

Two Cheers for China's Climate Obstruction

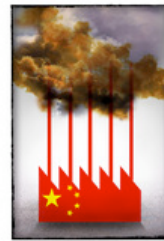
Bjørn Lomborg



COPENHAGEN – Since the Copenhagen climate summit's failure, many politicians and pundits have pointed the finger at China's leaders for blocking a binding, global carbon-mitigation treaty. But the Chinese government's resistance was both understandable and inevitable. Rather than mustering indignation, decision-makers would do well to use this as a wake-up call: it is time to consider a smarter climate policy.

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China is unwilling to do anything that might curtail the economic growth that has enabled millions of Chinese to clamber out of poverty. This development can be seen in the ever-expanding Chinese domestic market.

In the next six months, one-quarter of young Chinese consumers intend to buy new cars – the main source of urban air pollution – up an astonishing 65% from a year ago. A poll by *China Youth Daily* revealed that eight of ten young Chinese are aware of climate change, but are prepared to support environmental policies only if they can continue to improve their living standards – including acquiring new cars.

The cost of drastic, short-term carbon cuts is too high. The results of all major economic models reveal that the much-discussed goal of keeping temperature increases below two degrees Celsius would require a global tax of €71 per ton to start (or about €0.12 per liter of gasoline), increasing to €2,800 per ton (or €6.62 per liter of gasoline) by the end of the century. In all, the actual cost to the economy would be a phenomenal €28 trillion a year. According to most mainstream calculations, that is 50 times more expensive than the climate damage it would likely prevent.

Trying to cut carbon emissions drastically in the short-term would be particularly damaging, because it would not be possible for industry and consumers to replace carbon-burning fossil fuels with cheap, green energy. Renewable energy alternatives are simply far from ready to take over.

Consider the fact that 97% of China's energy comes from fossil fuels and burning waste and biomass. Renewable sources like wind and solar meet just 0.2% of the China's energy needs, according to the most recent International Energy Agency (IEA) figures. The IEA estimates that on its current path, China will get a mere 1.2% of its energy from renewable sources by 2030.

As if these reasons were not enough to explain the Chinese government's opposition to an expensive global carbon deal, economic-impact models show that for at least the rest of this century, China will actually benefit from global warming. Warmer temperatures will boost agricultural production and improve health. While heat-related deaths in summer will increase, this will be more than offset by a significant reduction in cold-related deaths in winter.

In short, China is aggressively protecting the economic growth that is transforming the lives of its citizens, instead of spending a fortune battling a problem that is unlikely to affect it negatively until next century. Little wonder, then, that Ed Miliband, Britain's Secretary for Energy and Climate Change

, found "impossible resistance" from China to a global carbon mitigation deal.

Trying to force China into line would be impractical and foolhardy. The inescapable but inconvenient truth is that the response to global warming that we have single-mindedly pursued for nearly 20 years – since the leaders of rich countries first vowed to cut carbon – is simply not going to work.

It is time to recognize the impracticality of trying to force developing countries to agree to make fossil fuel ever more expensive. Instead, we need to make a greater effort to produce cheaper, more widely used green energy. And to do this, we must dramatically increase the amount of money we spend on research and development.

A global deal in which countries committed to spending 0.2% of GDP to develop non-carbon-emitting energy technologies would increase current spending 50-fold, and it would still be many times cheaper than a global carbon deal. It would also ensure that richer nations pay more, taking much of the political heat out of the debate.

Most importantly, such an approach would bring about the transformational technological breakthroughs that are required to make green energy sources cheap and effective enough to fuel a carbon-free future.

We cannot browbeat China and other developing nations into embracing hugely expensive, ineffective global carbon cuts. Rather than hoping that we can overcome their "impossible resistance" with political maneuvering, leaders of developed countries need to shift their focus to a strategy that is both feasible and effective.

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OlivierReuland 12:03 14 Jan 10

"In all, the actual cost to the economy would be a phenomenal €28 trillion a year."

I would be interested to know how you calculated this number. I spinned the number in all directions but can't