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The organization of Chinese climate diplomacy

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Climate disruption is a whole new problem for the diplomatic sphere. Nations find themselves faced by a threat that concerns all of them, but before which they are not equal. They have to resolve a problem that, due to its global impact and highly scientific nature, cannot be tackled without considering a wide range of actors that operate outside classic diplomatic circles: companies, researchers, activists, etc.

In this new type of multifarious, multi-faceted climate diplomacy, states must therefore activate a wide variety of levers aimed at a target that has not changed, i.e. to defend their interests and gain influence, while building a common solution. In a nutshell: they need to construct their climate diplomacy.

This document sets out to describe this construction in the case of China: through what actions, programs and organizations does China attempt to influence climate issues in the international arena?

We reply to this question by looking at the role played by each type of actor in Chinese climate diplomacy. We have grouped them into three categories: conventional diplomatic actors, the technical-economic ecosystem, and defenders of the environment from civil society (citizens, NGOs, etc.).

I - Conventional diplomatic actors: variable voices but a unified discourse

1- Official representatives at international climate negotiations

To describe Chinese climate diplomacy, we need to start with the frontline actors, i.e. the delegations that represent China at international conferences on climate issues.

It is very difficult to analyze their composition since little information is available on negotiators' recruitment and profiles [2,3]. In any case, such information would probably not be very enlightening because the Chinese state structure is extremely vertical, and the delegation's role is to relay and defend a position imposed by the highest echelons of power [3]. Ultimately, the

origin, profile, convictions and personality of negotiators are of little importance. Rather than these individual parameters, a more pertinent analysis involves focusing on the collective strategy of the delegation.

On this question, a change has been observed since Xi Jinping arrived in power, confirmed at the COP26. Under Deng Xiaoping, Chinese diplomats systematically sought consensus and moderation, implementing so-called low-profile diplomacy [4]. Over the last few years, a paradigm shift has taken place, with diplomats increasingly taking a self-assured, even aggressive, stand. This is referred to as wolf warrior diplomacy [4] (with reference to the hit patriotic film, *Wolf Warrior 2*, and its evocative slogan: “Whoever attacks China will be killed no matter how far the target is”). Climate issues are also impacted by this change in philosophy. At COP26, China waited until the last minute to oppose, with unexpected force, the use of the term “phase out” to describe the gradual exit from coal, insisting on its replacement with the expression “phase down” [2]. At the previous inter-ministerial G20, in a similar way, Chinese negotiators undermined an agreement on ending fossil fuel subsidies [2]. Nevertheless, our contacts point out that, despite the change of attitude illustrated by these examples, when it comes to climate issues, wolf warrior diplomacy is not as radical as it is on other subjects (such as the questions of Xinjiang and Taiwan). At COP26, Chinese negotiators often showed themselves to be open [2], to the point that the environmental question has sometimes been described as the “oasis in the middle of the desert” of the country’s relations with the world [5].

Some put this down to the action of a key figure in Chinese climate diplomacy: Xie Zhenhua, the regime’s climate expert, who has represented his country at almost every conference since 2007. Although he energetically defends official Chinese positions [2,3,6], Xie Zhenhua stands apart in the picture described above. His interlocutors describe him as frank, friendly, and firmly convinced of the need for rapid, massive action against climate change [2,6]. The very cordial relations

that he entertained with other negotiators (such as John Kerry) were described as key to the progress made at COP26 [2,6], to the point that some observers described him as “the most important person” at the conference [6]. Since Xie Zhenhua is getting old, the question of his retirement and replacement is crucial to anticipate the evolution of Chinese climate diplomacy.

2- Ambassadors and diplomats: secondary actors who occasionally relay official messages

China also defends its climate positions through other diplomatic figures who do not specialize in the field, such as ambassadors and diplomats. When they speak on these subjects, these people convey a defensive, vindictive version of the official line in a typical example of wolf warrior diplomacy.

The communication of the Chinese Embassy in France provides a perfect illustration. The embassy communicates very little on climate issues, but when questioned on the subject during an interview ([7]) the responses made by Ambassador Lu Shaye were uncompromising. For example, regarding the instrumentalization of the energy transition as a lever of influence in Africa (cf. II-2), he replied that China acts “to help African countries”, that Western countries do a worse job, and that “all those who accuse China in Africa are liars”.

Similarly, the Chinese embassy in the UK, when questioned about the country’s lack of climate ambition, delivered a frosty press release [8], concluding with a cutting remark aimed at Western countries: “It is actions that count. Unlike some countries that pay lip service, China always keeps its words. [...] The developed countries should not shift their responsibility onto China and other developing countries”.

3- The media and social media: how China attempts to control them

In the past, China generally kept a low profile and took a cautious approach to communication and interactions with the

outside world. Recently, however, it has become more present.

Although access to social media is highly restricted for Chinese citizens, the Communist Party has largely understood the benefits of controlling its influence. The country therefore deploys a considerable number of Chinese nationals to create activity on social media and relay the official line.

The Facebook page of CGTN France (China's global television network), has clocked up over 20 million "likes", way ahead of Le Monde (4.6 million), and can broadcast its messages thanks to positive news feed algorithms [9].

The information war is also played openly through a new, much more aggressive, diplomacy, embodied by the spokesperson at the ministry of foreign affairs, Zhao Lijian, who tweeted in March that the US army might have brought the Covid virus to Wuhan; or the Chinese embassy in Paris, which is extremely active on Facebook and Twitter, in particular to attack the French Press. For the first time, Lu Shaye, Chinese ambassador to France, gave an interview in 2021 broadcast on the Thinkerview YouTube channel, whose videos are particularly popular [7].

Beijing also uses the climate issue to improve its declining international image, in particular in these times of massive sharing on social media. Events like the creation of the social credit system, the internment of Uyghurs, and the takeover of Hong Kong stir up emotions among internet users have an impact on Chinese soft power. China is therefore attempting to reestablish a more positive image on the international scene by positioning itself as a leader on some climate change issues.

II - Technical-economic ecosystem for the purpose of diplomatic influence

1- Research and innovation: technical leadership as a source of diplomatic legitimacy

The diplomatic arsenal is also manifest through the economic and technical ecosystem of Chinese businesses,

which put themselves at the service of international influence. China, for example, is in the process of becoming a key player in the sale of nuclear power stations. It is also one of the biggest exporters of batteries, wind turbines and solar panels. The country is the leading refiner of critical metals and possesses the largest global reserves of rare earths. It is therefore in China's interest to encourage countries to follow low-carbon trajectories, which thus makes them dependent on the PRC. In the race to reduce greenhouse gas emissions, staying on good terms with China means benefiting from advantageous economic exchanges.

Little by little, Beijing is developing participations in European energy companies, involving nuclear power, oil and gas, renewable energy and electricity networks. Since 2011, 30 billion euros have been invested in companies in the sector, to the point that China has been described as buying the energy of Europe [10]. In France, when the nuclear power group Areva was reorganized in 2017, the China National Nuclear Corporation attempted to buy a stake in French capital, which was refused. On the other hand, China did successfully invest in a 33% share of the Hinkley Point nuclear power facility in the United Kingdom. The country no longer hides its ambition and aims to construct a 100% Chinese reactor on British soil.

2- Economic arsenal to become a privileged partner of developing countries

This economic influence also extends beyond Europe, in particular emerging countries like Cameroon, where the hydropower engineering and construction company Sinohydro is working on numerous energy projects. Following the Memvé'élé hydropower dam in the south, the Chinese company is currently working on the Bini dam in Warak, in the Adamaoua region, and has been entrusted with the new project of a 20-megawatt solar power plant in the north [11].

China finances most new electricity production capacities in sub-Saharan Africa, to the tune of five billion dollars a year. These investments make the country the leading electricity

supplier on the continent.

Paradoxically, China is the number one investor in green energy, and at the same time the biggest polluter. It sells both solar panels and coal power plants, meaning it can then export some of its reserves [12]. At international summits, the PRC boasts that it is the biggest global investor in renewable energy. But this statement hides much greater investments in polluting energy.

Ninety-one percent of Chinese loans are directed towards projects requiring fossil energies. As a result, while the country announces that it is taking steps to reduce GHG on its own territory, it readily exports its pollution expertise to countries where regulations are weak or non-existent, while taking advantage of the natural coal resources in the same countries [13].

These massive investments make African countries dependent on China, which clearly intends to activate this lever to take advantage of the continent's assets, in particular its reserves of critical metals.

III - Citizens and NGOs: marginalized actors maintaining ambiguous relationship with power

This last part focuses on a third type of actor: defenders of the environment from civil society. Citizens, activists, and NGOs have fought hard to win their place at the table at international negotiations on climate, reflected by the presence of NGOs as observers at COPs, and Greta Thunberg's highly mediatized speech to the United Nations. Each country has to involve these actors in their diplomatic strategy on climate. As we will see, in the case of China, their role is still extremely marginal.

1- China, an unpropitious land for climate activism

The first obstacle to action by these actors stems from the Chinese political context, which does nothing to foster activism. Everyday stories in the news illustrate that for Chinese citizens, criticizing or opposing the central powers involves enormous

risks. This is also true for climate issues: high school pupil Ou Honqyi, who tried to launch a strike for the environment in her school, was expelled, publicly criticized, then forced into exile [14].

When climate activism is not repressed by the authorities, it risks coming up against the relative indifference of the Chinese people. Citizens are however increasingly aware of environmental issues (pollution, biodiversity), mainly due to their impacts on public health. Yet the climate issue, which is not as “visible” as air or water pollution, and which concerns the long term, is generally pushed into the background in the collective consciousness [15].

Lastly, most citizens have a vertical, centralized view of action for the environment, and tend to consider different forms of activism as unfounded. In 2017, a survey showed that only 1% of Chinese citizens esteemed that NGOs should be the drivers of action to combat climate change, ranking them in fourth position behind the government, scientific institutions, and the media [15].

2- The difficult emergence of Chinese NGOs on climate

In 2017, 3,289 environment-focused NGOs (ENGOS) were active in China [15]. Behind this impressive figure, the reality is a lot less glorious. Over one thousand of them are indirectly controlled by the government; and after removing branches of international ENGOS and inactive ones, researchers estimate the actual number of Chinese ENGOS at 150 [15]. Although these associations have had some successes, their influence remains extremely weak: very few extend beyond a local level and can claim to wield any influence on climate diplomacy. Out of the 1,300 NGOs present at COP22, only five were Chinese [15].

Several factors can explain this phenomenon. Firstly, the national context described above is extremely restrictive. The question of funding is also problematic: public grants often stipulate how the money should be spent, and ENGOS are

therefore often highly dependent on international funds. Lastly, they have few tools at their fingertips, such as climate data, which are maintained by the central authorities and difficult to obtain [15].

3- China and western NGOs hover between seduction and mistrust

Faced with the observations made in the preceding paragraphs, many foreign NGOs have opted to open a branch in China in an attempt to raise climate awareness. WWF has been present in the country since 1980, Greenpeace since 1997. Some NGOs even support the model of seeking funding from the Western world, where citizens are more engaged in climate issues, to fully invest in China, where the impact is greater [16].

Attracting the sympathy of these organizations is a question of image for the Chinese powers. In the early 2000s, their integration was facilitated, and several projects were successfully set up, featuring seduction on both sides (in 2004, Greenpeace wrote, “policies adopted by China over the past year read like an environmental group’s wish list”!) [17]. Relations quickly deteriorated. Chinese branches came up against the obstacles described above, and their foreigner status considerably complicated their action, involving a web of administrative red tape [15,17].

Today, about one hundred western ENGOs are still operational in China, but their presence involves risks. Direct risks for members: for example, Michael Kovrig and Michael Spavor, two Canadians working for western NGOs in China, were arrested by the authorities in 2018, then imprisoned for three years, accused of espionage, but in reality used as bargaining chips following the arrest of Huawei executives in Canada [18]. But also a more subtle risk concerning image, in particular for American NGOs. Some conservative US schools of thought warn of an inevitable convergence between climate action, socialism and authoritarianism [19], and see the investments

made by American NGOs in China as confirmation of their theories [20], even an act of treason. For these NGOs, setting up in China therefore means risking smear campaigns in the United States that could directly impact their funding.

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