

Beijing is already doing part on climate

By Gal Luft

The recent agreement between Chinese President Xi Jinping and US President Barack Obama, in which the US committed to reduce greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions up to 28 percent below its 2005 levels while China committed to peak its emissions by 2030, was one of the highlights of the recent Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation meeting in Beijing.

The details on how this will exactly be done are fuzzy and will be left to negotiations in the UN Climate Change Conference in Paris next year. But Xi's commitment to the 2030 goal means that in the coming months, China will be subjected to international pressure to turn words into deeds by accepting carbon dioxide (CO₂) reduction measures that may be detrimental to its economic development.

When it comes to fighting air pollution, China has many reasons to act decisively. The growing number of smoggy days in its big cities and the rise in pollution-related illnesses require meaningful action in reducing the emissions of substances that are actually detrimental to people's health – sulfur, nitrogen oxide, mercury, and particulate matter. But CO₂ is not one of them.

Contrary to the attempts by many in the West to label CO₂ as "pollution," its emissions have no direct impact on our

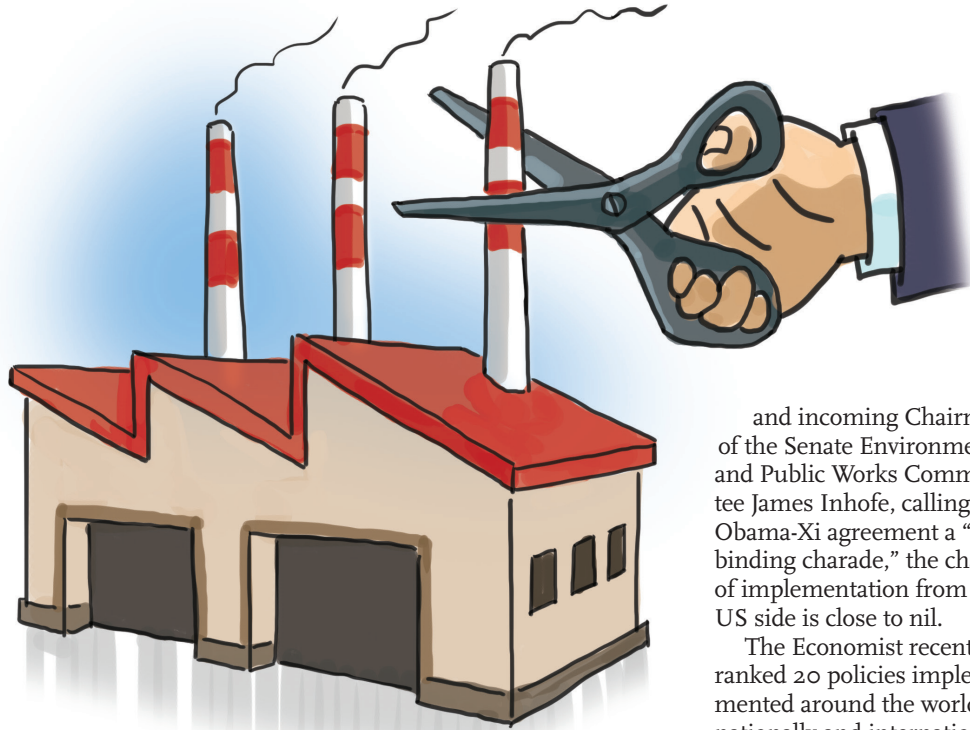


Illustration: Liu Rui/GT

health. It is also far from clear that increased CO₂ levels and the warming they supposedly cause have a net negative impact on humanity.

Since 1950, while the average global temperature increased by 0.2 percent, global per capita GDP has increased by 400 percent and global wild plants growth, enabling more people and animals to thrive, has risen by 15 percent. In China, life expectancy has increased by almost 20 years due to improvements in quality of life enabled by the use of fossil fuels. All of those should be weighed against the negatives

or climate change.

Now that China has made a commitment to cap its emissions, it should proceed with caution and ensure that the fulfillment of its side of the bargain is in lockstep with that of the US. This would be a prudent thing to do in light of Obama's track record of empty promises and lofty goals.

Obama's commitment to a deep cut in US emissions is less plausible especially with the backdrop of the Republican takeover of the Senate. With a Senate Majority Leader, Mitch McConnell, from the coal producing state of Kentucky,

and incoming Chairman of the Senate Environment and Public Works Committee James Inhofe, calling the Obama-Xi agreement a "non-binding charade," the chance of implementation from the US side is close to nil.

The Economist recently ranked 20 policies implemented around the world, both nationally and internationally, according to their contribution to GHG reduction.

Of the 14.3 billion tons of CO₂ equivalent cut annually, only four policies spared us more than 1 billion tons per year: the Montreal Protocol designed to phase out the production of chemicals that are responsible for ozone depletion (5.6 billion), the use of hydropower (2.8 billion), the use of nuclear power (2.2 billion) and China's one-child policy (1.3 billion).

Interestingly, the rest of the policies in The Economist survey, including greater use of solar and wind power, adoption of building standards, efficiency and forest preserva-

tion programs, most of which get more media attention than they actually deserve, collectively make only 17 percent of the total reduction.

In reviewing the policies that really made a difference in curbing carbon emissions, China's contribution is much more significant than commonly believed.

As the home to a fifth of the world's hydroelectric power capacity, China can claim credit for a reduction of 0.7 billion tons a year, almost 10 times the impact of the high-profile EU renewable energy program and the US vehicle fuel economy standards combined.

As it begins its preparations for the Paris climate summit, China should reject the notion widely held in the West that it is a climate spoiler.

Instead of being defensive about its emission reduction, China should highlight its contribution to the global effort and challenge the West to deliver cuts similar in their magnitude.

Those who lecture China on its climate performance should realize that what matters in the end is who made the deepest cuts regardless of the methods used, and that the policies that make the headlines are not those that make the difference.

The author is senior adviser to the US Energy Security Council and co-chairman of the Global Forum on Energy Security. opinion@globaltimes.com.cn

Time to bring 'APEC blue' indoors with entirely smoke-free environments

By Bernhard Schwartländer

The air quality in Beijing during and for a few days after the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) forum remained satisfactory. The arrival of world leaders meant an all-out effort to curb pollution, with factories temporarily shut down, limited vehicles on the road and workers sent on temporary leave. Residents of the pollution-prone capital called it "APEC blue." It was a lovely respite for a city facing sometimes hazardous levels of air pollution.

Despite the improved air quality outside, many places inside the city presented another harmful air issue. Smoking in enclosed public spaces is permitted at restaurants, hotels, offices and homes across Beijing. During the APEC meeting, the air outside was probably healthier than the air in many places indoors.

Beijing now has another chance to show the world that it can lead by making all indoor public places smoke-free. At the end of November, Beijing's lawmakers will consider the final draft of a new law to mandate that all indoor places become smoke-free.

This is a unique opportunity to bring the "APEC blue" clean air to all indoor public places in the city, permanently.

Having clean air indoors is a basic right that all the citizens of Beijing deserve.

This is critically important, because outdoor air pollution caused by carbon emissions from factories and cars is not the only kind of air pollution which causes illness and death. Indoor air pollution caused by secondhand tobacco smoke is also lethal. In China, it is estimated that exposure to secondhand smoke kills more than 100,000 people every year.

Reduction of outdoor air pollution requires substantial structural changes to the infrastructure of Beijing, and will take time.

Cleaning the air indoors can happen now, and doesn't require massive investments. It just requires the creation and implementation of smart laws to eradicate this health hazard.

Consider this the next time you pull on a face mask to go outside when the pollution reading in Beijing is high. Breathing in Beijing's air on even the

most polluted day is not as bad for you as being inside a restaurant, hotel, office, or bar where other people are smoking tobacco.

Secondhand smoke affects the health of everyone inside, from workers to guests, the elderly and children.

There is no safe level of exposure to secondhand smoke. The only way to protect against the very serious health hazards caused by exposure to secondhand smoke is through entirely smoke-free environments, with no loopholes and no exceptions.

Beijing lawmakers are now finalizing a law to make Beijing's public places smoke-free. They have an opportunity to make Beijing the first 100 percent smoke-free city in China.

In October, I was extremely pleased to learn that a proposed loophole in the Beijing smoke-free law on individual offices had been removed from the draft law. That was very good news indeed. But my pleasure on hearing this was matched by serious disappointment on learning about exemptions to the law which are now proposed for hotels and airports.

The provisions for hotels in the current draft of the law are weak. It is not good enough to say in a law that hotels "should" be smoke-free. They must be 100 percent smoke-free to protect their guests, as well as their staff, from exposure to secondhand smoke. Without such measures, China will pay a very high price in the lives of its own people.

Strengthening this law, to make Beijing 100 percent smoke-free, is not only in line with the legal commitments China has made by signing the WHO Framework Convention on Tobacco Control, it will save lives.

This is a chance that will not come easily again – a chance to protect the health of Beijing's citizens and visitors; a chance for Beijing to lead – nationally, and globally; and a chance to make the air inside Beijing's indoor public places a permanent shade of "APEC blue."

The author is WHO's representative in China. opinion@globaltimes.com.cn

