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Copenhagen in Chinese: What did the Official Version say and how did the Civil Society and Media act?

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The United Nations Climate Change Conference was held between 7 and 18 December 2009. Nations met there to negotiate a new arrangement, hopefully a successor for the Kyoto Protocol, as it would expire in late 2012. The European Environment Commissioner Stavros Dimas has already warned back in May 2009, that "...the Copenhagen agreement is almost certainly the world's last chance to put global emissions onto a trajectory that can keep us out of the danger zone."²

Members of civil society also played an active role in raising awareness and lobbying, hoping for a binding and effective agreement to be achieved by the end of the meeting. Among them, Chinese civil society organizations, almost as their maiden voyage, in terms of international campaigning, came up with a joint statement to declare their position. This article aims to analyze the role of Chinese civil society, as well as Chinese media, played before, during and after the Copenhagen meeting, and hopes to understand how the climate change issues, disputes surrounding the Copenhagen Conference and Chinese Government's responses were interpreted by them.

The civil society in the wake of Copenhagen

Chinese civil society was rather well prepared this time. Three weeks before the Copenhagen Conference, a joint statement, endorsed by international environmental organizations' China offices, as well as many Chinese organizations, were

launched³. The 17 November statement also indicated the discussion process for achieving a common view, has started back in 2007. Its significance comes at, as the first time ever that the civil society members in China, almost 40 of them, are united in offering a joint statement, in the run-up of such a major international event and the coalition covers a wide-range of NGOs, from giant international ones which work in China to very domestic ones.

The statement was well-received by the Chinese media and made it to the second biggest state-owned news agency, the China News Service⁴ and many Beijing newspapers, with a positive tone in describing the civil society's involvement.

However, while the statement mentioned "developed countries must commit to reducing their greenhouse gas emissions by 40% by 2020 compared with 1990s levels", it failed to give clear demand to Chinese Government on the exact figure for its emission cut. It went along with the official line on the principle of "common but differentiated responsibility", but not going into details in lobbying China, in any case, to come up with binding commitments.

The Chinese Government, almost a week later, offered its self-imposed target regarding emission cut, i.e. to reduce the "carbon intensity" (the amount of carbon dioxide emitted for each unit of GDP) by 40% to 45% by year 2020, compared with 2005 levels. The self-imposed target is a very tricky move. On one hand, it claimed that even without any results to be coming out in Copenhagen, China would be confident to reach such a

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² http://www.edie.net/news/news_story.asp?id=16413, 8 May 2009.

³ http://www.eu-china.net/web/cms/upload/pdf/materialien/eu-china_2009_hintergrund_14.pdf, 17 November 2009.

⁴ While Xinhua is the biggest news agency in China to give official news, China News Service is the second largest state-owned news agency and is considered as responsible for providing semi-official news for overseas Chinese and foreigners.

target. Yet, on the other hand, “this is a voluntary action taken by the Chinese Government based on its own national conditions and is a major contribution to the global effect in tackling climate change”, quoted from statement of the State Council. The National Development and Reform Commission said that “the goal only applies at home, and it is not internationally binding and not subject to international verification”.

In a press conference hosted by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs on 25 November 2009, Mr Yu Qingtai, China's ambassador for climate change, reminded the foreign journalists that the developed countries have to realize their targets under the Kyoto Protocol, (editor: in which China, did not have any binding target to meet as a developing country); the developed countries have to provide financial support, technical transfer and capacity building for developing countries and it is only then, the developing countries have roles to play in reducing emissions. This can be read as a hidden statement that if the developed countries fail to reach the first two conditions, the developing countries, including China, are not obligated to further actions.

At the press conference, Mr Yu talked about the historical background that the developed countries had polluted the world for more than two centuries during the industrialization, “we should not only look at the absolute amount of pollution (when being asked by a journalist that China has become the world's biggest carbon dioxide producer), instead of pollution per head. We cannot accept that Chinese can only have one-third, one-fourth, or even one-fifth of the rights to pollution.”

The United Nations' statistics (latest available for 2006), showed that China's carbon dioxide emissions per capita was at 4.62 tonnes, which was 69% of France's, 43% of Germany's and 23% of the USA's⁵. Yet, for major cities, taking the largest city, Shanghai, as an example, its carbon emission per capita in 2004 was about “2.9 times of average level in China (based on resident population), 2.4 times of world average level at that time, and approximately 50% that of USA and Canada and 68% that of Australia. The carbon emission in other developed countries such as Japan, Russia and many other EU countries, however, is lower

than that of Shanghai.”⁶. In other words, the trend of average carbon footprint in China is rising and alarming, as China's pace towards industrialization and urbanization show no sign of slowing down.

Such an interpretation of development rights and fair chance to pollution is often dubbed as the Chinese sense of “ecological justice”. From the wordings used in the press conference and repeated official lines of “voluntary but not binding target”, it can be read as China's way out in not engaging into binding commitment and also to exclude the greenhouse gas emissions produced by China's overseas investment.

Yet, China's self-imposed target was well received by most of the Chinese academics and NGOs. Hu Angang, Director of the Center for China Study at Tsinghua-Chinese Academy of Sciences, said that the self-imposed target was indicating “China is changing from a black cat to a green cat”. The Greenpeace China, in particular, has released a Chinese article, titled “*The Mission of Premier Wen*”, highly promoted the Chinese attitude for being “highly transparent” and summarized China's efforts as a sign of “China's peaceful rise”⁷.

The business sector, set up a delegation, travelled to Copenhagen and hosted a “Forum on Climate Change” in Copenhagen on 8 December 2009, showing their support to the Chinese Government's emission cut target, before heading off to Germany for a tour in visiting wind energy plants. They include the major trade associations and some 200 major Chinese companies. The statement issued at the forum, calls the companies to promote low carbon production as part of its corporate social responsibilities and to work along with NGOs. Yet, same as the old problem with the code of conducts, this type of statements is not binding.

The media tug-of-war

The Chinese media has been very active and positive about China's role before the opening of the Conference and later, the China's contribution in

⁵ Calculation based on http://unstats.un.org/unsd/ENVIRONMENT/air_co2_emissions.htm, updated August 2009.

⁶Download from http://gin.confex.com/recording/gin/2009/pdf/free/4db77adf5df9fff0d3caf5cafe28f496/paper2725_1.pdf, accessed on 20 January 2010.

⁷ In Chinese, <http://www.greenpeace.org/china/ch/cop15/about/news/mission-of-premier-wen>, 18 December 2009.

the conference, but remained very critical towards the developed countries, especially the USA.

First, it was on numbers. Most of the Chinese media reported that China promised to carbon intensity (the amount of carbon dioxide emitted for each unit of GDP) as decreasing by 40% to 45% by year 2020, compared with 2005 levels simply with the phrase “**emissions cut**”. The state-run China Daily, expressed in a misleading way by saying “several days ago, China and the US, the two biggest carbon emitting countries, announced their gas emission control proposals. China was to reduce its gas emission intensity by 40 to 45 percent by 2020 compared to 2005, while the US promised a 17 percent cut of its **carbon emissions**.”, without further explaining the difference between carbon intensity cut against GDP and the greenhouse gas emission cut, but just the 40% against 17% figures.⁸ Many compare the “emissions cuts” between China and USA directly, without further elaboration between the fundamental differences between the “carbon intensity” and the “greenhouse gas emissions”, which China and the USA were referring to, respectively. Most of the Chinese media only quoted Obama’s temporary promise to cut emissions by 17% below 2005 levels by 2020, without mentioning his further promise, such as “and to cut the greenhouse gas emissions by 42% by 2030 and 83% by 2050”.

The misleading reporting, done deliberately or not, distorted the fact that “under President Obama’s goal of a 17 percent reduction in greenhouse gas emissions, the U.S. would see slightly more than a 40 percent improvement in carbon intensity, similar to China’s ambitions. These estimates are slightly imprecise because our calculations are for only energy-related carbon-dioxide emissions. They are also based on assumptions about GDP growth. Nonetheless, they suggest that both countries are committed to ambitious goals” according to World Resources Institute, after reviewing both countries’ targets and making the calculation⁹. The incomplete Chinese reports, may also contribute to the later wide-spread criticism against the USA and other European countries, as the Chinese public have been all along fed with the idea that the USA and even EU, as developed countries, are doing much less than the Chinese and were angered by “why the western media still put the blame on China?”.

⁸ http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/china/2009-11/30/content_9079844.htm, 30 November 2009.

⁹ http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/china/2009-11/30/content_9079844.htm, 26 November 2009.

It is true that the offer from the USA is much less than the EU’s offer of a 20% greenhouse gas cut over the same period, or a 30% cut if there is a global deal, and much less than the 25-40% cut demanded by the developing countries. Yet, the offer from the USA, was indeed not as worse as it was presented by the Chinese media.

Then it went on to argue on money. Developed and developing countries, especially the USA and China soon got into disputes over the technical transfer and financial assistance during the Copenhagen Conference. While China demanded the technical transfer, funding and capital building from the developed countries, a pre-condition for developing countries to make any move, as the Ministry of Foreign Affairs raised before, the developed countries showed evidences that China, did not necessarily need the so-called technical transfer and financial support. The OECD report said “In China, the City of Guangzhou in Guangdong province has undertaken one of the largest landfill energy capture projects, which is expected to generate more than 50 Gwh of electricity, or enough for 30,000 households.”¹⁰ In October 2009, the Wall Street Journal reported that a Chinese wind-turbine company, with financing help from Beijing, had struck a deal to be the exclusive supplier to one of the largest wind-farm developments in the USA and “China is planning on future investments in the U.S. renewable industry as a way of creating a market for Chinese wind and solar equipment manufacturers.”¹¹ This might even become worrying for developed countries, such as Germany, Denmark and France, that China might turn those technical and financial transfers to make itself the pioneer in renewable energy production and at the end of the day, Chinese companies might enter these developed countries as an energy exporters and lead to cut-throat competition with their domestic energy producers.¹²

The so-called Chinese goals and tactics

During and after the Copenhagen Conference, several western analysts have been writing about the main goals of China for this conference, the

¹⁰ Kamal-Chaoui, Lamia and Alexis Robert (eds.) (2009), “Competitive Cities and Climate Change”, *OECD, Regional Development Working Papers N° 2*, 2009. See <http://www.oecd.org/dataoecd/30/36/44232251.pdf>, p96.

¹¹ <http://online.wsj.com/article/SB125683832677216475.html>, 30 October 2009.

¹² http://www.eu-china.net/web/cms/upload/pdf/materialien/maier-climate-change-china011209_09-12-02.pdf, 2 December 2009.

very common analysis was “to maintain the structure of the Kyoto Protocol and the principles of the Bali Roadmap, which placed major responsibility for emissions reductions and contributions to developing countries on the shoulders of the Annex I countries; to avoid all legally binding international commitments in favour of preserving China's own freedom of action in the future; and to avoid becoming the target of criticism should Copenhagen ‘fail’.”¹³

It is even very interesting and eye-opening to read the Guardian article on “*How do I know China wrecked the Copenhagen deal? I was in the room*”¹⁴, in describing the Chinese delegates blocking the conference, in insisting that industrialised country targets, previously agreed as an 80% cut by 2050, be taken out from the deal and how these moves annoyed leaders such as Angela Merkel, Kevin Rudd and of course Obama. The conclusion is that by shooting down the ambitious plan from the developed countries, China would be on the safe side, for not being expected to launch any ambitious plan in the coming years. According to the Indian media, three weeks before the Copenhagen Conference, the so-called BASIC countries, namely Brazil, South Africa, India and China held a seven-hour meeting, with Sudan as the chair, to discuss a counter-draft, led by China, “after reports suggested that rich nations led by Denmark are trying to set the agenda of the conference by presenting a draft containing a set of specific proposals.”¹⁵

Criticism also landed on the international civil society, saying that they took the bait from China too easily, as the Guardian article went on. However, the picture changed completely when we looked at the Chinese media.

Though the Chinese media and the Chinese shared the sense that Copenhagen had failed in the final days, their negative emotion was mainly towards the developed countries and their media, especially the American and the British, after the British climate secretary openly criticized China, Sudan, Venezuela, Bolivia, Nicaragua and Cuba blocking the negotiation.

As Wen left Copenhagen without a press confer-

ence and the Chinese delegation kept mostly quiet towards their own journalists, the Chinese media, ran frequently the official Xinhua lines during the final days of the conference. Most of the Chinese newspapers accredited China with glorious headlines, “China’s self-determined emission cuts beyond Copenhagen” Xinhua wrote on 20 December. Even for China Economic Herald, the more objective Chinese newspaper which covered Copenhagen, reported the disappointment felt by civil society participants in the scene, but nevertheless, praised Wen for promising China’s self-imposing target at the conference¹⁶.

As for the Chinese civil society, the academics seemed to be more vocal in supporting the official decision. “Climate change has become an accepted part of political discourse, but that does not mean, as some Chinese academics have suggested, that we should adopt mandatory emission targets too soon and surrender our development rights and future environmental capacity”, wrote Tang Wei, an assistant researcher at the Shanghai Academy of Social Sciences’ Ecological Economics and Sustainable Development Institute¹⁷.

A handful of civil society members traveled from China to witness the Copenhagen, such as Shanshui Conservation Centre, which were there to facilitate the forum of the Chinese business leaders; Greenpeace China, and a youth group called China Youth COP 15. Their roles ranged from supporting the official lines, observing the meetings, exchanging with civil society organizations from other countries for experience. But very different from other countries’ civil society organizations, whose role there was also to lobby their own governments or criticize their own governments’ insufficient commitment, the Chinese civil society organizations were either supportive towards the Chinese delegation or they kept quiet.

At the time of writing, no official statement has been put out by the organizations which once co-signed the 17 November statement, analyzing China’s role during and after the Copenhagen Conference. While the Chinese civil society takes their time to discuss and come up with a new position, a similar challenge also comes upon its counterpart, the European civil society organizations. How do they evaluate Copenhagen, their

¹³http://www.brookings.edu/opinions/2009/1222_china_climate_lieberthal.aspx, 23 December 2009.

¹⁴<http://www.guardian.co.uk/environment/2009/dec/22/copenhagen-climate-change-mark-lynas>, 22 December 2009.

¹⁵ <http://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/india/Copenhagen-conference-India-China-plan-joint-exit/articleshow/5279771.cms>, 28 November 2009.

¹⁶ In Chinese,

<http://www.ceh.com.cn/ceh/jryw/2009/12/22/57480.shtml>, 22 December 2009.

¹⁷<http://www.chinadialogue.net/article/show/single/en/3447>, 6 January 2010.

own governments' "commitment" and their China policy, if there is any? With a Copenhagen Accord which was not democratically drafted and without any voices from the EU, how should they move on, in terms of cooperating with their counterparts from China and other developing coun-

tries? The exchanges between civil societies across the continents are expected to be further strengthened, in the coming months, or years, and hopefully not too late, as climate change can't wait.

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