

China: The Time to Act is Now

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On July 26, the United Nations General Assembly recognized that every person has the right to a clean, healthy and sustainable environment as a universal and individual right. It is not the first time this right is mentioned in documents and by the main bodies of the United Nations, but since the enshrinement of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the United Nations took 74 years to recognize that life itself is being threatened by the current environmental crisis.



United Nation's historical resolution emphasizes the interconnection between rights (for instance, a contaminated environment can threaten the right to health, or access to water and food); the need for international legal instruments and multilateral agreements that include this new right as a universal right; and calls for States, international organizations and the corporate sector to intensify their efforts in order to guarantee a clean, healthy and sustainable environment for all of us. From an optimistic stance, this resolution could account for a delayed but critical awakening of an “environmental multilateralism” within United Nations.



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The resolution had massive support from members of the UN (161 countries voting in its favor). However, China, Russia, Belarus, Cambodia, Iran, Kyrgyzstan, Syria and Ethiopia abstained from supporting the resolution. China's representative to the United Nations explained their abstention arguing that there is no agreement on the definition of the environmental right and its relation to other human rights, she asked for more time, patience and efforts to avoid undue haste. But how long can we wait? According to the latest report from the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), three fourths of the world population "could be exposed to potentially mortal climate conditions by the end of the century due to extreme heat", if the current warming patterns continue and intensify.

China's abstention is more than disappointing. Without a commitment from major emitters, "environmental multilateralism" can achieve very little. China generates more than one fourth of the world's annual greenhouse gas emissions. Notwithstanding, China has committed to achieving carbon neutrality by 2060, the Belt and Road initiative still finances coal-fired power plants abroad. In fact, according to various researchers, the Belt and Road projects could increase the average global temperature by 2,7°C, significantly higher than the goal established in the Paris Agreement to limit the global temperature increase to 1,5°C. In turn, we must remember that the China Development Bank (the world's largest bank) is the major funder of fossil fuel extraction projects globally.

While at the United Nations China opts for patience and waiting, the world longs for a China that promotes the "community of shared future for all of mankind", and that transcends "all types of differences in human society and points to the greatest possible benefits for all", as Xi Jinping declared a few years ago. Without China's commitment and leadership, "environmental multilateralism" is not viable in the United Nations.



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