

The State of Europe: EU-China – Defining a New Partnership

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Friends of the Earth Europe supports close and friendly relations between the European Union and China. But EU officials have a moral duty to remind their Chinese counterparts that universal values and fundamental rights should also be part of daily life in China. Some of them are:

- The freedom to express peacefully one's views in every possible way
- The right to form independent parties and Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs)
- An independent judiciary

I strongly believe that China will not be able to solve its rising social, economic and environmental problems if it suppresses critique and prevents the development of a politically independent judiciary, media and civic society.

China's rapid economic rise since the early 1990s is linked with growing social problems and an environmental crisis directly affecting hundreds of millions of people. The ruling party in Beijing will not be able to tackle these issues alone. It needs input from partners like NGOs and journalists, who must be able to voice their opinions freely without fear of landing in jail.

1. The situation of NGOs

NGOs in China have increased steadily in number over the past several years. But legal and financial red-tape complicates operations.

NGOs can be registered as social organisations, non-profit organisations, foundations, educational institutions or corporations. Most of them are unregistered, like Greenpeace China. In spite of their different legal embodiments, they all share two common dilemmas: registration and financing. As a result of these dilemmas, many NGOs in China lack operational capacity and technical capability.

The current situation for NGOs in China is one of legal uncertainty. There is no smooth or transparent registration system, nor any legally guarantees.

NGOs trying to raise politically sensitive subjects such as human rights, labour or religion remain few and risk abrupt closure. But NGOs operating in areas of lesser political sensitivity like environmental education or advocacy, health activities, services for the disabled, or general education can usually carry out their activities with relatively few restrictions and little interference.

The Ministry of Civil Affairs, the key Registration Management Agency, has legal power over NGOs. It can issue warnings, order organisational changes or cancel a NGOs' registration.

The institutional problems facing Chinese NGOs, in particular their uncertain legal standing and scarce funding, greatly complicate the ability of the NGOs to attract quality employees.

2. The situation of the media

Since 1995, Chinese authorities have issued about 60 sets of regulations to control internet content. As of January 2001, sending "secret" or "reactionary" materials over the Internet became a capital crime. People convicted for their use of the Internet have received sentences of between two and four years. The elaborate regulatory framework serves as a statement of policy, a justification for monitoring and surveillance, a set of guidelines for what constitutes "illegal" activity, and a deterrent to internet users. "Topics that damage the reputation of the State" are banned.

"Prior restraints" are synonymous with censorship, and represent one of the most burdensome infringements on freedom of expression in China. The term "prior restraint" refers to any system in which the government may deny a person the use of a forum for expression in advance of the actual expression. Chinese authorities employ several different types of prior restraints to ensure that the ruling party is able to silence critics and maintain direct editorial control over political information and news reporting. They impose extensive prior restraints on the publishing of newspapers, magazines, books, and websites. Only people with the "correct" political, ideological, intellectual and, increasingly, financial credentials are allowed to engage in publishing. This allows authorities to effectively silence critics and control the flow of information to and among the people of China.

Chinese laws and regulations narrow the space for free expression by domestic and foreign press. Contrary to international law, news reports must largely reiterate the official government factual account and analysis, e-mail is selectively monitored and courts regularly sentence Chinese editors, webmasters, reporters and bloggers alleged to have leaked "state secrets," "incited subversion," or "colluded with hostile foreign forces" to long prison terms. Regulations also restrict where journalists can go and which stories they can cover.

3. The situation of the environment

While China's economy is growing rapidly, its environment has been worsened. This has prompted, in 2004, environment officials and experts to call for the adoption of green GDP as an experimental framework, with criteria and indexes to calculate such a GDP.

A green GDP deducts the cost of environmental damage and the consumption of resources from the traditional gross domestic product. It can help people understand the costs of resources and environment during the economic development.

Formulating a green GDP is a difficult exercise. From calculating the market value of the extinction of a species, to the cost of soil erosion resulting from the felling of trees, to the health damage from pollution, the exercise is riddled with complexity.

Some experts said if environmental costs are deducted, China's average annual GDP growth between 1985 and 2000 would drop by about 2 per cent.

Unfortunately, Chinese officials recently scrapped the idea of a Green GDP for China.

While economic growth has increased incomes and improved health indicators, as well as reduced overall poverty levels, growth has not been totally benign. As an example, environmental pollution

from coal combustion is damaging human health, air and water quality, agriculture and ultimately the economy.

In 2001, China accounted for 9.8% of world energy consumption. By 2025, projections indicate that China will be responsible for approximately 14.2% of world energy consumption. Responsible for 12.7% of the world's total energy-related carbon dioxide (CO₂) emissions, China is already the second largest emitter after the US. China's share of world climate-damaging CO₂ emissions is expected to increase in coming years, reaching 17.8% by 2025.

By 2025, the share of nuclear power used for China's electricity generation is expected to increase to 4% from the its current level of just over 1%. This is yet another of the many negative trends.

China's main challenge in the 21st century is to learn lessons from the mistakes in Europe and the US. Unfortunately, Chinese policies show that the opposite is taking place.

The country is on a dramatic, unsustainable track.

Sources:

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