

ENVIRONMENT CHINA

## 'China uses major climate forums to do business and expand its influence'

### OP-ED

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**The West condemns Beijing's social and environmental model, yet continues to benefit from it. Its blind dependence on Chinese 'green' technologies is the result of this hypocritical approach, researcher Isabelle Feng argues.**

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**W**hy express outrage at Shein opening in the BHV department store in Paris, while welcoming Chinese solar panels and wind turbines with open arms? Why feel trapped by Beijing's restrictions on the export of rare earths, when for 30 years, both Europe and the United States have celebrated offshoring this highly polluting industry to the Communist empire?

Over the years, Chinese exports have changed in nature, shifting from labor-intensive products (textiles, toys, furniture) to those with high technological value (solar panels, batteries, electric cars). While the former evoked bleak images of sweatshops, the latter are associated with green landscapes that symbolize "clean" energy.

But at its core, the Chinese model has not changed: precarious working conditions, minimal labor rights and a lack of transparency. The monthly salary for workers at BYD's automobile factory in Zhengzhou, based on a 40-hour work week, amounts to 2,100 yuan (€250), or €1.50 an hour, with five days of annual leave. The factory management prefers to highlight the "overall monthly remuneration," which can reach 7,500 yuan (about €900), but only if one works from 8 am to 8 pm, six days a week.

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### Western cynicism

In May, the Brazilian courts initiated proceedings against BYD for "modern slavery" at its factory construction site in the state of Bahia. CATL, the world leader in batteries, has been accused by the US

Congress since June 2024 of forced labor. When the Chinese giant set the new "896" work schedule (from 8 am to 9 pm, six days a week), its engineers were disgusted when they discovered that their foreign colleagues were graciously spared.

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By relocating factories to countries where labor is cheaper and environmental standards are laxer, as if the people there had stronger lungs and more flexible backs, the West displays the same cynicism. The relocation of a polluting factory mainly delights the residents of the country of origin, while those of the host country often have no say in the matter.

Since 2015, China has forbidden any citizen from bringing an environmental lawsuit. Western environmentalists, meanwhile, congratulate themselves on an improved carbon footprint due to closing factories at home, as if carbon emissions released under Chinese skies do not contribute to global warming. Without going so far as to accuse Europeans of hypocrisy or disguised colonialism, as Chinese Communist Party propaganda used to do, they have nonetheless lived in a state of cynical complacency, lulled by globalization: "Pollute in your country to manufacture what we need, and we will buy your products to become greener."

Transformed into the world's factory, the Maoist regime has never lost its focus: to become ever more powerful in order to one day dominate the West. The economy is just one tool among others to achieve this, as is environmental policy. As early as the 1990s, Beijing encouraged the unrestrained exploitation of rare earths, with no regard for the environment or the health of its people, and encouraged foreign companies in the sector to set up their factories there, such as Rhône-Poulenc, formerly the world leader in rare earths.

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## Trap set for Europe

While Brussels scrutinizes the carbon footprint of companies on its territory, Beijing nurtures the European addiction to its "clean" equipment, manufactured under conditions that align neither with European values nor with its social and environmental standards. Instead of raising the price of strategic metals over which it holds a monopoly, Beijing deliberately keeps it low, aiming to discourage any Western attempts to reopen mines and factories at home. This strategy has ultimately paid off: In October, the rare earth embargo forced US President Donald Trump to back down.

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Gone are the days when Beijing denounced global warming as a plot by the West to block its exports. The global market's enthusiasm for renewable energy has provided it with an unexpected

opportunity to sell its supposedly clean products, as well as a green cloak of respectability in diplomatic circles.

Faced with a disordered America, Beijing has positioned itself as the ultimate defender of the Paris Agreement, courted at major climate forums, which it uses to do business and expand its influence. At COP30 in Belem, Beijing remained vague about its carbon agenda and made few funding promises, but took great pleasure in laying a trap for Europe: If you want to protect the environment, you must remove tariff barriers on Chinese green products!

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In the atmosphere of a new Cold War, "climate" has become the magic word to justify any fruitless meeting between Beijing and Western capitals, which, despite themselves, contribute to the glorification of a totalitarian regime, as demonstrated by the 25<sup>th</sup> summit between China and the European Union in July. In its Chinese-language statement, Beijing erased almost all the topics raised by Brussels (Ukraine, the bilateral deficit, human rights in Xinjiang and Tibet, the status quo in the Taiwan Strait) and kept only climate change. If Europe wants a true transition, it will have to resolve to manufacturing wind turbines and photovoltaic panels on its own soil and accept all the consequences, including increased costs and... pollution.

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