

THE EU-CHINA COOPERATION TO PROMOTE SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT

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Abstract

In the past 37 years, we witnessed a spectacular economic development of the People's Republic of China, which experienced an average annual growth of 9.96%. Unfortunately, in order to maintain this rate of growth, the Chinese government did not observe the environmental protection laws, thus causing pollution and environmental degradation. Nevertheless, in recent years, China became aware that it is one of the biggest polluters in the world and that it should choose the path of sustainable economic growth and green development. To foster sustainable development, cooperation at a global scale is indispensable. To this effect, EU, the main importer of Chinese goods, is directly interested in seeing environmental issues in this country mitigated and in having a close and efficient cooperation with China to find solutions for preventing and fighting the problems associated with sustainable development.

This paper undertakes to analyse the cooperation relationship between the EU and China in the field of sustainable development, focusing on the environmental issues and on climate change, as well as on the way in which the EU-China bilateral relations can influence the fostering of sustainable development on a global scale. In this study, I used qualitative research methods, namely document analysis. Data collection was conducted by examining several types of documents: specialised articles, communications of the European Commission, reports of the Council of the European Union, statistics and books.

Keywords: *sustainable development, EU-China cooperation, climate change, environment*

Classification JEL: *Q01, Q54, Q56*

1. Introduction

The EU and China established official diplomatic relations in 1975, under the Trade and Economic Cooperation Agreement signed in 1985. These relations intensified rapidly, being characterised by interdependence, and, in 2003, the two entities became strategic partners. “In order to reflect the full breadth and depth of today's comprehensive strategic partnership between the EU and China, the two sides agreed to launch negotiations on a new Partnership and Co-operation Agreement which will encompass the full scope of their bilateral relationship, including enhanced cooperation in political matters” [2]. Unfortunately, these negotiations have yet to be completed.

The rapid evolution of the ties between the two players “has been driven by the rise of China as an economic and geopolitical power, the advancement of the European market integration, their shared trade interests and search for common solutions to global economic, security and technological challenges” [9].

In order to find pertinent solution to these challenges, the two entities agreed to further intensify their bilateral relations by extending their scope so as to cover an ever-increasing number of fields. To this effect, the two players seek to deepen their ties by means of a periodic political dialogue especially with regard to: trade in goods and services and the access to markets, climate change and energy, environmental protection and sustainable development, cooperation in research, development and innovation etc.

It is worth mentioning that trade relations are the “driving force” of the EU-China bilateral relationship and, at the same time, the cornerstone for building cooperation relations in other strategic fields. In this context, the European and Chinese political leaders who attended the Helsinki Summit (2006) underlined the fact that „sustainable development was

one of the main pillars of the strategic partnership. Furthermore, the two entities agreed to build a sustainable society that was friendly to the natural resources available on a global scale and to the environment”[2]. The objective of this study is to give a complex and coherent overview of the EU-China cooperation relations on sustainable development. To reach that objective, the paper is structured as follows: Section 1 – Introduction; Section 2 – China, the world’s biggest polluter – where we will review the main topics regarding environment degradation caused by China’s actions; Section 3 – The EU-China cooperation relations on sustainable development – where we will analyse the main aspects of the European-Chinese ties in the field of sustainable development; Section 4 – Conclusions.

2. China, the world’s biggest polluter

In the past decades, China asserted itself as a major economic and commercial power on a global scale. It is currently the second biggest power in the world, the largest producer of goods, the largest exporter and the second largest importer. According to statistical data, in the past 37 years, China’s average growth rate was approx. 10%. Yet there are researchers who claim that this growth was somewhat artificial, because it was accomplished to the detriment of the country’s environment. Nevertheless, according to Justin [8], China is facing four great challenges: “the increase of inequality, the increase of the level of environmental degradation, the persistent external imbalances, as well as an ageing society.” Another serious problem for China is “the increase of energy insecurity, which may become an Achilles’ heel for development”[1].

As far as environmental degradation is concerned, this has become a top priority problem for China, determining it to wish to become “an environmentally friendly society and to promote a green environment by using resources efficiently”[6]. Nevertheless, „China continues to favour economic growth at the expense of its own environment” [10]. According to CSM [11], “if the Chinese economy continues to grow at the current rate and the Asian giant does not decrease its energy consumption rate, then, by 2030, this country will be emitting as much carbon dioxide into the atmosphere as the entire planet”. Moreover, as the chart below shows, carbon dioxide emissions from the burning of fuels almost tripled, being the main cause for the emergence of climate changes.

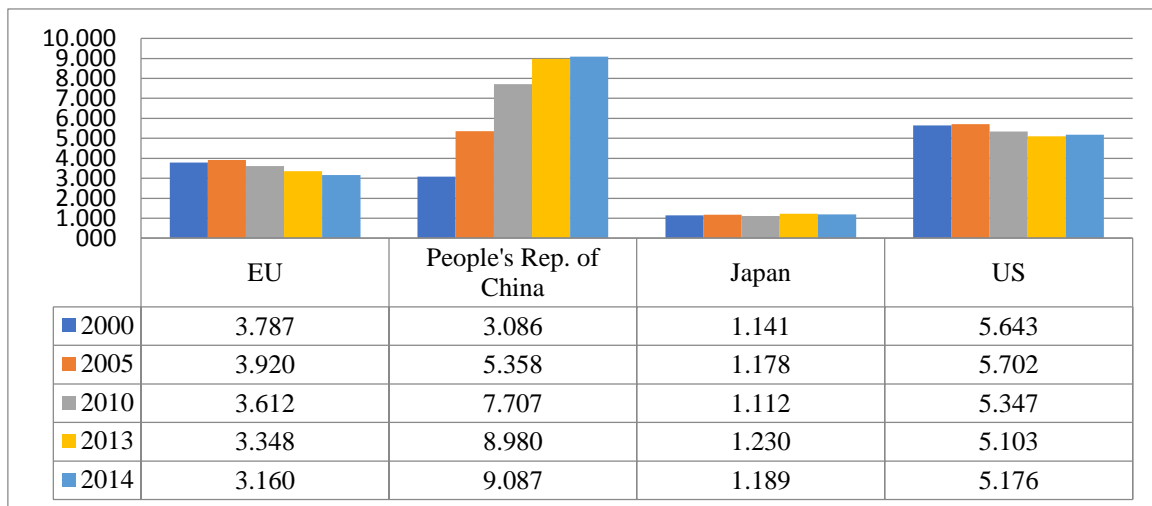


Chart no.1 Carbon dioxide emissions of the world’s main powers (million tonnes of CO₂)

Source: made by authors based on data from International Energy Agency

In addition, according to the World Bank, the majority of the most polluted cities in the world are in China, with “a level of pollution that is twice or even three times higher than that of European capitals. This is due to industrialisation, high population density and the large and growing number of cars”[10]. However, China is surpassed by the US and by Japan in the list of countries by carbon dioxide emissions per capita (see Chart no. 2).

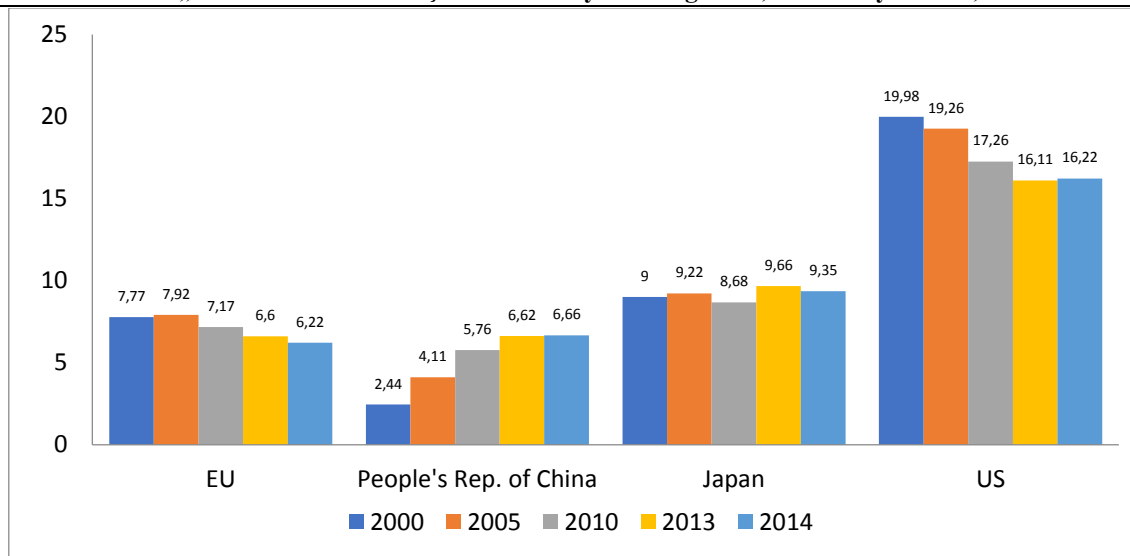


Chart no.2 Carbon dioxide emissions per capita (tonnes CO₂ / capita)

Source: made by authors based on data from International Energy Agency

It is important to note that the People's Republic of China became aware that it promoted an economic growth that violated the environmental laws and it decided to take the path of sustainable development. Furthermore, "the European Union recognised that China would play a central role in addressing the challenge of sustainable development. The EU and China should work together closely and efficiently on matters of energy, environment and climate change, underlining the fact that the response to climate changes is the main task towards achieving sustainable development on a global scale, both for today and for the generations to come" [10]. In addition, several researchers, including Hanson, claim that "achieving a sustainable development, both by China and by the entire Europe, depends on the cooperation between the latter and the Asian giant towards meeting the environment objectives"[6]. With that in mind, let us analyse, in the next section, the Sino-European cooperation relations in the field of sustainable development.

3. The EU-China cooperation relations in the field of sustainable development.

Considering the fact that the new millennium is characterised by serious problems that affect the entire world, ensuring a sustainable development is paramount. China plays a major role in achieving this objective. In order to find solutions that work, China needs to cooperate with other countries that have the necessary technology and financial means, and are open to such cooperation. In view of these criteria, China could only cooperate with the US, the EU and Japan.

While the US and Japan are more reluctant towards technology transfer, fearing the modernisation of China's military forces, the EU is open to such a cooperation. Furthermore, the European and Chinese political leaders decided to work together in order to fulfil the goals of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. These goals include "to protect the planet from degradation, including through sustainable consumption and production, sustainably managing its natural resources and taking urgent action on climate change, so that it can support the needs of the present and future generations"[12].

Moreover, the EU reached the conclusion that the People's Republic of China should not be held exclusively responsible for environmental degradation, since China is "the world's workshop", which favours the export of pollution from all the other countries to China.

As mentioned above, the official diplomatic relations, which began in 1975, relied on trade. These relations gradually evolved and, in 2003, turned into a Strategic Partnership that concerned several fields of cooperation. According to De Matteis, "since 2005, issues related to the environment and climate change have been at the very heart of their bilateral relationship, and consistently on the agenda of their bilateral summits"[3]. This was also highlighted by the European Commission in 2006: "One of key global challenges is to ensure our development is sustainable. China will be central to meeting this challenge. On issues such as energy, the environment and climate change, respect for international social standards, development assistance, as well as wider macroeconomic issues, the EU and China should ensure close international co-operation"[5]. The importance of the cooperation between the two players with regard to sustainable development is also highlighted by the fact that this notion is "one of the central pillars of the EU-China 2020 Strategic Agenda for Cooperation" [4].

Another top priority for China, as well as for the EU, in achieving sustainable development concerns climate changes. These “tend to include not only environmental, but also other issues, such as development, economic growth, international security and, in certain cases, even social and political stability” [3].

As far as the reasons for cooperation are concerned, we would like to point out the following: (1) “both the EU and China face similar challenges with regard to energy and the environment; (2) they are both interested in Central Asian resources and share some common energy suppliers” [3]; (3) “the increasing co-dependency between nations in achieving progress in environmental protection on a global scale; (4) the control of the transport of pollutants from Asia to Europe; (5) creating an environmentally friendly Chinese economy” [6]

With regard to the institutional framework, the cooperation between the two entities is achieved by means of high-level dialogues. For instance, the cooperation on energy issues began in 1994, through talks between the European Commission and the Chinese Ministry of Science and Technology; the cooperation on environmental issues dates back to the EU-China talks on environment launched in 2003; as for climate change, the two entities decided to launch the EU-China Partnership on Climate in 2005.

To sum up, we may conclude that the issues related to sustainable development are constant topics for debate during the EU-China summits and are essential to deepening the bilateral cooperation relations. Moreover, the further strengthening of these bilateral relations, both in the field of the environment and in the field of climate change, can be greatly beneficial to both players in the international arena. Benefits include an increase of energy security, which is vital to the sustainable economic growth of the planet, the shaping of a positive identity of the two players in the eyes of the world and the fostering of genuine economic growth for China.

4. Conclusions

Despite the bilateral EU-China relations having had their downs, they remain some of the most emblematic international cooperation relations. The EU became vital to China’s development and rise, while China is an increasingly important partner for the EU in all fields.

Considering that the EU is the main consumer of Chinese goods, it is directly interested in cooperating with China on issues related to the environment, on energy and on climate change. In order to achieve a sustainable economic growth on an international level, both the EU and the EU institutions should encourage and support China to become more responsible about environmental protection, energy consumption and climate change.

In this paper, we were able to notice that the security of the sustainable energy supply, climate changes and environmental protection are top priorities both for the EU and for China in their efforts to achieve sustainable economic growth, a sustainable environment and social sustainability. At the same time, these issues are also vital to the development and the deepening of the EU-China cooperation.

With a view to achieving sustainable development, it is recommended to intensify the dialogue and to consolidate the cooperation between the political and public players and the research institutions of the two entities. On the one hand, this would raise awareness on the issues related to climate change and to energy; on the other hand, this would help to find pertinent solutions to fulfilling the goals of sustainable development. Furthermore, it is recommended to disseminate information, to foster sustainable models of production and consumption, and to implement development strategies based on the new technologies.

In view of the points made in this paper, we may claim that, in order to reach the goals of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, the two players must consolidate their cooperation in this field and must pay more attention to the issues of climate change, energy and environmental degradation.

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