ENVIRONMENTAL PROTECTION IN CHINESE FOREIGN POLICY

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The environmental aspect of Chinese foreign policy has been neglected in the study of Chinese foreign relations. Yet it has become increasingly important since the late 1980s. Beijing's increased interest in environmental diplomacy is closely linked with its security, economic, environmental and foreign policy interests. Recognizing the seriousness of its deteriorating domestic environment, the growing international attention on the ecological threats, and the need to improve China's image and international status, Beijing has begun to pay special attention to environmental diplomacy. Yet China's priority of economic development, its limited resources, its concerns about sovereign infringement, and trade barriers determine the features of China's practice in this area.

INTRODUCTION

Chinese foreign policy has long been shaped by Beijing's security concerns, its need for economic development, its leaders' perceptions of international relations, and the changing international environment. Until very recently, leaders in Beijing have been mainly concerned about the strategic balance, North-South relations, the new international economic order, and security interests in the neighboring regions. Little attention has been given to global environmental protection. For the most part this neglect has reflected similar attitudes in much of the international community. Environmental protection has been generally viewed as a domestic concern or, at most, a worthwhile but trivial aspect of international cooperation.

The 1972 Stockholm Conference marked the beginning of global environmental politics. By the second United Nations conference on the global environment, which was held in Nairobi, Kenya in 1982, moderate progress had been achieved with a series of treaties and conventions on oceans, wildlife and the atmosphere being signed by a number of countries. However, it was the second half of the 1980s that witnessed a significant change in the perception of the environmental dimension of international relations. Scientific evidence on trends like global warming, ozone layer depletion, ocean pollution, the future of tropical rainforests, and other environmental problems have alarmed policymakers in many capitals. In developing countries, air pollu-

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tion, land degradation, desertification, deforestation, population explosion and water shortages have become much more serious problems. In less than a decade, environmental protection has emerged as one of the most pressing issues on the global agenda and, since the late 1980s, hardly any international meeting has been convened without addressing repeatedly the urgency of world environmental issues. Facing serious global ecological threats, the United Nations convened its first global green summit, the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development, in Rio de Janeiro in June 1992.

The change in international priorities and the deteriorating domestic environmental situation have also created some incremental shifts in Chinese global thinking on environmental protection. Although China participated in the 1972 Stockholm Conference and has been the contracting party of several treaties concerning such issues as endangered species and ocean dumping, Beijing in general viewed global environment protection as an insignificant matter in its foreign policy concerns in the 1970s. Chinese leaders have gradually realized the importance of environmental issues and have begun to pay special attention to international cooperation in this respect in their conduct of foreign relations since the late 1980s. "We all live on this planet, so environmental protection is an issue of common concern," and Premier Li Peng at an international environmental conference held in Beijing in June 1991, "it has become an important component in the establishment of a new international order."

Chinese leaders not only have taken every occasion to underline the urgency of taking common actions in dealing with the issues, but have also actively participated in the international environmental campaign, especially since June 1989. China has joined the International Union for the Conservation of Nature and Natural Resources, the Plan of Man and Biosphere, and, in November 1990, together with twenty-one other countries, it contributed to the Global Environmental Facility (GEF), a three-year $1.5 billion trust fund aimed to help reduce global warming, preserve the earth’s biological diversity, and protect international water and the ozone layer in the developing countries. In 1990 alone, China sent more than 120 environmental delegations to other countries and received environmental delegations from more than fifty countries.

China has also hosted a number of international conferences on world environmental protection since 1990. In October 1990, an international conference on the integration of economic development and the environment was held in Beijing, and in January 1991, another seminar on global climate change and environmental protection was hosted there. In early May 1991, the Chinese Ministries of Energy Resources and Ministry of Foreign Economic Relations and Trade co-sponsored a seven-day international meeting with UNDTCD on energy and the environment. In June 1991, the PRC gov-