

China's efforts on climate deal partly due to its pollution

By Louise Watt
The Associated Press

BEIJING — China's push for a global climate pact was due in part to its own increasingly pressing need to solve serious environmental problems, according to observers.

China, the world's biggest source of climate-changing gasses, was blamed for obstructing the last high-level climate talks in Copenhagen in 2009. This time around, it sent strong political signals it wanted a deal ahead of and during the Paris negotiations that ended with an agreement to keep global temperatures from rising another degree Celsius (1.8 Fahrenheit) between now and 2100.

"Environmental issues have become much more important to the Chinese public and therefore to the Chinese government," said Dimitri de Boer, head of China Carbon Forum, a Beijing-based nonprofit organization.

Since 2009, the public has gone from not knowing much or caring about environmental issues "and mainly being focused on wanting to make some money, to now being very concerned with environmental issues and taking that on par with wanting to make money," he said.

China's cities are among the world's dirtiest after three decades of explosive economic growth that led to construction of hundreds of coal-fired power plants and an increase in car ownership.

China was reminded of its severe environmental challenges during the Paris conference when the capital, Beijing, issued its first red alert for pollution under a two-year system because of heavy smog. The city ordered limits on vehicles, factories, and construction sites and told schools to close.

China pushed for a deal because of its own problems and because the effects of climate change are becoming clearer each



PERVASIVE POLLUTION. In this combination of photos from the first week of December, women wear masks to protect themselves from air pollutants in Beijing. Many in Beijing are becoming accustomed to wearing masks during winter since episodes of nauseating smog lasting several days have become common. China's push for a global climate pact was due in part to its own pressing need to solve serious environmental problems, according to observers. (AP Photo/Andy Wong)

year, said Dr. Jiang Kejun, senior researcher at the Energy Research Institute under the National Development and Reform Commission, China's top economic planning agency.

The message on climate change "is very clear — we must do something — and in the meantime the domestic policymaking process is getting more environment-oriented," Jiang said. The air pollution in Beijing is putting pressure on policymakers and China is moving toward a low-carbon economy anyway, he said.

To build momentum for a deal, China and the United States, the world's two biggest carbon emitters, last year set a

2030 deadline for emissions to stop rising. This June, Beijing promised to cut carbon emissions per unit of economic output by 65 percent from 2005 levels.

In September, Chinese President Xi Jinping pledged \$3.1 billion to help developing countries combat climate change.

"That's huge," said de Boer. "They may well be a developing country, but they are also clearly ready to start supporting the least-developed countries in terms of their climate mitigation and adaptation efforts."

Xi attended the opening ceremony of the Paris conference along with other leaders — and made a last-ditch effort in phone talks with President Barack Obama to get

a global deal, according to China's official Xinhua News Agency. He told Obama that their countries needed to work together to ensure an agreement was reached "in the interest of the international community," Xinhua said.

Chinese foreign ministry spokesman Hong Lei said China's push for a successful conclusion to the Paris negotiations "fully shows that China is dealing with climate-change issues as a responsible big country."


Beijing came under criticism for obstructing the 2009 Copenhagen talks when some participants complained China and India stymied global emissions reduction efforts, possibly for fear they might hamper economic growth.

Now, the world's second-largest economy has emerged as a leader in curbing greenhouse-gas emissions by investing in solar, wind, and hydro power and even reducing its coal consumption last year as it attempts to clean up its polluted cities.

It is also already nurturing more self-sustaining growth as it refocuses its economy away from energy-hungry heavy industry to consumer spending and technology and making energy-efficiency gains.

Dr. Olivia Gippner, a climate-politics researcher at the London School of Economics, said that China's actions in the run-up to the conference indicated that it had "a very high willingness to do something," which sent an important signal to other countries.

"It was like an opener for the overall negotiations to go forward," she said.



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