

China's Green Leapfrog

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BEIJING—In recent years, America's national leadership on climate change has been lagging far behind other nations. It now appears the Barack Obama presidency will be the first to actually tackle the issue on a national level. In looking at how other countries are engaging the problem, we may be surprised to find China emerging as a potential leader.

This summer, Beijing stunned the world not only with grandiose Olympic ceremonies, but also with blue skies that few people believed would clear before the Games. As the glamour of the Olympics gradually subsides, pollution has begun to reappear as automobile bans are partly lifted and factories resume operations. Yet in the wake of the Olympics, some long-lasting controls have been put in place that will fundamentally change Beijing's environment for the better.

Much of Beijing's environmental cleanup during the Olympic Games came from both immediate expediency endeavors and gradual, long-term measures. While short-term regulations on traffic and neighboring factories may have provided an effective way to clear Beijing's air, years of government work have contributed to infrastructure changes for a cleaner and greener path. These changes include replacing coal with gas, adopting greener industrial technologies, phasing out or forcing out polluters, increasing public transportation, and providing more stringent environmental monitoring.

Perhaps most telling of the potential for change, thousands of young Chinese are now venting their complaints on pollution by referring to the "green Olympic days."

This holds true for other cities as well, particularly in more developed regions. Yet pollution still poses mounting challenges nationwide, with polluters migrating toward less-developed areas where gross domestic product still outweighs environmental considerations.

Gradually, the country is deviating from the centuries-old industrial path of first

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polluting and then cleaning. It is now doing both aspects of the work simultaneously, which for a nation still industrializing and working to bring millions out of poverty is a unique accomplishment.

This change of path is a necessity and has been pushed by strong national political forces and facilitated by the advantage China enjoys as a latecomer in modern-day cultural movements and technologies. China excels in setting a good example by learning from others. This learning process has brought about a rapid advancement in environmental policymaking, as well as the adoption and dissemination of green technologies.

China has seen increased vitality in its green industries, including energy efficiency and renewables, and there is still potential for significant development.

As good as the central policies may appear, one major concern is how to implement them at a local level. The deeper challenge facing China's governmental bodies is that economic development and environmental progress are often in opposition to each other. How far China can go with its green drive will still largely depend on how committed the top leadership is to this course.

If the Olympic Games have demonstrated anything, it is the Chinese government's exceptional capability of uniting and mobilizing the public. If that same focus and pride are directed toward the environment, China will foster a greener future at a much faster pace.



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