

China can rebuild smarter, cleaner

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Our hearts go out to the Chinese, who have experienced tremendous loss of life due to the massive earthquakes. The devastation is certain to worsen air and water pollution, which are horrific in China, making it even more difficult to prevent disease and death.

Ironically, if we act quickly the quake could also open the door for remaking China's economy in a way that improves the well being of the Chinese — and people worldwide.

Last September I was hired to train Chinese government leaders in sustainability. The group I worked with were the leaders of the "Party School," which is the professional training apparatus that all senior government officials must attend.

As often occurs with the Chinese, the seminar turned out to be something quite different than advertised. I was told the officials wanted to understand how leading organizations in Europe and the United States improve their environmental performance in a way that also enhances social and economic well being.

It turned out they actually wanted to learn how they could maintain political control. The environment was merely the medium through which this issue was playing out.

The Chinese government deserves credit for raising millions of its people out of poverty over the past two decades. They accomplished this through an export-focused development strategy of producing inexpensive goods for foreign markets. Low-cost, inefficient technologies, powered by high-polluting coal — the cheapest abundant source of energy available — have boosted the economy.

The environmental and social costs of this approach, however, have been devastating. According to the state-run China Daily, a 2007 government survey found that cancer had become the leading cause of death in China due to "air and water pollution combined with widespread use of food additives and pesticides."

Air pollution has been linked to hundreds of thousands of deaths each year. Almost 90 percent of the water bodies flowing through or near cities are seriously polluted. More than 500 million people lack access to safe drinking water.

As pollution-related illness and deaths have climbed throughout China, so has social unrest. One of the officials at the seminar I led said in a moment of candor that last year alone saw more than 30,000 public protests, which he called "mass group incidents," many of which were focused on pollution or other environmental insults.

The government has taken a two-pronged approach to the rising discontent. Many of the protests have been put down through force. The government also launched a number of green initiatives aimed at improving energy efficiency and reducing pollution. Some show great promise. In general, however, progress has been slow because of the emphasis on heavy industry. Ineffective environmental regulatory mechanisms have also hurt. The government closed a few of the worst industrial sites, but the powerful new wealthy class that owns the factories have rebuffed this approach.

So, the government is stuck. It can't control the new economic elite it intentionally created, and at the same time faces rising public outrage.

Worse, China's economic model now threatens the entire world. China has surpassed the United States as the world's largest emitter of greenhouse gases. Emissions are growing at more than 10 percent a year, which means if it continues, emissions would double every seven years. As a result, scientists are now concerned that the Earth will heat up much faster than first predicted. Combined with our own emissions, China's greenhouse gasses threaten widespread global social, economic and environmental breakdown.

China should not take all the blame for these problems. It is now the second-largest source of imports to the United States. In our relentless pursuit of cheaper goods, we have shifted more and more of our manufacturing — and thus our greenhouse gas emissions — to China. Thus, in many ways China's emissions are also our problem.

As these issues slowly surfaced during the seminar, one solution became clear. The government will not reduce its emissions if it means abandoning efforts to raise its people out of poverty. And the Chinese people will not be placated unless pollution and other abuses subside. Only by continuing to increase wealth, this time through a clean energy revolution, will the Chinese people — and the entire world — be rescued from China's unbridled emissions.

A huge rebuilding effort will soon begin in China in the aftermath of the earthquakes. This offers a unique opportunity for the United States to launch a massive effort to help reconstruct China's energy systems and factories with clean technologies that also improve economic and social well being.

Constraining economies and eliminating opportunity will not resolve global warming. Only by increasing prosperity and enhancing security in China and elsewhere can the worst of global warming be avoided.

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