China

A look at what China’s rise means for the U.S.—and for your future

BY PATRICIA SMITH

Kids wear masks to protect against a haze of pollution in Beijing’s Tiananmen Square, 2013.

6. Is China destroying the planet?

China is facing an environmental crisis. Its cities are often wrapped in a toxic gray smog. To protect their kids’ lungs, many parents keep their children from playing outside. People walking the streets often wear face masks. Only 1 percent of the country’s 560 million city dwellers breathe air that would be considered safe in the U.S., and air pollution alone causes hundreds of thousands of deaths each year.

These problems are the ugly flip side of China’s miraculous economic boom: The many factories and power plants that have driven that growth are responsible for terrible environmental destruction. Most of China’s electricity comes from coal, the dirtiest of fossil fuels. As more Chinese enter the middle class and buy cars, emissions continue to soar.

And all that pollution doesn’t stay in China. A 2013 study found that almost 30 percent of the air pollution in San Francisco had drifted across the Pacific from China. China is also the world’s largest emitter of greenhouse gases that scientists say are causing climate change. (The U.S. is second.)

The environmental situation in China is “very alarming,” says Urvashi Schori of the Asia Society in New York. “But here, the Chinese Communist party has some ability and is gaining the will to do something about it.”

For starters, the government has put caps on the amount of coal that can be used and has lowered the amount of coal that can be burned in several provinces. It’s also been pouring money into renewable energy. China has large wind turbine facilities and it’s about to overtake Germany in generating the most solar power in the world. Its export of renewables is also growing, and that’s helping to bring the price down globally.

29%
Percentage of global greenhouse gas emissions contributed by China in 2011. The amount was lower than predicted by the U.S. Energy Information Administration.

In 2014, Chinese companies made a third of the world’s wind turbines.

China’s also promising tighter enforcement. “We are going to punish, with an iron hand, any violators who destroy ecology or the environment, with no exceptions,” President Xi Jinping said last spring.

Overall, there’s reason for cautious optimism, says Henry Lee, an expert on China’s environment at Harvard University: “They’re taking climate very seriously, and they’re doing a lot. But they’re so big and have so many people that the task is enormous.”
7. Is China's population too big or too small?

In the late 1970s, China's leaders saw a problem: The population was growing so quickly that it was straining the country. For China to pull itself out of poverty, its leaders had to control population growth. Their solution was an extremely restrictive policy, adopted in 1980, limiting families to one child each.

Thanks to the one-child policy, China's population has leveled off at about 1.4 billion people, still the highest in the world. Reducing the number of births has enabled China to feed its people, improve access to education and healthcare, and pull millions into the middle class.

But this success came at a high cost: Some violators of the policy faced fines or forced sterilizations. Sometimes, authorities withheld identity papers (similar to birth certificates) for second children, making it hard for them to go to school or see a doctor.

The policy has also created some major demographic problems, including a huge gender imbalance: Because boys are traditionally favored over girls, many couples aborted female fetuses so they could try again for a boy. After several decades of this, there are some 30 million "extra" men who will not be able to find wives.

And small families mean there are fewer young people overall. In 2012, China's working-age population began declining. At the same time, the number of people over 60 has kept growing. This could stunt the country's economic growth, since they won't be enough workers to replace those retiring and keep the economy humming. At the same time, there will be more old people to take care of.


In response to these challenges, the Chinese government relaxed the one-child policy in 2013, making it easier to have a second child without punishment. But so far, the birth rate hasn't risen much.

8. Why do Chinese students study so hard?

A student's score on this single nine-hour test is the only thing that matters for admission to Chinese universities. And for students from poor families, college is a ticket to the middle class—and out of a life working in fields or factories. So students spend years cramming for the test.

"The Chinese greatly value education and put enormous pressure on their children to work hard and do well," says Shell of the Asia Society.

In fact, Shanghai students routinely outperform the rest of the world in international math and science tests.

So why should that matter to you? Even though China's youth population has declined, there are still 300 million Chinese between the ages of 15 and 19—about four times as many as in the U.S.—and they're the first generation to come of age as China becomes a global power.

In a globalized economy, these Chinese college graduates—7 million a year—are going to be competing with young Americans for jobs and opportunities.

9. How bad is China's human rights record?

Human Rights Watch puts it this way in its 2015 report: Since Xi Jinping became president in 2013, China has "unleashed an extraordinary assault on basic human rights and their defenders with a ferocity unseen in recent years."

In other words, things are getting worse, not better.

Amnesty International estimates that 500,000 people are being held in China without charge or trial. There's been an increase in government harassment, surveillance, and the abuse of those who defend human rights, including lawyers and activists. The press, long subject to government censorship, faces even more restrictions.

China also executes more people than any other country in the world. Though the statistics are considered state secrets, China is believed to execute several thousand people a year.

In July, the government passed a sweeping new national security law that gives the military and the police additional powers to maintain security everywhere from schools to cyberspace. Experts say this crackdown can't be sustained in the long term.

"For China to be a real global superpower, it needs to have legitimacy at home," says Sharon Hom of Human Rights Watch in China, a New York-based group. "It cannot have legitimacy at home because a cracked-down, repressed society is not the same as an independent, flourishing society."

10. Can't China and the U.S. just get along?

The U.S. and China are tightly bound together: Their annual trade adds up to $500 billion. There are 275,000 Chinese studying in the U.S. and 25,000 American students in China. China is the largest holder of U.S. government debt, and no country buys more American agricultural products.

But politically, the two nations often clash. When the U.S. wanted to change North Korea's leader Kim Jong Un with human rights abuses at the International Criminal Court, China opposed it. When the U.S. wanted to impose sanctions on the Syrian government as part of a bid to change its internal war, China vetoed them in the United Nations Security Council.

But experts say that on most of the world's big issues, China and the U.S. need to work together better.

"On any given global issue, without China, we're not going to be able to solve it," says Stephanie Kleine-Ahlbrandt, a China expert at the United Nations.

There's still a great deal of wariness in the relationship, and China's recent aggression in the South China Sea is making America spend more on its military (see our cover story this week). But U.S. leaders recognize the need for cooperation, whether to fight terrorism, prevent a global pandemic, tackle climate change, or deal with a nuclear-armed North Korea.

"There is no divvying opinion here," says Scott Stewart, a political scientist with the RAND Corporation, in Washington, D.C. "This is the best thing for both countries. China and the U.S. are always going to have to work together better."

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