradation and resource depletion is approximately 9 percent of China's gross domestic product. Furthermore, China may fail to keep its new promise since it has failed to enforce environmental laws in the past. For example, in 2013, the government announced its 13th Five-Year Plan (FYP) in which it promised to restrict the number of vehicles on the road, cut coal burning, and force factories to disclose their emissions data to the public. Local officials provide monetary support for local environmental bureaus, but they also



Credit: Reuters

maintain strong political ties to factory and power plant owners. Other local officials let companies pollute since emission-violation fees are a source of revenue for the government. Another issue is that most local environmental regulatory budgets come from pollution-discharge fees, which are based on the amount of pollution;

consequently, reduced pollution can result in a loss of important funds. In addition, the government still fears citizen unrest over pollution violations and thus tries to prevent citizens from controlling pollution and limiting the number of environmental organizations; protestors face harassment or arrest.

The revisions to the environ-

mental laws subsequently require major violators to disclose pollution data and local governments to release information on air quality, thereby increasing transparency. Ma Jun, an award-winning environmentalist and director of the Institute of Public and Environmental Affairs, asserts that information and transparency are key to motivating enforcement of environmental laws and mobilizing support for change. Ma and his team were able to create an interactive water and air pollution map, highlighting polluting companies around the country. As of now, most of China's local governments disclose information online about local factory emissions. Ma says that transparency is especially important in China because the central government lacks a functioning court system to enforce environ-

mental laws. The Supreme People's Court has made it easier for non-governmental organizations (NGOs) to sue polluters but its court often relegates cases concerning environmental laws to lower-level courts, which have strong ties to the government. As Ma points out, the process is "still not fully based on rule of law" and "polluters are still going to fight to influence the process."

Although the Chinese government is making changes to improve the disastrous environment through either its FYP or increasing transparency, it will need more ambitious plans to qualify for both the Chinese national standard for and World Healthy Organization's guidance level of pollution. Additionally, China should realize that investing in environmental improvement is a benefit as it can increase employment and technological advances.

Syria—Too Little Too Late?

by Adam Liu

4 years. 200,000 deaths and counting. 9 million displaced. 11 million in need of help. 1 billion US dollars gone towards refugee camps. The result? Not peace, but a continuing crisis. These are the devastating impacts of the Syrian civil war, which had begun as a series of minor protests but has now erupted into a large-scale international conflict. Since the 2011 protests that had been staged within context of the Arab Spring, the war has forebodingly evolved into a new battle. It is now not an uprising for independence, but rather a worldwide fight, astonishingly, for the integrity of humanity itself.

It had initially started out with an effort to oust Bashaar al-Assad, an oppressive, autocratic dictator of a regime that had ruled for nearly half a century, according to a report by ABC. Large groups demonstrated in the streets, advocating for change and reform, with legitimate causes for concern. The movement gained popularity, with people across the nation assembling to voice their opinions. Everything seemed to be somewhat under control. Then, the horrors came. Massacres of families, children, and innocent peaceful demonstrators. The people in turn forming rebel groups and taking up arms against the government.

Big countries such as the U.S. beginning to take notice. Sanctions implemented and weapons given to the rebels. And as the conflict further boils, the UN gathering outside the borders and setting up refugee camps for the disaster. Then Russia coming in to support Assad, a long-time ally, sending aid to the regime. After, the true atrocity. Chemical weapons. They decimate the people but only inflict further outrage. But finally, the first measure of peace. Assad agrees to dispose of the chemical weapons. Yet the war still isn't over, and keeps going on.

And that's where the conflict takes a menacing turn: the rise and proliferation of ISIL, a Sunni jihadist group seeking to overthrow Assad in order to establish an Islamic caliphate. Initially accepted as simply another rebel group, soon the world realizes that these people are not much better, and potentially more formidable than Assad. British and American reporters and health workers are gruesomely beheaded on live video, the atrocity shocking everybody around. Later, we realize the terrorists are branch from the previously notorious al-Qaeda. However, it is not until ISIS begins to conquer territory at an alarming rate that countries like the U.S. de-

cide to take action.

But the situation is complicated. With ISIS, Assad is our common enemy. Yet with Assad, ISIS is our common enemy. That seems really confusing. Why? Because now, that we want to take down both Assad and ISIS.

This is where we are now, and it is nearly too late. Both President Obama and David Cameron (British) have authorized the deployment of airstrikes against ISIS targets. Other members of the European Union have followed suit. Arms and other forms of aid have been distributed to the moderate Kurdish group, the source of ground forces neither in support of ISIS nor Assad, but enemies of both. But that alone is not sufficient to suppress the persisting ISIS forces. Although the Kurds claim the air attacks have been effective, these forces are simply not sufficient to eradicate the Islamic threat. Turkish forces have refrained from intervening. Instead, they are preventing Kurds in their country from joining the fighting trepidation of such people turning arms back against them from across the border: evidence of a long history of cultural conflict between the two groups. The situation is dire: by June 2014, ISIS forces have captured numerous Syrian provincial

capitals, Iraq's Fallujah, and most importantly, the U.S. influenced Iraqi base of Mosul, an arsenal full of U.S. sent military equipment. Brutal rule threatens the people in all the Islamic-controlled areas, which now spans a substantial amount of key points in northern Syria and Iraq. And at this very moment, a vehement, fierce struggle between the Kurds and Islamic soldiers drags on in Kobane, a strategic point on the border of Syria and Turkey. Air strikes by western powers have repeatedly struck targets, but ISIS advancement has not bothered to cease. Military intervention via ground forces is necessary if ISIS is to be completely eradicated from the Middle East, subsequently restoring peace and prosperity to the nation. Kurdish troops are limited and weapons merely range to light weapons, insufficient for taking out tanks and other armored vehicles. As their numbers continue to diminish in the fight for Kobane, it is evident that the Kurds alone cannot win the war. Assistance is essential, and time is dwindling.

And as long as this is the case, as long as we are unable to set actual ground soldiers on soil, the future for the Middle East remains bleak indeed.

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