

Long march to sustainability

The People's Republic has quickly transformed from economic dwarf into the world's second-largest economy. Up to now, this rapid growth was at the expense of the environment. But there is a change in thinking afoot, in government and among the people.

For over three decades, China prioritized growth at any cost. But the country seems to be reaching the limits of this model. The air in well over 90 percent of the cities in China exceeds the fine particulate limits set by the World Health Organization. About half of the country's river and ground water is heavily polluted, as is a sixth of the soil, resulting in high contamination levels in foodstuffs. While industries and people demand ever increasing amounts of water, the deserts are growing. At the same time, farmland is disappearing under concrete.

But consumer hunger remains unassuaged. Indeed, while living standards in parts of some Chinese cities are up to the Western level, there is still huge potential for development in rural areas. Chinese car density is significantly under a fifth of that in Germany, and the amount of waste produced per capita by the two countries stands at a similar ratio.

Today, much of the populace, especially the more educated classes, have an awareness of environmental issues, and the mood is turning ever more clearly against an economic policy of "business as usual." The Chinese government is concerned about its position in the face of dissatisfied citizens, and so is not even attempting to deny the sulfur damage in cities or the oil film on the rivers. Premier Li Keqiang has spoken openly of an "inefficient growth model" and Party General Secretary Xi Jinping has promised to punish polluters "with an iron hand."

Sustainability has also started to factor into the five-year plans which set the overall focus of the economy. The legal and regulatory framework is becoming ever denser, to the benefit of the environment. Implementation is quite slow, but the first successes are evident. For example, the government is pushing the expansion of alternative energy, from photovoltaics and wind to electric cars. In China's fast-growing cities, traffic infrastructure is often stressed to its limits. Here, too, the government is intervening, while also searching for new ways to address the problems.

But all this isn't done solely with a view to a healthy environment and the social peace that goes with that. Economic policy factors also play a role. After all, the production of alternative energy would greatly reduce China's dependency on the world's complicated oil markets. Above all, the country hopes that ecological business sectors will have great potential for Chinese companies, both at home and abroad. ◀



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Solar array at Qinhuangdao in the northern province Hebei