

Copenhagen, Darfur and New Perceptions of China

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Blame for the failure of the Copenhagen Climate Change Conference to lead to a stronger agreement has, in many quarters, been assigned to China. [A recent piece in *The Guardian* sums up this view very clearly.](#) While it may not be entirely fair to blame this failure solely on China, and affluent countries including the U.S. and many in Europe are not, in the bigger picture, without blame for the climate change crisis, China clearly bears some of the responsibility for the relative failure in Copenhagen.

The perception, which is not exactly inaccurate, that China poses obstacles to global agreements on slowing down carbon emissions, on its own is not particularly interesting or surprising. As a rapidly growing economy which relies heavily on manufacturing and where consumer buying power is increasing dramatically, the Chinese government has legitimate reasons to be concerned about doing anything that will slow economic growth. Moreover, holding China solely responsible for climate change is absurd.

In the broader context of China's emergence as a global power, and as the only state that can be expected to pose a serious challenge to the U.S. in the next decades, this perception is significant. Climate change, and the environment more generally, are issues that are particularly close to the hearts of the North American and European left. It is striking that Mark Lynas chose to place his critical article on China's role in the Copenhagen conference in *The Guardian* a left of center British newspaper.

There are other reasons why the European and North American may turn their eyes and political focus more on China in the near future. China's repressive policy towards Tibet, although not its equally repressive policy towards neighboring Xinjiang, has long been a concern among progressives. Similarly, stories of [racism against Africans and African Americans in China](#), will do little to raise China's image in progressive circles.

China's foreign policy may draw further scrutiny, particularly in human rights circles in the near future as well. [China is increasingly presenting a source of foreign assistance to governments from Central Asia to Central Africa and South America which gives these governments an alternative to western support and assistance.](#) Chinese assistance, however, does not include pressure to respect human rights, liberalize the political system, conduct fair elections or any of those other things which Europe and the U.S. frequently ask from recipients of foreign aid.

As authoritarian governments increasingly turn to China for support, China may emerge as the biggest supporter of repressive regimes and violators of human rights. One does not have to look much further than [Darfur to see that this trend has already begun.](#) For years it has been axiomatic in progressive circles that the U.S. plays this role, if these trends continue and if perceptions catch up with this reality, progressive understandings

of China will evolve as well. Additionally, citizens of countries whose repressive governments are backed by China will likely adopt strong anti-Chinese sentiments as people in previous generations adopted anti-Americanism.

The opinions of the European and American left may not be of central import, but when linked to western potential populist anger at China and residual conservative ill will towards China's nominally Communist government, China may become a powerful, but broadly disliked country. It is not clear whether or not this will matter for China's trajectory to becoming a world power. The current hegemon seems to care a lot about how it is viewed globally as American administrations regardless of party speak in terms of winning hearts and minds and constantly seek to strengthen the image of the U.S. overseas. China may begin to recognize the importance of this too as they seek to convert their global economic power into global political power, but by then it may be too late.