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'Ecological Civilisation': China's Ideological Counter-View?

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Synopsis

China's concept of ecological civilisation is meant to counter the Western view of sustainable development and assert its thought leadership on environmental issues.

Commentary

OVER THE last three decades, Chinese intellectuals, government officials, party stalwarts and state leaders have toyed with the concept of 'ecological civilisation' (EC) to frame their environmental ideology and management of environmental problems. Domestically, EC has provoked discussion among Chinese intellectuals on its implications for China's developmental trajectory.

From a global perspective, EC is another way for China to assert the Beijing Consensus. This refers to the Chinese economic development model increasingly seen as an alternative to the Washington Consensus of market-friendly policies promoted largely by the West and the World Bank.

China's Concept of 'Ecological Civilisation'

After nearly three decades of frenzied capitalistic and 'modernised' development, the explosive burgeoning of an urban-industrial landscape, a network of road and rail communication connections serving 22 percent of the global population, Chinese officials recognise the toll its poorly managed development has had on the environment. More importantly, there is the worrying impact on the health of its citizens, where outdoor pollution prematurely kills annually 350,000-500,000 people.

With its roots in Marxism, EC was used by the Chinese government as a response to its domestic environmental issues. Despite millennia of beliefs in the human-nature

harmony, China's Marxist ideology since its establishment of a communist state in 1949 changed radically that equation; human beings became the dominant power and nature a servant.

While China has a ministry of ecology and environment, it uses ecological civilisation in a conceptual and ideological way to frame environmental issues, both nationally and internationally. While the EC idea was first mooted in the Soviet Union, the Chinese have officially operationalised its usage.

In 2007, the government proposed building an 'ecological civilisation'; in 2012, the EC was included in the Chinese Communist Party's (CCP) constitution; and the Centre for Ecological Civilisation was established in the Chinese Academy of Governance. One of the early government proponents of EC was Pan Yue, the vice-minister of Environmental Protection.

Relevance of Ecological Civilization Concept for China

The Chinese national adoption of the EC concept is a carefully crafted, orchestrated and managed political decision. The use of 'civilisation' covers a gamut of historical, philosophical and postmodern interpretations. Given that China is one of the oldest surviving civilisations, the term provides a current marquee of its global status.

The historic East-West debates underscore the Chinese leadership's quest to find their own national path in development and maintain their national difference especially with the morphing of cultures under globalisation. Samuel Huntington's 'Clash of Civilizations' between the West and 'Confucian' civilisations and Donald Trump's current trade wars have stiffened China's political resolve to pursue its national ambitions for global leadership.

If we accept Arnold Toynbee, Jared Diamond, and Victor Lieberman's vexing questions of why civilisations achieved short bursts of human creativity but never found the key to underwriting a sustainable civilisation, the Chinese adoption of EC makes sense for the future.

An EC will define a postmodern paradigm that hopefully will answer universal concerns of living in harmony within Gaia's 'laws of nature' in a sustainable way. The downside to this Chinese paradigm is two-fold; firstly is the Chinese concept of EC too Sinocentric (Marxist ideas of equality and a government-directed top-down approach) and hence difficult for other cultural communities to be participants?

The irony is that the more Chinese officials try to domesticate EC (such as relying on its tradition of Daoist, Confucianist, and Chinese Buddhist thought in a non-inclusive way), the less it will apply as a universal goal.

Secondly, is whether the thousands of societies who never experienced civilisation are able to identify with the EC concept. Unless the term civilisation is freed from regional and cultural connotations and elevated to global human aspirations the EC concept will be unpalatable to many in the developing world. After all Huntington only identified currently eight civilisations, which makes these centres and cultures rather exclusive.

Another Attempt to Assert Beijing Consensus?

For decades after Gro Bruntland coined the term 'sustainable development' (SD) in 1972, governments, non-governmental organisations and multinational corporations have latched onto this concept to proclaim their adherence to green awareness and environmentally friendly action.

For many developing countries, including China, SD seemed more appropriate to western developed countries where the concern was with future generations, when in fact the concern in developing countries is with the current challenges of poverty, environmental degradation, an environmentally dysfunctional capitalistic system and stark inequalities. For President Xi Jinping, an ecological civilisation is all inclusive, "benefiting both contemporaries and future generations".

Rather than imitate western models in development, Chinese leaders see the EC concept as more appropriate to its national development and historical inheritance, an alternative to SD that covers both an environmental and socio-economic and cultural dimension.

While in the SD paradigm China is more seen as a neophyte considering its relative late start in economic development, the EC concept allows China to chart its own path. At the same time, just as academics view SD as oxymoronic, the EC concept might come across as contradictory; ecology defines the universal, but civilisation has been traditionally culture and place-specific.

The EC concept is China's attempt to counter the western capitalistic model of development and undergird the Beijing Consensus in two ways. Firstly, Chinese intellectuals and officials see Marxist ideals of social equality as a rebuff of western capitalistic-induced inequality.

Furthermore, the equality goal resonates with peoples in the developing world and will enhance China's development appeal. China's state run capitalism has brought many benefits to China that western observers wonder if China's brand of capitalism is a new form of capitalism.

Secondly, China's EC has helped her revive traditional cherished human-nature values with current development goals as well as tame capitalism with socialistic goals. At the end of the day, the East-West clash will best be settled by the comparison of concrete results.

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