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# China's Role in Global Transition Processes to Sustainability — A Role Theoretical Approach

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**Summary**
The transition to sustainability is a global project, and without China as an active supporter coping with this challenge will be impossible for the international community. The necessity to involve China is exemplified by the case of greenhouse gases (GHGs): the country is already responsible for about 28 percent of global emissions. In recent years the United Nations has increasingly urged the Chinese government to assume a more active and responsible role in international climate policy — a request to which China has complied by adopting a proactive role during the 2015 Paris World Climate Summit and beyond. However, there are plenty of expectations placed on China as an international actor both by other states as well as by domestic stakeholders. They encompass a wide spectrum of, in parts, incompatible political, economic, social, and ecological issues. The dichotomy that exists in the sustainability-related expectations molding China's self-conception and behavior originates particularly in two factual conditions: first, the country's role as a substantial driver of the global economy and, second, its additional need to further spur economic development in its own less developed domestic regions. Using a role theoretical approach, the article seeks to examine the parameters that influence China's space for thought and action in the global transition process. The aim is to contribute to the existing body of research on the relationship between structure and actors in politics during the course of sustainability transitions. It thus strives to present an additional perspective on the potentials, limits, and motivations of nation-states to either promote a sustainability-related transition process or to remain on a conventional, unsustainable path.

**Keywords**: China, climate protection, sustainable development, economic growth, G20, role theory

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## Introduction

China's rising as a great power and the implications of that for its role on the international stage, entailing new opportunities as well as new responsibilities, has been subject to a broad range of studies. China's position in the international system has undergone fundamental changes since the beginning of the new millennium. With almost 10 percent economic growth every year since 2000, China is presently the world's second-largest economy. With these capacities it has established itself as a major driver of growth within the global economic system, that coming along with corresponding increasing expectations of the international community toward an economically strong China — expectations that grew even stronger when the Chinese economy proved to be a reliable pillar of stability in uncertain economic times after the global financial crisis.

Above all, China's perception not only as an economic heavyweight but also as an emerging political great power has generated new demands concerning its obligation to take up a substantial share of responsibility for solving key global challenges. Closely connected to the size of its economic output are China's enormous scale of greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions. As the largest emitter thereof worldwide since 2009, one of the main challenges for the Chinese leadership is the struggle against climate change. In this respect, international expectations correspond at least partially to environmental necessities within China: Ever-accelerating environmental degradation is not only affecting the quality of life of a growing number of Chinese citizens but has also become a serious trigger for poverty induction. Environmental issues threaten to negate a considerable amount of the welfare gains won by the previous economic growth.

Nevertheless, further growth continues to be seen as an indispensable prerequisite for general social progress in China. Therefore, on the domestic level, the Chinese leadership has to counterbalance these two at least partially conflicting goals. The roles that the Chinese government will be able or willing to play on the international stage in the context of those two considerably different expectations are currently the subject of intensive scientific and political discussion. They are constituted by the diverse, partly contradictory, influences of both domestic and international actors — influences that either limit or extend the range within which the Chinese state can invent, develop, or change its role image. Using a role theoretical approach, this paper thus examines the domestic and external parameters that influence this role conception — which is largely determining the Chinese government's degree of political leeway in global transition processes.

## Analytical framework: A role theoretical approach

Addressing current global social and ecological challenges requires a kind of cooperation between states that involves looking beyond national boundaries and interests to a considerable degree, and, in addition, rethinking the conception of state

power and the role of nation-states within this framework. Other political and societal forces become herewith significant players in the international political arena, ones whose presence is urgently needed in order to drive the transformation process forward. Recognizing that states alone "no longer constitute the arena of collective action" (Beck 2006: 31), recent years have seen the development of a variety of approaches in International Relations and Foreign Policy — with scholars thus attempting to gain a better understanding of the meaning and implications of these new constellations. Role theory, as a moderate constructivist approach, has strived to contribute new knowledge to this set of issues by providing a theoretical framework that allows us to explore further the role of states between structure and actors.

With recourse to sociological role theory, this approach describes the roles of states as them being components in an international social structure (Holsti 1970). The objective of nation-states is to keep a balance between integration into the international community on the one hand and the protection of national interests by political and institutional norm building and rule making on the other. They consequently assume or alter the social roles on the international stage that allow for these negotiation processes to occur. As the international system knows no superior institutions standing above the sovereignty of states, national roles are primarily formed by a state's ego role conception — that is, by the expectations that domestic forces have concerning the international role that "their state should be playing" (Chen 2015:116). This includes different domestic actors, coming from within the government as well as from broader society. Nevertheless, being an integral part of the international system and as such inherently dependent upon it, nation-states have as well — at least partially — to respond to the expectations of other states regarding their behavior. These "alter" role assignments are therefore also an essential component of a nation-state's own role conceptions. Meanwhile international institutional structures aiming to regulate relationships between actors define key values and norms, and, on this basis, provide guidelines for behavioral practices.

While early role theorists have put different weight on the sources of role making — putting emphasis either on the domestic factors shaping national roles or stressing the significance of the international structure (Walker 2004) — newer approaches have tried to bring these perspectives together by placing the making and taking of a state's role in a framework of influences between individual and structure — and between domestic and foreign role assignments respectively (Harnisch 2012). They thus ascribe central importance to the role of nation-states in addressing global problems while, at the same time, attaching adequate significance to the forces of structural ties as well as to the other state and non-state actors who are able to substantially influence and shape a state's chosen role behavior. Thus seeing self-conceptions and the behavior of states as being generated in an interplay between role expectations and role acceptance, role theoretical approaches have undertaken

analysis of a variety of policy fields (Harnisch, Frank, and Maull 2011). With reference to China's significantly changing roles in the international political arena, studies have illustrated the strong weight that its government attaches to domestic expectations regarding economic, financial, and security issues (Harnisch, Bersick, and Gottwald 2015).

However role theory has hitherto scarcely been used to examine China's efforts to achieve a coherent position against the backdrop of the role expectations articulated within different policy fields having a global scope, ones that are difficult to reconcile with each other. The Paris Agreement, negotiated by the 195 member states within the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC), has an exceptional character within international institutional arrangements. It aims at a fundamental transformation of the $CO_2$-intensive economic system on a global scale and in the shortest possible time — thus demanding considerable compromises be made regarding domestic interests from its members. Although it was to a certain extent successful in creating a new "we identity," in view of climate change risks still member states only agreed on voluntary contributions. The values and norms underlying the Paris Agreement are measured against those of other institutional systems, ones that have often been in place for a long time now. This applies in particular to the principles of the global market-based economic system.

Using the climate protection–economic growth nexus, the paper seeks to contribute to this aspect of the role theoretical debate. The central questions addressed are, therefore, which domestic and external actors influence China's role behavior on the international stage in regard to climate change and economic growth issues, and to what extent and in which directions do they exert this influence.

## Domestic expectations: Between economic growth and environmental concerns

It is now unquestioned in the official political rhetoric of the Chinese government that mere quantitative economic growth without concern for the environment simply cannot be maintained. Sustainable development had already been an integral part of the tenth Five-Year Plan (2001–2005), and, based on this guideline, the concept of a green economy has established itself as the appropriate development path to follow. Moreover the ideas of building an "ecological civilization"（生态文明 shengtai wenming) and a "harmonious society" (和谐社会 hexie shehui), two terms first coined by former Chinese President Hu Jintao in 2007, have both gathered new momentum in the political rhetoric of recent years (Wang 2013). In addition, the guidelines adopted by the State Council of late (CCCPC and The State Council 2015; NDRC 2016; The State Council 2016) leave no room for doubt that the Chinese government is currently looking for ways to effectively combat

environmental degradation and to remove obstacles regarding the enforcement of related laws and regulations.

Nevertheless, many of these obstacles — including implementation problems on the local level, vested interests, missing possibilities for monitoring, and a still strong focus on the economic performance of local governments — are difficult to remove completely. Recognizable successes have failed to appear, and the accelerating deterioration of environmental conditions and the substantial negative impacts of that on the daily quality of life have led to a steadily growing awareness within Chinese society regarding the importance of ensuring a clean and intact environment (Guo and Marinova 2011).

Deepening concern finds its expression in multifaceted forms. These comprise individual engagement, like with the journalist Chai Jing who published a self-financed film about the causes and effects of air pollution in China (Chai 2015), as well as collective commitment, such as a huge number of demonstrations against polluting companies and environmentally harmful activities by local administrations — or groups of scientists actively seeking possibilities to provide consultation on environmental issues to governmental bodies. The extent to which anxieties about a degraded environment have gained prominence is reflected in recent surveys. They illustrate that an intact environment is now placed well before economic growth (World Values Survey 2016: V 81). Within this framework it is to be noted that ecological concerns expressed by the Chinese public have strongly focused on their own living environment in recent years, but are increasingly integrating global phenomena like climate change too.

### Chinese nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) and academics in the domestic discourse

Within the aforementioned context NGOs are now playing a central role. NGOs voicing Chinese citizens' concerns in institutionalized form and mobilizing the public have seen a tremendous increase in number since 1994, when the first-ever environmental NGO was set up in the country. While their initial focus was on individual projects and environmental degradation in China, their scope has widened considerably in recent years — being now no longer restricted to issues directly related to the living environment in China, but extending to a much broader frame of reference. Climate change became an important theme first in 2007 — thus marking the turning point in the Chinese government's position regarding its role in climate negotiations. Lacking sufficient knowhow to efficiently engage in this field, the China Civil Climate Action Network (CCAN) was set up to facilitate capacity building, involvement in political processes, and networking on an international level for the individual organizations (Schroeder 2011).

The options for action vary between the different civil society groups, with the risk of them being harassed or shut down completely depending on the political

sensitivity of their specific thematic field (Deng 2011). Generally speaking, China experienced a gradually widening political space for environmental NGOs in the pre-Xi era. This space extended to the pressing issue of climate change — especially in the wake of the UNFCCC conference in Tianjin in 2010, when the engagement of Chinese NGOs with climate issues intensified considerably. The Chinese government benefited from the increasing professionalism of domestic environmental NGOs and their more active involvement in climate policy. Chinese NGOs could not only introduce considerable knowhow to Chinese environmental legislation but also contributed to the greater credibility of China as a committed actor in the global fight against climate change (Huang 2016; Zhang et al. 2013; Zhan and Tang 2013). Even in this atmosphere of a greater willingness to allow more societal participation, however, NGOs still had to circumnavigate potentially political sensitive issues.

At the official level, responsibility for climate change issues was moved from the China Meteorological Administration (CMA) and assigned instead to the National Development and Reform Commission (NDRC) as early as 1998 — indicating the importance attributed to the topic as a new international policy field, and making the NDRC, alongside the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MOFA), the central actor in Chinese climate change policy (Richerzhagen and Scholz 2008: 15). The choice of the Chinese delegation to, and its position at, the Paris climate talks were framed by the guidance of the NDRC. Nevertheless, the NDRC is also the key organization for the macroeconomic development of China. While granting great importance to climate issues by assigning the handling of them to the NDRC, this move has also entailed the body's submission to economic considerations too. Since the reforms of the late 1970s, economic growth has been the main instrument for achieving constant progress in Chinese societal wellbeing. In particular, the remarkable successes experienced in poverty reduction are attributed directly to rapid economic development. While the former ideological basis, anchored in Marxism-Leninism, eroded with the increasing commitment to a market economy, economic flourishing has established itself as a central legitimization premise for the Chinese Communist Party's (CCP) claim to leadership.

## The Chinese leadership's legitimization basis

For Chinese leaders and the CCP, it is therefore, in fact, nothing less than a question of future legitimization to find a balance between furthering economic growth and lessening life quality-reducing environmental degradation. Already under Hu Jintao, the Chinese government turned toward "a harmonious society" as the new ideological foundation for rule — substituting dwindling political legitimization based on Marxism-Leninism. This concept — especially when referring to *tian ren he yi* (天人合一), the harmony between men and the universe — borrows from Chinese tradition as an essential element of national cohesion, thus turning it into a

new conception of development in harmony with nature — namely the aforementioned "ecological civilization." Although the anchoring of the idea of the harmonious coexistence of men and nature in Chinese philosophy must be regarded with a certain degree of skepticism (Solmecke 2014), social wellbeing and equality on the one hand and an intact ecological environment on the other are indeed important ingredients in this new concept. Nevertheless this premise is not — as is often argued — a genuine Chinese version of sustainable development. Although elements of sustainable development are integrated herein, the core idea behind the concept is in fact to develop a new, all-embracing (albeit rather vague) legitimizing foundation for the continued claim to leadership of the CCP — something that has, for more than three decades now, depended heavily on successful economic progress being attained. It is, then, by no means an idiosyncratic Chinese concept of sustainability.

Against this background it becomes clear that finding a compromise between external and internal expectations regarding future economic development and climate protection translates into a question of successfully installing a new legitimizing basis for the leadership of the CCP. It is not surprising that the NDRC, as a primary guardian of this basis for rule, turned out to be reluctant to accept the necessity to include climate protection considerations in their economic planning — given their restricting of the potentials of economic growth (The State Council 2004). Although ecological and climate issues have been given considerably more attention during the last few years, not least because environmental degradation threatens to become a relevant factor in destabilizing the said legitimization basis, the need for future substantial economic growth has not been called into question. Instead, the strive for compatibility between economic growth and climate protection — so-called inclusive and sustainable, or "green," growth — is now the core objective on the official agenda (13th Five-Year Plan; NDRC and The State Council 2016).

With respect to official policy direction, the question of whether economic growth can still be the prime instrument to generate social progress against a backdrop of climate change risks is normally simply not raised — in order to maintain an urgently needed broad scope for political action. This also holds true in regard to the importance for Chinese NGOs of participating in related networks of the Global South (Schroeder 2011: 13): Usually, economic growth is here seen as the primary tool to combat poverty and is not to be questioned. NGOs therefore concentrate on the options for China to contribute to climate mitigation without bringing up the — politically highly sensitive — issue of potentially contradictory development goals for the Chinese economy.

Nevertheless, it can be said that climate change is no longer a policy field that is solely controlled by the Chinese government within the country. NGOs are exerting increasing influence, albeit within narrow limits — a development that has been a

growing topic in the Chinese academic discourse of recent years (Zhang 2016). Particularly the Third Plenum Decision in November 2013, which referred to the participation of civil society groups in social issues as "social governance," was generally seen as a favorable sign for the future radius for engagement of Chinese civil society groups. The climate conference in Paris 2015, which witnessed the remarkable participation of about 30 environmental and social NGOs (UNFCCC 2015), can justifiably be called the hitherto peak in the partaking of Chinese societal groups in climate issues. This development not only reflects the increasing primacy of climate considerations in China but also the growing attention being paid with regard to the state's positioning within the international arena.

Nonetheless, although the significance of public participation has been repeatedly emphasized at the official level (CCCPC and State Council 2015), NGOs dealing with politically more sensitive topics are experiencing increasingly strict regulations being imposed on them — narrowing the space for participation under the Xi–Li leadership. Especially the Foreign Nongovernmental Organizations Management Law (NPC 2015), having entered into force in January 2017, will put organizations — both foreign as well as domestic — under stricter supervision by the Chinese security apparatus. Although it is too early to make concrete forecasts about how environmental NGOs will be affected by the new law, it is likely that cooperation between foreign and domestic NGOs will be negatively influenced. This cooperation constitutes a fundamental basis for enhancing expertise in global environmental issues for Chinese NGOs. Furthermore, for a number of domestic NGOs relying on the financial contributions and support in capacity building provided by international NGOs, the law might have far-reaching consequences. In regard to the ability of the NGOs to take a more critical position, the tightening of regulations will therefore have adverse effects.

The domestic expectations of the Chinese state as a player in international climate negotiations voiced by the country's NGOs must, therefore, remain limited. They advocate a responsible role for China, not least because it is one of the countries that will be very severely affected by changes in the global climatic balance. Essentially, however, the compatibility of the needs for climate and environmental protection in tandem with further substantial economic growth is not ever called into question. Moreover, scientific research in China — not least a key reference point for Chinese NGOs in developing their political stance — generally does not delve into this question.

A significantly growing awareness of climate change as a major threat is clearly present and more than evident in the Chinese scientific literature (Wu et al. 2016). Recent years have witnessed a fast-growing body of relevant literature, a tendency intensifying particularly in the wake of the Paris Summit. However the focus therein is, on the one hand, on current or future domestically perceptible negative impacts and resulting consequences, or on measures to be taken — rather than on addressing

the global context. On the other hand, the methods of choice to combat climate change — regardless of whether the phenomenon is addressed with a global or a China-focused perspective — are seen as concentrating on decarbonized economic growth, a circular economy, and adaption measures (Cao 2016; Wu et al. 2016). Even against the backdrop of unequivocally expected largescale negative climate change impacts, further development achieved by sustained economic growth seems to be a so prevalent societal objective as well as a so unswerving political guideline that doubt concerning the compatibility of economic and environmental goals, or ideas about alternative forms of development, are hard to find in the Chinese academic literature (He et al. 2016).

Instead, China's idea of itself as a developing country and — deriving from this basic assumption — the necessity to generate progress by further substantial economic growth remain uncontested. Generally speaking, an inherent compatibility between economic growth and climate protection is assumed to exist and so development via a green economy continues to be proposed (Kang and Duan 2016; Zhang and Li 2009). China's planned contribution as per its "Intended Nationally Determined Contributions" (INDC China 2015) is frequently praised as ambitious, as it is the only developing country committing itself to an emissions peak (Ding 2016: 43). Consequently, the scientific literature seldom elaborates on the question of whether a 1.5 degree target would be more adequate than the planned 2 degree reduction — thus allowing more space for $CO_2$-intensive economic development (Schroeder 2011: 27).

Overall, the role that the Chinese state is playing on the international stage — complying with the requirements of the international community regarding it assuming more responsibility for climate protection, specifically by taking the lead among developing countries and, at the same time, committing itself to highly ambitious emission reduction objectives — can be deemed to be consistent with the expectations voiced by domestic forces. Neither the scientific community nor NGOs in China, both needing to have political sensitivity in mind, contest this role conception by openly questioning the validity of pursuing considerable economic growth objectives. Moreover, domestic expectations concerning China's chosen identity within the international system are in general contradictory. Debates among Chinese scholars, NGO activists, and policymakers show that the question of China's preferred identity on the international stage — namely whether China should take the opportunities and responsibilities linked to the role of a major power (大,国da guo) — is one that is never answered consistently (Shambaugh 2013: 14; Xu 2014).

This conflict is profoundly affecting the domestic discussion on China's position in the interplay between being an economic superpower and a responsible actor in climate negotiations. Although other expectations regarding a more responsible international role are now gaining ground, the perception that China is still a

developing country that is in need of substantial overall economic growth remains deeply embedded in its domestic self-perception. This holds true even against the backdrop of the decreasing effectiveness of economic growth in poverty alleviation. Within this framework, the role behavior of the Chinese government on the international stage can be considered as homogenous and coherent with the domestic expectations publicly expressed. The fact that the Chinese population is enormously concerned about environmental degradation, resulting in them now placing more importance on maintaining an intact environment than on expanding economic capacity, is creating increasing tension between these two conflicting priorities. However this tension has not — yet — reached the Chinese public discourse to such an extent that it would trigger expectations about a fundamental change in priority setting or even reconsideration of the growth paradigm.

## External expectations: Rising to global challenges

The scope within which China's international role is developed or changed is considerably determined by the self-perception of the Chinese leadership about the country's need to harmonize these twin demands of economic growth and environmental protection. As illustrated above, this role identity receives substantial domestic backing. Nevertheless, China's increasing importance in the international arena has also given rise to dichotomic expectations by other countries trying to influence the making of China's role therein. Two of the principal focal points in this context come with China's huge economic output. First, its strong economic performance has awakened strong hopes, and particularly in the industrialized countries, that China might fulfill the role of economic powerhouse — thereby giving fresh impetus to a sluggish global economy. But, second, the colossal scale of GHG emissions accompanying its economic growth has created serious concern and an increasingly strong demand by the international community that China should assume greater responsibility for committing to substantial reductions therein.

### China in UN climate negotiations

With regard to the latter point, China's voluntary commitment regarding its intended emission reduction target can unquestionably be perceived as having been one of the most anticipated INDCs in the context of the Paris summit of 2015 (INDC China 2015). In the preceding years, the lack of willingness to share responsibility for worldwide GHG emission reductions cost China growing criticism. As a developing country, and with its status as an Non-Annex I Party, China had no obligation to reduce emissions. However, the fact that China has been the largest emitter thereof for a number of years caused mounting pressure from other industrialized countries demanding its more active participation in climate protection. This critical attitude has given way to increasing approval since 2007, from when China gradually committed itself to taking more responsibility (Tseng 2015). Its recent commitment,

made via the INDCs (2015), to reduce carbon intensity by 60 to 65 percent per GDP unit by 2030, to cap emissions, and to increase the share of non-fossil fuels used to 20 percent by the same year has met with partly enthusiastic responses — from other countries, from scientists, and even from international NGOs (Stevenson 2016).

China's attitude in international climate negotiations has undergone various changes meanwhile. This evolution is typically split into four different phases. Between 1990–1994, being partly motivated by the desire to end diplomatic isolation in the wake of the Tian'anmen Square incident, China showed a passive but cooperative attitude. Not least, China was one of the first countries with a national Agenda 21, which was adopted as early as 1994. After 1995, however, it turned increasingly wary about the impacts of climate measures on its domestic economic goals (Yu 2008: 57). It unilaterally focused on the principle of "common but differentiated responsibilities," resulting in it entirely rejecting any even voluntary emission reductions.

However the Kyoto Protocol was ratified in 2002, and China submitted its initial "National Communication" to the FCCC in 2004. In the following years the Chinese leadership issued a range of policies aiming at the more climate-conscious development of its economy — the most important being the National Climate Change Program and The Scientific and Technological Actions on Climate Change in 2007, which gave climate change an important place in Chinese domestic policy. The Bali conference in the same year is normally seen as the turning point in China's attitude (Tseng 2015). More proactive than ever before, China became one of the main architects of the Bali Roadmap. In 2009 at the Copenhagen Conference, President Hu Jintao for the first time quantified a Chinese reduction goal in terms specifically of a carbon reduction by 40 to 45 percent per GDP unit up until 2020. The United States–China bilateral partnership on climate change was deemed another milestone for climate protection — bringing together the world's two largest emitters of GHGs, between them responsible for around 40 percent of the worldwide output thereof and two countries whose attitude toward climate protection had hitherto been between cautious and outright dismissive.

Following an established narrative China responded, at least partially, to the growing pressure from the industrialized countries by committing itself to ambitious reduction goals. But a closer look reveals that China's INDCs, however positive the country's turnaround in climate policy might be, still leave considerable room for improvement. Among other things, the peaking year of around 2030 could, according to certain studies (Green and Stern 2015), realistically be at least five years earlier. Statistics showing that China's coal consumption has constantly decreased since 2014 (IEEFA 2017) support this position. While they fuel hopes that future economic growth might be possible without increasing emissions, however, their conclusiveness is limited by the poor availability of reliable data from China (Zhu 2014). In addition, the measures formulated in the INDCs are not specific

enough to show realistic potential for a long-term decoupling of economic growth and emission levels. Above all, as the emissions targets are efficiency related it is not clear at which absolute level China's emissions will eventually peak. Although these deficiencies are apparent, the international political response remains widely positive. The focus lies clearly on the recognition of China's general willingness to contribute to the fight against climate change rather than on the specific measures adopted to that end.

In fact, within the context of climate negotiations, China finds itself facing conflicting expectations. On the one hand, within the G77 plus China it still plays the role of "the first among equals" — seeking concessions on climate finance, extensive emission reductions from rich countries, and upholding the principle of "common but differentiated responsibilities." On the other hand, it has been facing increasing pressure from the G20 (2015) — and particularly by the two other biggest emitters, the US and the European Union — to take more responsibility. At the Paris Summit, China seemingly succeeded in meeting the expectations of both sides: although insisting on the basic principles of different treatment and responsibilities for rich and poor nations, thereby complying with the requirements of the G77 countries, it could apparently as well satisfy the expectations of the group of industrialized countries with its INDCs. In addition to the outcome of the Paris Summit, bilateral arrangements signed with the US (US–China Joint Presidential Statement on Climate Change 2016) and the EU on cooperation over climate protection (EU–China Joint Statement on Climate Change 2015) have contributed to further emphasizing China's role taking as a responsible partner in climate protection. In short, China is seemingly adopting the role that the industrialized countries have assigned to it — thus, at the same time, meeting domestic challenges too, which accelerating environmental degradation and the resulting problems of legitimization have posed for the Chinese leadership.

## China as driver of the global economy

In addition to being a responsible actor in the global fight against climate change, China, as already illustrated, simultaneously faces the requirement to provide substantial impetus for the international economy by sustaining its own economic growth at a comparatively high level. The financial crisis after 2007 and the subsequent breakdown of the world economy proved to be an important milestone with regard to the making of China's new role on the international stage. Although China's export-oriented and foreign direct investment-dependent economy was seriously affected by the contraction in international demand, its — still comparatively strictly controlled — financial markets sustained relatively little damage in the ensuing financial turbulence.

Moreover, China's public debt was low at that time — thus readily allowing for the implementation of comprehensive stimulus measures to boost the domestic

economy. By providing several packages between 2008 and 2010 and facilitating more local government investments and favorable credit terms, the Chinese government not only responded to the domestic needs of an economy that could no longer rely on the consumer demand of an international clientele but also to growing external pressure. Despite a number of critical voices being heard (Gottwald and Duggan 2011: 245), the reaction of the international community to a Chinese government that was obviously taking responsibility in supporting a weak world economy by strengthening its own economic capacities was for the most part overwhelmingly enthusiastic.

The G20 — having grown in stature since the financial crisis, as the central body for economic and financial stability — became the main framework for the process of the role making and taking of China as a responsible power in the global economy and financial order. Unlike with the Bretton Woods institutions, where China is facing a difficult task to be on equal terms with the industrialized countries, the G20 offered a good starting position to achieve that objective. Having hitherto been reluctant to assume a strong role on the international stage, since the 2009 summit of the G20 in London the Chinese leadership underwent a considerable change by now positioning the country as a firm advocate of a fairer and a better crisis-proofed international economic and financial structure. China's continuously and strongly expanding economy is an integral part of this scenario. This role is appreciated by the industrialized countries, as well as by the emerging countries within the G20.

Furthermore, this approach also corresponds to domestic demands for a more prominent role being played by China on the international stage. In the Chinese academic literature the G20 is frequently described as the only effective platform on which China can truly participate with the West in international economic governance as an equal (Xu 2014) — a perception that is also found on the official level of Chinese politics (Gottwald and Duggan 2011). A commanding performance within this group, ensured by the role adaptation of an economically strong China that is able to act as the locomotive of the world economy, is therefore desirable for the Chinese government with regard to both external as well as domestic role assignments. The new Five-Year Plan (2016 – 2020) meets these requirements with a proposed economic growth of 6.5 percent or more by 2020 and a doubling of economic output up until 2020 compared to 2010. Beyond this, as illustrated by the dominant role China plays in recent economic and financial constructs that aim at stimulating global economy recovery such as the "One Belt, One Road" (OBOR) initiative and the founding of the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB), the Chinese government achieves even more than fulfilling external role expectations. Its growing global economic importance substantially strengthens opportunities for China to formulate its own role expectations of other states.

## China's international role between economic and ecological requirements

It becomes apparent by describing the role expectations that are placed on China in terms of economic and ecological goals that these create the same tension in the international context as they evidently do in Chinese domestic politics too. The hope to make both roles compatible — being a responsible actor in climate protection as well as being an essential driver of the world economy — is, as noted, heavily based on the rhetoric of a green economy (INDC 2015; G20 2015). This corresponds, to a large extent, not only to the economic policy approaches of most developed or developing countries but is also in line with the understanding of the sustainable development of the international community coined by the UN (UNEP 2011). Therefore, according to general political rationality, the simultaneous striving for both targets does not create any contradictions. However, even measured against the optimistic assumptions about green growth scenarios regarding the compatibility of economic growth and ecological soundness, the ambitious growth targets identified with a view to furthering worldwide growth and meeting the intended climate protection goals are hard to reconcile. A closer look at projects with an international focus makes these conflicting interests visible. As the OBOR program is certainly one of the most comprehensive economic initiatives for the coming years it provides a clear example in this context.

With the establishment of an extensive international trade network that will span around 60 countries and three continents, namely Asia, Europe, and Africa, the Chinese government hopes with the OBOR initiative to provide strong growth incentives for its own as well as the global economy. In China, most of the provinces and municipalities have already incorporated the initiative into their economic planning (Wangyi Caijing 2015) — thus hoping to secure their own slice of the cake. In addition, the initiative has also met with great approval from nearly all of the countries intended to be included in it. Therefore, the Chinese government has been able to make agreements with a vast number of individual states throughout both Asia and Europe (Blanco Pilto 2015; Xinhua 2015). Nearly all cooperation plans specify environmental goals on the basis of a green economy. Nevertheless, a closer look reveals that clear priority is given to substantial economic targets and that a project of this size will entail a huge environmental impact (AIIB 2015: Chapter 1; Zhang 2015).

This already becomes clear by looking at the first stage of the planning process. A trade network of this scale requires a comprehensive infrastructure, one that is still to be built (Wang 2015), and thus offers first possibilities to generate immense GDP growth. It will mainly involve the transportation and the construction (namely the cement industry) sectors — two ranking among those with the highest environmental impact. For China, the OBOR project represents an opportunity to tackle the overcapacities that were created during the overheated development of

infrastructure in recent years. Therefore, the OBOR initiative is meant not least as an outgoing strategy in line with domestic demands for further growth opportunities — explicitly described as "bringing the outside in" (由外至内, youwai zhinei) (Eyler 2015; Zhao and Yang et al. 2015). This applies for the cement industry, with a low capacity utilization rate of 65 percent, the railway industry (Zhao and Yang 2015), Chinese ocean carriers, sea freight forwarders (Wei 2015), and for the aviation market — which are nearly all operating at a loss (Solmecke 2014: 285ff). In other regions and countries, the OBOR initiative is perceived as a major stimulus for their own economies. For the EU, for instance, the Chinese strategy concerning trade corridors through Europe corresponds to its own objective of restimulating its economy after years of sluggish growth in the wake of the financial crisis — not least by creating new infrastructure. Against the background of the OBOR initiative, China was thus invited to financially contribute to the corresponding new EU investment plan (European Commission 2015; EU 2014).

In the context of examples like the OBOR initiative, it becomes obvious that, although international expectations of China simultaneously embrace for it both an economically strong and an environmentally responsible role, this parallel approach does not translate into practice. Typically, both role assignments are simply not conceived together. In the context of the urgently felt need to revitalize a sluggish world economy, growth objectives and the role assigned to China in this context are given priority by the international community. As a consequence, role expectations of China concerning its behavior as a responsible actor in climate protection — although increasingly demanded — in fact remain weak in praxis for reasons of own priority setting.

The changing political course of the new US administration concerning a withdrawal from international free trade on the one hand and climate protection on the other creates new requirements for China's role on both fronts. Chinese leaders have expressed their willingness to meet the recent requests made of them with regard to assuming an even greater responsibility for the global economy as well as for climate issues (Liu 2017; Xi 2017). Whether these changed conditions will affect the balance between environmental and economic goals in the long run remains to be seen. As for now, the general political priority setting in favor of economic goals is not affected at all. In sum, external role expectations do not, therefore, make a profound change of behavior in the tense fields of climate protection and economic growth necessary — at least not to an extent that would affect the fundamental orientation of domestic policies.

## Conclusion

Its status as a major political and economic global player — and not least the sheer scale of its GHG emissions — make China one of the most important actors in international climate change policies. After rejecting a responsible role in the past,

China has begun to demonstrate its willingness to assume more responsibility in recent years. This applies in particular to the period since November 2014, when Xi Jinping and Barack Obama committed themselves to strengthening their efforts in contributing to international climate protection in a joint agreement announced in Beijing. Nonetheless, this new readiness to join the fight against global climate change must be seen in the broader context of the other expectations that are placed on China as an international actor by foreign countries as well as by domestic stakeholders. Particularly, China's role as a locomotive for the world economy alongside domestic expectations to further raise standards of living in China by continued high economic growth illustrate the dichotomy between socioeconomic and environmental objectives — one that strongly influences China's role conceptions.

Applying a role theoretical approach, this article illustrated which external and domestic forces are decisive in influencing China's role identity in the international arena — thereby determining that government's potential scope for action with regard to global transition processes. Domestically, the Chinese leadership has to navigate between the twin objectives of sustaining economic growth and keeping environmental degradation within acceptable limits. Success in balancing these two goals is crucial for maintaining the legitimization basis of the government. Although domestic voices demanding greater emphasis on an ecologically sound environment have been growing louder and gaining influence in recent years, the compatibility between growth targets and efficient environmental protection is not yet openly questioned. China's status as a developing country and the resultant need for economic growth, as well as the established trickledown-based model of poverty reduction, are not openly challenged. The Chinese government's role taking on the international stage can therefore be considered as consistent with domestic expectations.

Despite the frequently made argument that the Chinese leadership has been increasingly pressured by the industrialized countries to take more responsibility in climate protection, this leveraging is ultimately only limited. The economic interests of the international community itself and the de facto irreconcilability of role assignments to China with regard to environmental and economic goals considerably weaken external demands vis-à-vis climate issues. In practice, this results in a strong emphasis only on economic requirements. Against this backdrop, China's domestic interests largely determine its role behavior on the international stage without it having to reject external expectations — thus being able to play the role of a "constructive player" (Xinhua 2015). The common finding that China's international role conception is still mainly attributable to domestic needs (Droege and Wacker 2014; Gottwald and Duggan 2011: 25) therefore also proves true with regard to China's positioning between climate protection and economic growth targets. Nevertheless, at the same time, this prioritization corresponds significantly with external role expectations too.

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