

# ICS Special Lecture

## The Implications of China's Environmental Protection efforts for the Asia-Pacific Region and Beyond

**Speaker :** Elizabeth Economy, C.V. Starr Senior Fellow & Director for Asia Studies at the Council on Foreign Relations

**Chair:** Patricia Uberoi, Honorary Fellow, Institute of Chinese Studies

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Without doubt, China's environmental crisis that is fuelled by the country's rapid industrialization is one of the most debated issues worldwide. It was timely to have Elizabeth Economy talk about it and many other related issues. How deep rooted is China's environmental crisis and what is the fundamental nature of China's environment problem? These were a few questions that the speaker posed at the outset. For her, China was currently at an inflection point as far as the trajectory of its commitment to environmental protection was concerned, primarily because of its implication for the global environment. In this context, she referred to some of the measures adopted by Beijing towards environment protection in China. The speaker also spent some time, towards the end, to shed some light upon the United States-China climate deal in November 2014.

Economy mentioned that her PhD dissertation was on 'China and Russian Strategies and Global Climate Change negotiations' and also, that she has been working on China's environment for almost 20 years. However, she observed that the issue of environmental protection had never been taken as seriously as it is being taken in recent years. In this context, she thinks it is timely to discuss China's environmental problems and commitments.

### **Environment in China Today**

35 years of rapid economic development was considered as the main factor responsible for the severe environmental crisis in China today. A few figures were cited to show how China managed to reach the current critical juncture of environmental crisis. Only 1% of China's total urban population can breathe normal air that meets the World Health Organization (WHO) standard. In 2014, about 2 per cent of China's land was contaminated. The situation is more severe in some provinces. The local government in Guangdong reported that the percentage of contaminated land in Guangdong ranges between 28 to 50 per cent. This in turn poses a significant problem for Chinese agriculture. While the Chinese government publishes reports about contaminated lands, it does not disclose the details of their location making it highly problematic for those living on such lands.

Water pollution has also been a major environmental concern in China. A recent report published by a Chinese water research institute disclosed that only about 30% of China's total ground water is clean and the rest 70% is not even fit for human touch. In the last few decades, 28,000

out of 50,000 rivers in China dried up due to overuse and climate change. The speaker commented that China is facing the twin challenges. At one level, it faces environmental challenges akin to developing countries and at another level, it also faces challenges analogous to advanced industrial countries, such as automobile pollution and so on.

### **Implications for Global Environment**

China's commitment to environmental protection at home is an important marker of its commitment regionally, as well as, globally. China is the largest importer of timber, including illegally logged timber. It is also the largest contributor to over-fishing and illegal fishing in the Asia Pacific, extending to the coastal regions of Africa. China ranks third in overseas land acquisition. Some countries like Argentina have started maintaining strict land policies vis-à-vis China. The revised land policies were mostly to do with the state owned Chinese enterprises' (SOEs) land purchases in Argentina. A major imperative for the Argentina policy was the protection of the country's farm-land from environmental degradation.

The speaker added that Chinese overseas companies are mostly accused of exporting weak system of environmental impact assessment. The problem is more acute in the mining sector. For example, she referred to backlash against Chinese companies in countries like Peru, Myanmar and Zambia.

Further, the speaker dwelt on ways in which China could cause damage to the global environment. Japan and Korea have suffered from acid rains caused by China for several decades. Pollution clouds produced in China travel all the way from the Pacific to the United States. In this context, she called China an 'exporter of pollution'. Quoting from a report published by local government of Hubei province, the speaker sought to demonstrate how China planned to shift its polluted industries abroad. Currently, China has surpassed the United States in greenhouse gas (GHG) emission. In percentage terms, the United States' emission is 15% and China's 29%.

### **Initiatives by Chinese Government**

The speaker was skeptical about the Chinese leadership's new efforts towards environment protection. According to her, their concerns emanate from the understanding that the environmental issue has started affecting the country's economic development. For example, Beijing has suffered almost 50 per cent drop in its tourism due to air pollution. As an aside, the speaker shared that the leadership may not have been as forthcoming if the environment problem existed in Xinjiang for instance. Public health and social unrest are two urgent issues before the Chinese leadership. Around 450 villages of China have been recognized as cancer villages where the diseases are largely caused by water pollution. According to a government report published in 2014, 6,700 Chinese citizens die prematurely every year due to air pollution. The situation is even more severe in northern China. One of the major concerns of the Chinese leadership is the ongoing social unrest in China due to the environmental crisis. A report from 2012 suggests that 1,080,000 environmental protests have been organized in China within a span of few decades. Internet is seen as having played a major role in promoting popular protests in China. Internet discussions in that sense have had a cumulative effect in forcing the government to be more sensitive to citizen demands. The speaker mentioned about a tweet from the US Embassy regarding the statistics of air pollution in Beijing, which influenced the Chinese government to take action regarding air pollution in Beijing. Another example she mentioned is about how a documentary on air pollution titled 'Under the Dome' directed by Cai Jing went viral over the

internet followed by a massive response from the civil society until it was banned by the government.

Both traditional and institutional reform has been undertaken by the Chinese government to overcome the environmental crisis. Large scale campaigning, micro policies and air control in the provinces are some of the traditional methods. Within the institutional reform, the speaker is hopeful about the responsibility undertaken by the local government officials. Although, the degree of transparency shown by the government in respect to environmental protection is not significant enough, yet the situation is far better than two decades ago. The appointment of an environmental scientist as the environment minister demonstrates the seriousness of the Chinese government over the issue. However, the speaker urged for increased investment in the environment sector both at the central and local levels.

### **United States-China Climate Agreement**

The speaker is sceptical about the use of the term ‘agreement’ to the climate negotiation process between the US and China. She argued that the two countries have not reached that level of cooperation in environment sector where a deal between two countries can be termed as an ‘agreement’. Rather, they could be termed as ‘side by side pledges’ where both the countries commit to reduce their respective pollution levels, but at the same time, not be bound by any legal norms. According to the deal, the United States will reduce its carbon emissions by 26-28 percent by 2025 without imposing new restrictions on power plants or vehicles, while China intended to reach the peak by 2030. The speaker hoped that US-China cooperation in the field of environment would have a positive impact in terms of energizing international negotiations on climate change. The significance of the deal lies in the fact that it is the first public commitment that the Chinese side has made on the environment issue.

### **Discussions**

The presentation generated questions on diverse issues ranging from e-garbage, renewable energy, private sector initiative in the field of China’s environment protection, role of civil society and so on. Addressing a question related to coal production in China, the speaker stated that reducing dependence on coal has been a major initiative of Chinese President Xi Jinping’s environment policy. The speaker highlighted the increasing number of corporate social responsibility reports published by private companies. There are also a few companies in China including Alibaba which started supporting environmental initiative and environmental NGO’s. The discussion also dealt with issues like environmental governance, rule of law and transparency.

*Report prepared by Jayshree Borah, Research Assistant, Institute of Chinese Studies, Delhi.*

### **About the Speaker**

Dr Elizabeth Economy is the C.V. Starr senior fellow and director for Asia studies at the Council on Foreign Relations. Dr. Economy has published widely on both Chinese domestic and foreign policy. She is the award-winning author of *The River Runs Black: The Environmental Challenge to China's Future* (Cornell University Press, 2004; 2nd edition, 2010; Japanese edition, 2005; Chinese edition, 2011). Her most recent book, with Michael Levi, is *By All Means Necessary: How China's Resource Quest is Changing the World* (Oxford University Press, 2014). Dr. Economy has published articles in foreign policy and scholarly journals including *Foreign*

*Affairs, Foreign Policy, and the Harvard Business Review; and op-eds in the New York Times and Washington Post, among others.*

Dr. Economy serves on the board of managers of Swarthmore College and the board of trustees of the Asia Foundation. She is also on the advisory council of Network 20/20 and the science advisory council of the Stockholm Environment Forum. She is a member of the World Economic Forum (WEF)'s Global Agenda Council on the United States and served as a member and then vice chair of WEF's Global Agenda Council on the Future of China from 2008 to 2014. She has taught undergraduate and graduate level courses at Columbia University, Johns Hopkins University's Paul H. Nitze School of Advanced International Studies, and the University of Washington's Jackson School of International Studies. Dr. Economy received her BA from Swarthmore College, her AM from Stanford University, and her PhD from the University of Michigan. In 2008, she received an honorary doctor of laws degree from Vermont Law School.

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