

China: Leading the fight against global warming?

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China, The Three Gorges (Credit: gyn9038/Bigstock) (via: [bit.ly](#))

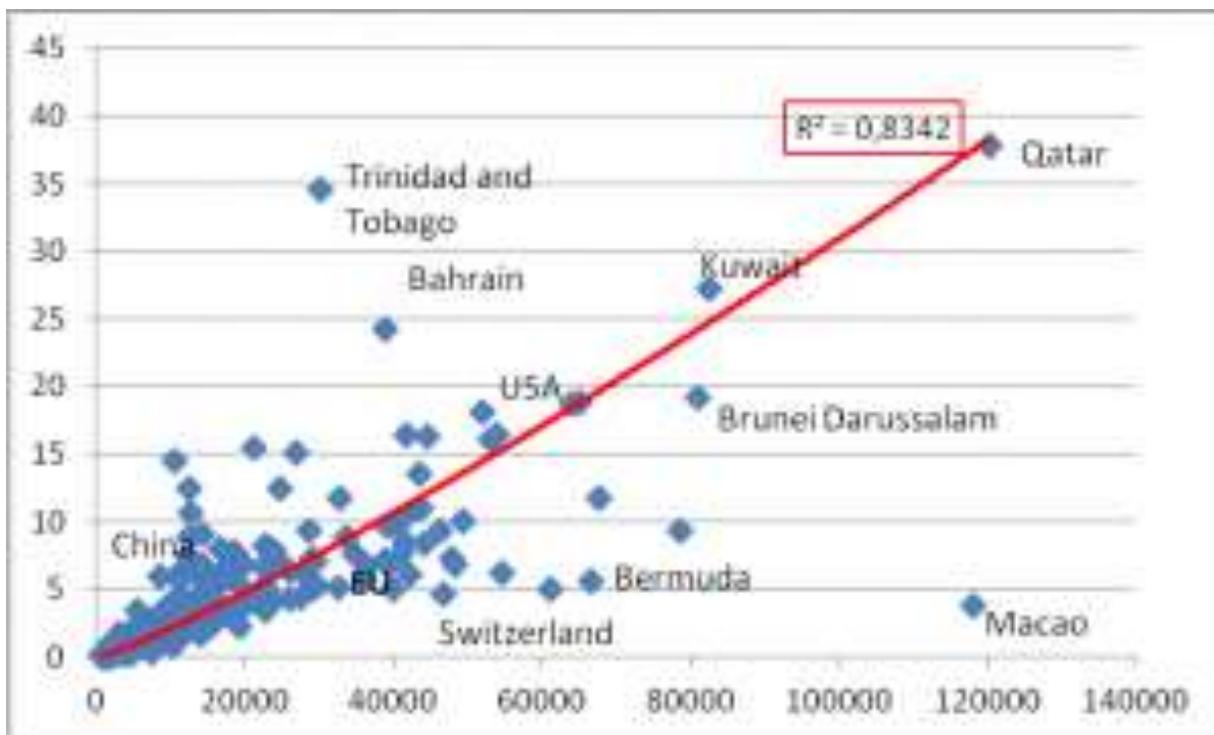
The Kyoto Protocol, which was signed in 1997 and came into force in 2005, envisaged binding targets for cutting emissions only for industrialised countries (so-called ‘Annex I’ states), but not for developing ones. The understanding at that time was that it is first and foremost Western countries which should deal with climate change problem.

- First, industrial countries are responsible for creating the problem, as they accounted for nearly 80% of the greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions between 1850 and 2010.
- Second, developed states are today responsible for nearly 40% of the world’s annual emissions and per capita emissions in the West are several times higher than in the Global South (fig. 1). CO₂ and other

GHG emissions depend strongly on energy consumed and the consumption of energy is strongly linked to the level of economic development, so emissions per capita are strongly correlated with per capita income (figure 1). China, for example, emits less than 8 tonnes of CO₂ per capita, whereas the US emits over 8 tonnes. Exceptions are mostly associated with specific industries (some countries have more heavily polluting industries than others) and the development of alternative energy sources (which is why per capita emissions in the EU are less than half of America's emissions).

- Third, developing countries are not as rich as developed countries and it is only fair that the rich pay more for global environmental problems.

Figure 1. CO₂ emissions (metric tonnes per capita) and PPP GNI (current dollars) in 2013



Source: World Development Indicators Database

“The most important contribution to change has to come from developed countries,” wrote Martin Khor, the head of the Third World Network in 2007. “This is because they have been historically most responsible for Greenhouse Gas emissions,” he explained. [“They are still the most important emitters,](#)

especially per capita; and they have more financial and technological resources.”

The position of developing countries at that time was that the West does not have the moral right to ask them to use less energy per capita as long as it spends several times more energy per capita itself and emits several times more GHG per capita. Development priorities in the Global South were considered more important than preventing climate change. Some observers predicted a conflict between the industrialised West and the developing South, envisaging the imposition of Western sanctions on developing countries which refuse to accept targets for emissions reductions.

Today, the situation has changed dramatically. China and the US signed a joint agreement in 2014 establishing targets for reducing emissions. Beijing promised that its emissions will peak in 2030 and will be reduced afterwards. Under Trump, however, the White House has refused to stick to its climate commitments, but China is keeping to the Obama-era targets and thus is becoming the leader in the global drive to cut emissions, together with the European Union. Even more important is the actual reduction of emissions. In 2017, they could drop 1% from 2016, making it the fourth consecutive year of either zero growth or a decline in the country's emissions. Even if emissions increase slightly in 2017, the virtual stability of emissions for four consecutive years is quite an achievement for a country whose rapid development requires increasing volumes of energy consumption. China is already leading in the use of solar and wind energy and in green technologies.

It appears that China has accepted the responsibilities which come with being a world leader. If our planet can be compared to a joint stock company, China is behaving like a country that has a controlling block of shares: it accounts for 19% of the world's population (and for over 30% together with other countries of north-east and south-east Asia, where China traditionally has held a great deal of influence). Together with India (18% of the world population), China may be soon posing questions to the major polluters (the US, first and foremost), calling on them to reduce emissions.



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