

G20 China's chance to lead by example

By Jeremy Garlick Source: Global Times, People's Daily

The G20 meeting of the world's 20 most powerful nations in Hangzhou this September comes at a critical juncture for humanity. Environmental, political and economic concerns challenge global leaders, demanding holistic but hard-to-find solutions.

Global warming and climate change are altering the face of the planet. Temperatures are rising year on year. Sea levels are rising as ice caps melt, submerging Pacific islands. Extreme weather events are becoming more common. Food and water security are threatened.

At the same time, radicalism and extremism appear to be on the rise. The Islamic State and far-right political movements have gained footholds in the Middle East, Africa and Europe.

Meanwhile, the global economy seems fragile. Growth is slowing, nations are increasingly indebted, financial institutions and markets are vulnerable. There is a considerable risk of the global capitalist system cracking apart if nations do not take concerted action to avert this danger.

Yet this G20 summit comes at a moment when global leadership seems either contested or lacking.

Disputes over the refugee crisis and Britain's exit from the European Union have revealed that Europe is actually not a proper union at all. In the US, the endless election process has thus far proved bitter and divisive.

In Asia, territorial disputes show how far nations have to go to establish relationships of trust and security.

Just getting leaders to focus on the issues and discuss them in a clear-headed manner is going to be a challenge. Most are preoccupied with local issues, regional rivalries or winning elections. Yet there are one or two encouraging signs.

For instance, Britain's new Prime Minister, Theresa May, has apparently offered an olive branch to Russian President Vladimir Putin. Just agreeing to get together for a chat in Hangzhou is a step in the right direction.

This is just as well. Setting out to ostracize the world's largest nation would hardly be a wise course of action on anybody's part. This is particularly the case when the problems of today's world demand everybody's attention.

In the forefront has to be the intractable issue of how to reconcile economic growth with reducing the impact on the environment. Put simply, leaders need to think carefully about how it is possible to constantly increase manufacturing output in a consumer-led global economy while protecting

the natural environment.

For example, it is difficult to see how the targets of the 2015 Paris Climate Conference (or COP21) can be met while reliance on consumption continues. Cars continue to roll off production lines at ever-faster rates, steelmakers are dumping surpluses onto markets at knock-down prices, and stores are chock-full with goods which customers are exhorted to buy even if they don't need them. All of this activity requires ever greater quantities of fossil fuels, which fill the atmosphere with pollution and greenhouse gases.

Of course, this is not at all an easy task, especially when the prospects of agreement and concerted action appear to be so far away.

Still, Hangzhou presents an opportunity for China to demonstrate leadership by bringing the nations together under one agenda: to clean up the planet while stimulating new economic growth.

It goes without saying that there are obstacles to such an aim: lack of trust between nations, differing geopolitical and geo-economic agendas, and so on.

Yet China has already shown, by initiating with the US a move to implement COP21 at the earliest opportunity, that it is serious about eco-friendly policy.

Crucially, China has also begun to meet targets to lower its national carbon footprint. Peak coal usage was reached in 2014. Slowly but steadily, the use of coal as a percentage of China's total energy consumption is reducing.

This demonstrates that China, understanding the urgency, is willing to make a change. It also shows that China can eventually become a leader by example.

At the same time, China is developing renewable energy technologies. In addition, only China, due to its large population and developed industry, can achieve the economies of scale necessary to bring down the costs of green energy and also make these energies profitable.

Developing new industries should also create new jobs which will benefit countries economically and reduce incentives for young people to turn to extremist politics.

The G20 therefore presents an historic opportunity for China to show that it can begin to find ways to overcome obstacles to cooperation, and lead the world into a greener future while re-stimulating the economy.

Last year was the hottest on record. This year is predicted to be even hotter. It's high time that leaders should get together to do something to change habits of industry and investment that have been entrenched since the 19th century. Why should this process of change not begin in Hangzhou 2016?

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