

# China's Pollution and the Threat to Domestic and Regional Stability

**Nathan Nankivell**

## China's Pollution and the Threat to Domestic and Regional Stability

**By Nathan Nankivell**

*China's economic boom has an environmental dark side. While China's economy continues to grow at a rate of more than 8% annually, as it has for more than two decades, the country's environment and the Chinese people are paying a steep price. China now boasts five of the ten most polluted cities in the world; 70% of the water that flows through China's urban areas is unfit for drinking or fishing; and severely degraded land or desert, which now claims 1/4 of China's land, is advancing at a rate of 1300 sq. miles per year.*

*As Nathan Nankivell points out, the environmental crisis poses a challenge for China's leaders on their own developmental terms. The environment is biting back into economic growth: regions from Qinghai to Shenzhen, for example, face significant costs to industrial production from lack of water; countrywide, these economic losses totaled \$28 billion in 2003 and the challenge is only increasing. Overall costs to China's economy from environmental pollution and degradation are estimated at 8-12% of GDP annually. Environment-related public health is a second significant problem. Chinese officials have acknowledged, for example, that 300 million people drink contaminated water on a daily basis, and of these, 190 million drink water that*

*is so contaminated that it is making them sick. Finally, the failure of the government to redress its environment-related economic and public health problems has produced widespread social discontent. Environmental protests are a serious source of localized social instability that in numerous, widely-reported cases over the past year alone, have turned violent.*

*For the rest of the world, how China responds to its environmental crisis has enormous implications. Nankivell outlines some potential future scenarios that suggest just how serious a threat China's environmental practices might be to global security. Already, throughout Asia and beyond, China's contribution to transborder air and water pollution provokes significant concern. Russia's harsh criticism of China's handling of the recent transborder water pollution disaster that poisoned the water for the twelve million residents of Harbin and many others suggests the potential for international conflict. Globally, China is one of the world's leading contributors to climate change, ozone depletion, and biodiversity loss, and it is now in the early stages of following the United States and other rich nations in a race toward mass automobile ownership whose implications for air pollution and global warming are profound.*

*Can China change its environmental trajectory? There are some positive signs. While quadrupling its GDP between 1980 and 2000, China's energy increased only twofold, suggesting a recognition of improved efficiency. And the Chinese state monitors pollution at 300,000 factories. Formally*

registered environmental non-governmental organizations now total more than 2000 in China, and environmental activists, with the help of the Chinese media and some outspoken Chinese officials, are pressing for environmental impact assessments to be openly conducted, bringing lawsuits against polluting factories, and even attempting to halt mega-dam construction. In some wealthier Chinese cities, such as Dalian and Shanghai, proactive leaders have increased the share of local funds devoted to environmental protection. Nankivell calls for greater assistance by the international community. In fact, international environmental NGOs, foreign governments and international governmental organizations such as the World Bank are all deeply engaged in contributing to China's environmental protection effort. Indeed, by one account, international NGOs now account for as much as three fourths of funding for environmental protection in China. It is nevertheless difficult to escape the impression that, thus far, the combined efforts amount to chasing a problem that is growing by leaps and bounds, and that efforts to reverse the juggernaut appear rather like the application of band aids over gaping wounds.

In the end, the possibilities for slowing and eventually reversing environmental disasters will have to come through the concerted efforts of the international community in combination with the agency of vigorous and informed states. In China, as in the United States, Japan and elsewhere, the priorities of the state will be crucial. But they will also reflect the pressures from the citizenry under circumstances in which the gods of accelerated development and global definitions of modernity (the private automobile most importantly) exercise powerful sway. Critical gaps in China's domestic policy milieu will have to be reversed, and fundamental decisions about national priorities will have to be reconceived, if that nation is to avoid the crippling consequences of environmental pollution and contributing massively to global warming. Chief among

these are corruption, low levels of investment in environmental protection, a lack of incentives to do the right thing, still nascent practice of the rule of law, a primacy on economic development, and poor transparency.

The issues, however, are hardly the responsibility of China alone as the United States' rejection of the Kyoto environmental accords makes plain. Indeed, while the United States is both the largest source of global warming and the major obstacle to an environmentally responsible international policy, China has emerged as an important ally in efforts to prevent the realization of meaningful global standards to restrict greenhouse gases and address other global environmental problems.

If not addressed, environmental challenges will drag China—and the rest of the world along with it—deeper into an environmental crisis and further along the path of Nankivell's dark scenarios.

China's environment is edging closer to a condition of crisis with each passing day. Pollution and environmental degradation have already left scars and will continue to create problems as the situation worsens. While it may be possible for China to mitigate the impact of environmental damage through coordinated policies, effective spending, and sound future planning, Beijing is unable or unwilling to prescribe such measures. As an undeniable fact on the ground, it is imperative for prudent policymakers to consider the geostrategic implications of not just a superpower, but of an environmentally-ravaged China as well.

There is little disagreement that China's environment is a mounting problem for Beijing. The country produces as many sulphur emissions as Tokyo and Los Angeles combined but with only a fraction of the vehicles; China is home to 16 of the world's 20 most polluted

cities; water pollution affects as much as 70 percent of the country; air pollution is blamed for the premature death of some 400,000 Chinese annually; crop returns are steadily decreasing in quantity and quality because of polluted land and water; and solid waste production is expected to more than double over the next decade, pushing China far ahead of the U.S. as the largest producer (The Economist, August 19, 2004).

While the general accessibility of this information is creating greater awareness, trends indicate that pollution and environmental degradation will worsen. Chinese consumers are expected to purchase hundreds of millions of automobiles, adding to air pollution problems. Despite pledges to put the environment first, national planners still aim to double per capita GDP by 2010 (China Daily, October 20, 2005). Urban populations are expected to continue expanding, leading to the creation of slums and stressing urban sanitation and delivery systems. Steadily richer Chinese will be able to purchase more goods and consume more resources. The nation lacks a powerful national body able to coordinate, monitor, and enforce environmental legislation: the State Environmental Protection Agency (SEPA) is under-staffed, has few resources, and must compete with other bureaucracies for attention. The devolution of decision-making to local levels has placed environmental stewardship in the hands of officials who are more concerned with economic growth than the environment. Finally, the deficiency of capital and the lack of will to promote massive spending on environmental repair necessary to reverse more than two decades of destruction are perhaps most indicative of the fact that environmental restoration will not occur: estimates on the final cost of environmental repair range into the tens of billions of dollars (Canadian Security Intelligence Services Division; The Economist, October 20, 2005).

From the examples above, it is clear that

China's environmental crisis will only worsen before it gets better. SEPA's impotence, Beijing's contradictory policy statements, expanding consumption, and a lack of funds to reverse already serious problems all suggest that pollution and degradation will most likely worsen in the decades to come.

### **Pollution, Unrest, and Social Mobilization**

As the impact of pollution on human health becomes more obvious and widespread, it is leading to greater political mobilization and social unrest from those citizens who suffer the most. The latest statement from the October 2005 Central Committee meeting in Shanghai illustrates Beijing's increasing concern regarding the correlation between unrest and pollution issues. There were more than 74,000 incidents of protest and unrest recorded in China in 2004, up from 58,000 the year before (Asia Times, November 16, 2004). While there are no clear statistics linking this number of protests, riots, and unrest specifically to pollution issues, the fact that pollution was one of four social problems linked to disharmony by the Central Committee implies that there is at least the perception of a strong correlation.

For the CCP and neighboring states, social unrest must be viewed as a primary security concern for three reasons: it is creating greater political mobilization, it threatens to forge linkages with democracy movements, and demonstrations are proving more difficult to contain. These three factors have the potential to challenge the CCP's total political control, thus potentially destabilizing a state with a huge military arsenal and a history of violent, internal conflict that cannot be downplayed or ignored.

Protests are uniting a variety of actors throughout local communities. Pollution issues are indiscriminate. The effects, though not equally felt by each person within a community, impact rich and poor, farmers and businessmen, families and individuals alike. As

local communities respond to pollution issues through united opposition, it is leaving Beijing with no easy target upon which to blame unrest, and no simple option for how to quell whole communities with a common grievance.

Moreover, protests serve as a venue for the politically disaffected who are unhappy with the current state of governance, and may be open to considering alternative forms of political rule. Environmental experts like Elizabeth Economy note that protests afford an opportunity for the environmental movement to forge linkages with democracy advocates. She notes in her book, *The River Runs Black*, that several environmentalists argue that change is only possible through greater democratization and notes that the environmental and democracy movements united in Eastern Europe prior to the end of the Cold War. It is conceivable that in this way, environmentally-motivated protests might help to spread democracy and undermine CCP rule.

A further key challenge is trying to contain protests once they begin. The steady introduction of new media like cell phones, email, and text messaging are preventing China's authorities from silencing and hiding unrest. Moreover, the ability to send and receive information ensures that domestic and international observers will be made aware of unrest, making it far more difficult for local authorities to employ state-sanctioned force.

The security ramifications of greater social unrest cannot be overlooked. Linkages between environmental and democracy advocates potentially challenge the Party's monolithic control of power. In the past, similar challenges by Falun Gong and the Tiananmen protestors have been met by force and detainment. In an extreme situation, such as national water shortages, social unrest could generate widespread, coordinated action and political mobilization that would serve as a midwife to anti-CCP political challenges, create divisions

within the Party over how to deal with the environment, or lead to a massive show of force. Any of these outcomes would mark an erosion or alteration to the CCP's current power dynamic. And while many would treat political change in China, especially the implosion of the Party, as a welcome development, it must be noted that any slippage of the Party's dominance would most likely be accompanied by a period of transitional violence. Though most violence would be directed toward dissident Chinese, a ripple effect would be felt in neighboring states through immigration, impediments to trade, and an increased military presence along the Chinese border. All of these situations would alter security assumptions in the region.

### **Other Security Concerns**

While unrest presents the most obvious example of a security threat related to pollution, several other key concerns are worth noting. The cost of environmental destruction could, for example, begin to reverse the blistering rate of economic growth in China that is the foundation of CCP legitimacy. Estimates maintain that 7 percent annual growth is required to preserve social stability. Yet the costs of pollution are already taxing the economy between 8 and 12 percent of GDP per year [1]. As environmental problems mount, this percentage will increase, in turn reducing annual growth. As a result, the CCP could be seriously challenged to legitimize its continued control if economic growth stagnates.

Nationalists in surrounding states could use pollution as a rallying point to muster support for anti-Chinese causes. For example, attacks on China's environmental management for its impact on surrounding states like Japan, could be used to argue against further investment in the country or be highlighted during territorial disputes in the East China Sea to agitate anti-Chinese sentiment. While nationalism does not imply conflict, it could reduce patterns of

cooperation in the region and hopes for balanced and effective multilateral institutions and dialogues.

Finally, China's seemingly insatiable appetite for timber and other resources, such as fish, are fuelling illegal exports from nations like Myanmar and Indonesia. As these states continue to deplete key resources, they too will face problems in the years to come and hence the impact on third nations must be considered.

### **Territorial Expansion or Newfound Alliances**

In addition to the concerns already mentioned, pollution, if linked to a specific issue like water shortage, could have important geopolitical ramifications. China's northern plains, home to hundreds of millions, face acute water shortages. Growing demand, a decade of drought, inefficient delivery methods, and increasing water pollution have reduced per capita water holdings to critical levels. Although Beijing hopes to relieve some of the pressures via the North-South Water Diversion project, it requires tens of billions of dollars and its completion is, at best, still several years away and, at worst, impossible. Yet just to the north lies one of the most under-populated areas in Asia, the Russian Far East.

While there is little agreement among scholars about whether resource shortages lead to greater cooperation or conflict, either scenario encompasses security considerations. Russian politicians already allege possible Chinese territorial designs on the region. They note Russia's falling population in the Far East, currently estimated at some 6 to 7 million, and argue that the growing Chinese population along the border, more than 80 million, may soon take over. While these concerns smack of inflated nationalism and scare tactics, there could be some truth to them. The method by which China might annex the territory can only be speculated upon, but would surely result in

full-scale war between two powerful, nuclear-equipped nations.

While a significant concern, the larger and more realistic implication for Western security analysts must be greater cooperation and a possible alliance with Moscow. It should be assumed that China will court Russia or even pursue an alliance with its northern neighbor to gain access to water, oil, and other natural resources. Indicative of growing strategic cooperation include a number of recent developments between the two countries, including a joint military exercise and continued investment and work on an oil pipeline. Such warming ties between Moscow and Beijing could threaten Western interests in the region and beyond.

### **Conclusion**

Pollution and environmental degradation, not traditionally considered security concerns, should be accounted for in security assessments of China and the region. Social unrest, the potential for large-scale political mobilization, and democratization are increasingly challenging CCP power and legitimacy. These trends, when linked to political change, could lead to outbreaks of violence, possible large-scale emigration, economic instability, and other concerns.

In facing such a serious problem, China would benefit from further foreign assistance and expertise. As the health of China and its economy is inextricably linked to all of the world's most developed economies, wealthy states and NGOs should consider additional courses of action to help China form a credible environmental movement supported by legal experts, academics and Party officials sympathetic to change. Although not a complete solution, increased foreign assistance may be a step in the right direction. Alternatively, and if left untreated, China's environment will worsen and threaten stability in one of the most populated and dynamic areas



on Earth.

### Note

1. "China's internal challenges and their implications for regional stability", APCSS, 25 February 2000. [http://www.apcss.org/Publications/Report\\_China's\\_20Internal\\_Challenges\\_00.html](http://www.apcss.org/Publications/Report_China's_20Internal_Challenges_00.html)

*Nathan Nankivell is Senior Researcher at the Office of the Special Advisor Policy, Maritime Forces Pacific Headquarters, Canadian Department of National Defence. The views expressed are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the official policy of the Department of National Defence. He wrote this article for China Brief, Volume 5, Issue 22 (October 25, 2005). Posted at Japan Focus January 3, 2006.*