Shift in China’s commitment to regional environmental governance in Northeast Asia?

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ABSTRACT
This article examines how China’s economic and social development has influenced its commitment to regional environmental governance in Northeast Asia. Environmental problems in China have drawn cross-border attention, and China must address these serious problems. On the other hand, China is a unique country in East Asia because it has succeeded in growing its economy and competing in an international marketplace while also maintaining an authoritarian regime. Considering this unique position in the region, how can China solve common environmental challenges in a cooperative manner? What factors have affected cross-border cooperation with China’s counterparts? This article points out that there are two principles found in environmental diplomacy in China: common but differentiated responsibility in global environmental issues and building friendship and partnerships with neighboring countries. These principles have affected China’s commitment to regional environmental cooperation in the way of mixture of modest and defensive attitudes. Moreover, in the context of regional environmental cooperation in Northeast Asia, the article argues that Japan has been an important factor for China to learn Japanese experiences as well as to enjoy Japan’s affluent financial assistance. Recent economic and social development in China has made its commitment more positive in global environmental cooperation on the one hand and more uncertain in terms of regional environmental governance on the other hand. The transnational network of non-state actors is now limited in their opportunities to commit to the regional environmental governance; however, there can be hope for sustainable future in terms of neighboring partnerships.

KEYWORDS
China; environmental problems; regional environmental governance; Northeast Asia; transnational cooperation

1 Introduction
The East Asian region, including the sub-regions of Northeast Asia and Southeast Asia, has achieved rapid economic growth through globalization as well as regional economic integration in the last decade. As part of this economic growth, numerous developing countries in the region have experienced industrialization, urbanization, and mass consumerism with significant environmental impact. These experiences are similar to

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what Japan, a forerunner of economic development in the region, experienced during its recovery and reconstruction after defeat in World War II. The entire East Asian region is affected by these changes. While people, goods, capital, technology, and information are crossing borders at an increasing rate, so too are environmental problems such as dust, air pollution, marine pollution, haze, carbon dioxide (CO₂) emission, and food contamination, which are becoming common threats to the environment and human health in the region.

In the 1990s, just after the UN Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED) at Rio de Janeiro, regional environmental institutions began forming in East Asia to tackle cross-border threats. East Asia was 20 years behind Europe, where the first environmental institutions emerged after the UN Conference on the Human Environment at Stockholm. The regional environmental institutions in East Asia have faced some criticism for being ineffective due to their non-binding, informal, weak, and overlapping nature, especially when compared to similar institutions in Western Europe and North America. Moreover, non-state actors including NGOs and academic researchers are limited in their opportunity to participate and promote regional environmental governance by the state.

Furthermore, China’s rapidly changing economic dynamics in recent years have increased the complexity of governing regional environmental cooperation. China has become a major economic power in East Asia and has even overtaken Japan in terms of GDP. Japan, while still in an advantageous role as a developed country, has largely reduced its financial assistance to China, which caused Japan’s presence in the regional environmental governance to be more fragile. Especially in Northeast Asia, stable relationships in cross-border cooperation are impeded by broader issues such as geographical asymmetry (upwind–downwind); political divides (socialist–capitalist, cross-straits); sustained conflicts on history and territories (China–Japan, Korea–Japan); and other unstable international factors (around the Korean Peninsula).

Promoting environmental cooperation in East Asia, especially Northeast Asia, is not an easy task when facing such a complex situation. Undoubtedly, China must play a major role in promoting regional environmental cooperation due to its significant impact on both the economy and the environment. Reimann points out that “With the greater willingness of China to participate in regional environmental initiatives, prospects for regional cooperation will markedly improve. Whether this happens or not will greatly depend on domestic politics and development.” The following questions arise in terms of regional environmental governance: how can China participate in a cooperative solution for common environmental challenges in the region? and what factors affect its cross-border cooperation with other countries in the region?

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2 Teranishi, “Twenty-First-Century Environmental Cooperation.”
3 Matsuoka, “Japan’s Asian Strategy,” 203.
4 Ibid., 204–6.
5 Reimann, “Environment, Human Security, and Cooperation” 777–780.
6 See the annual variation of GDP (current US$) in Japan and China (https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/NY.GDP.MKTP.CD?locations=CN-JP&view=chart).
7 Matsuoka, “Japan’s Asian Strategy,” 207–220.
8 Otsuka, “Development and Perspectives of Environmental Cooperation”.
9 Reimann, “Environment, Human Security, and Cooperation,” 657.
It is difficult to find a comprehensive analysis of China’s commitment to regional environmental governance in the existing studies. Wang Zhijia, who was the then director of the Department of International Cooperation in the State Environmental Protection Agency and used to be a diplomat in UN Environmental Program (UNEP), wrote two volumes on environmental diplomacy in China, called *China Environmental Diplomacy*. Those books, however, focus mainly on UN-related environmental diplomacy, with some attention paid to bilateral cooperation. Wang does not analyze regional and multilateral environmental cooperation. Other scholars pointed out that the regional environmental initiatives in East Asia are overlapping, nested, non-binding, general, consensus-based, and weak in comparison to similar institutions among Western countries in terms of regional environmental governance. However, they did not pay much attention to China’s environmental diplomacy and its transition in terms of regional environmental governance.

To answer the questions raised earlier, this article examines the shift in China’s commitment to regional environmental governance in East Asia, especially in Northeast Asia, on the basis of official documents, field observations, and some interviews. In reviewing the transition, I focus on the principle as well as practices of China’s environmental diplomacy in which key factors can be found to explain how and why the transition in regional environmental governance occurred. Furthermore, in terms of environmental diplomacy, I focus on not only state actors but also a key non-state actor, environmental NGOs, whose roles have been debated in the literature on environmental governance under Chinese authoritarianism.

In the next section, I review the development of environmental diplomacy in China in both international and regional contexts, which reveals that Japan has been a key reference for China. In the third section, I examine China’s role in regional environmental cooperation and argue that China has displayed a mix of moderate and defensive approaches in handling environmental issues. In the fourth section, I investigate how the dynamic and complex situations in Northeast Asia have affected China’s role in regional environmental governance. Lastly, I conclude the article with a summary and some implications for further study.

2 Formation of China’s environmental diplomacy

2.1 China’s participation in the UN conference on the human environment

China’s foray into environmental diplomacy came just 1 year after its entry into the UN. In 1972, the Chinese government sent a delegation to the UN Conference on the Human Environment held in Stockholm, which was the first UN conference on

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10Wang, *China Environmental Diplomacy; China Environmental Diplomacy (II).*

11Matsuoka, *Regional integration in Asia*; Takahashi, *The Comparative Politics of Transboundary Air Pollution*; Komori, “Evaluation regional environmental governance”; Reimann, “Environment, human security, and cooperation” and Bao, *China Environmental Governance*, 176–179.

12This article focuses on regional environmental governance in Northeast Asia, as a sub-region of East Asia. It should also be important to examine the China’s commitment to regional environmental governance in Southeast Asia, where there are international rivers. For example, see Nakayama, “China as basin country of international rivers.”

13For emerging and survival of environmental NGOs in China under the authoritarian system, see Bao, *China Environmental Governance*, 88–110; Otsuka, “Strategies for fragmentary opportunities.”
environmental issues to gather both developed and developing countries. Premier Zhou Enlei decided to dispatch an official delegation to the conference in order to assuage his strong anxiety over the serious situation of environmental pollution in China although the Cultural Revolution, an extreme left movement launched from 1966, continued in the country, when there was no effective measure against environmental pollution taken by the government.

It is also worth mentioning that the UNEP was established on the basis of a recommendation made at the UN conference in Stockholm, and China has had a seat on its executive board since the first election. As discussed later, this has become an important channel for China to enter into negotiations with other countries in global environmental issues.

The delegation’s official report was full of anti-capitalist and anti-imperialist discourse, reflecting the ultra-leftist movement in the country under the Cultural Revolution. For example, Tang Ke, the head of delegation, remarked the following in his speech: “We think that now, environmental pollution [konghai] in some places is very serious and unusual, because Capitalism has developed as Imperialism to become a Super Power conducting exploited, invaded, and battailous policies.”

Most importantly, however, the report contained some important principles and positions held by the Chinese government at the time that continue to influence China’s modern environmental diplomacy. Five principles that still govern China’s environmental diplomacy are noteworthy: the interests of developing countries need to be defended; developed countries should transfer science and technology to developing countries without any compensation; major industrial developed countries should burden international fundraising; states have sovereign rights over environmental protection decisions; and to deal with serious environmental pollution around the world. There were also found the focus on encouraging positive attitudes, however, it should be noted that it originated from China’s political struggles against exploitations by capitalists (or imperialists).

2.2 A turn of discourse over lessons of developed countries

As mentioned previously, China’s participation in the UN Conference on the Human Environment was driven by Premier Zhou’s anxiety over domestic environmental problems. After returning from the conference, some delegates expressed concern that environmental pollution and natural ecological disruption in China was more serious than that in developed countries. This concern was shared with leaders including Premier Zhou and pushed the First National Conference on

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14 China Environmental Protection Administration, 377.
15 Qu, “I and China’s environmental protection,” 1.
16 Wang, China Environmental Diplomacy, 116–120 and China Environmental Protection Administration, 328.
17 Qu, “I and China’s environmental protection,” 1–2.
18 Tang’s speech, 4.
19 See Hua Jilong’s speech, 15–17.
20 He pointed out totally 10 points about basic positions of Chinese government concerning the Declaration on Human Environment.
21 Ask by Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Ministry of Fuel Chemistry, 208–209.
22 Qu, “I and China’s Environmental Protection,” 1.
Environmental Protection held just 1 year after the UN conference. At this conference, Hua Guofeng, who later succeeded Mao, mentioned lessons taken from the serious environmental problems created by developed countries, including Japan and the U.S. However, those cases were mentioned not as lessons to be learned from but as proof of their inability.

It was after the Third Plenum of the Eleventh Central Committee of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), held in 1978 and known as a turning point when the party’s political focus shifted from extreme socialism to promoting economic development, that CCP and the central government recognized the seriousness of the country’s environmental pollution and the need to learn from the experiences of developed countries. At the end of 1978, CCP issued its first document on environmental protection. CCP acknowledged the severe environmental pollution under a weak capacity of industrial technology. The document read, in part, that “we should avoid walking on the old road which capitalists took as it caused serious environmental disruption and then had to treat it.”

Qu Geping, who was the first director of the State Environmental Protection Agency, mentioned in a 1980 lecture that developed countries adopted specific policies to improve environmental issues, including strict environmental regulations and standards that were stipulated by the government, in responding to the strong resistance by people against pollution as well as strict regulations on industries that developed technological innovations, such as improving product efficiency to reduce environmental impact.

### 2.3 Attention to Japanese experiences

China recognized the value of learning from other countries that were already further down the path of environmental degradation. Among the experiences of developed countries, those of Japan, a neighboring country that achieved astonishing economic growth in East Asia after World War II, caught the attention of Chinese leaders and environmental technocrats in the central government. They learned Japanese lessons and experiences in combating heavy environmental pollution during its rapid economic growth through various channels at the early stage of China’s environmental diplomacy.

In December 1970, before China entered in UN, and also before China entered diplomatic relations with Japan, Premier Zhou met a Japanese journalist, Norikuni Nakano from Fuji TV, and learned that the Japanese were enduring “Kogai” (environmental disruption) that included minamata disease (methyl-mercury poison caused by untreated wastewater from a fertilizer factory); itai-itai disease (persistent pain in bones caused by cadmium in untreated wastewater from a mining); and other problems.

Zhou ordered his officials that they should listen to his lecture at the national planning
conference in 1972. Not only technocrats but also directors of the state administration and the military participated in his lecture because Zhou came to recognize the serious risks caused by environmental pollution that would have happened in some parts of China already and all relevant officials in his government should work together to address them. It is said that this lecture provided the first comprehensive information on environmental protection for the Chinese government.  

In addition, at the 1972 UN conference in Stockholm, Chinese delegates unintentionally learned of the serious situation of environmental problems in developed countries, including Japan. The Chinese delegation’s official report mentioned that some sufferers of minamata disease had blamed monopolist capitalists for their misconduct of pollution. The report also stated that delegates were asked to show a cold shoulder to Japanese delegates at the conference in order to avoid the problems in China–Japan relations.

After the turning of CCP’s political focus from extreme socialism to economic reform, Chinese technocrats disclosed their attentions to Japan’s environmental situation and its attempts at environmental regulations. In 1980, Qu Geping, a top environmental technocrat, gave a lecture at a training course for environmental management officials. He mentioned Japan’s rapid economic growth past countries like the U.S. and the U.K. to emphasize the importance of management. Qu pointed out that the low-quality Chinese management style kept China behind these other countries. Additionally, he emphasized the need to establish strict environmental regulations and referred to the “Pollution Diet” held in Japan in 1970 where the country stipulated 14 environmental regulations to reduce environmental pollution.

China continued to follow Japan’s progress with environmental regulation in other ways as well. For example, it organized study tours to visit Japan after the UN Conference on the Human Environment. The first study tour was organized by Qu and the Beijing municipal government in June 1975. For the first time, the Chinese government conducted a study tour on environment problems in another country. Chinese representatives visited Japan four times, the U.S. three times, and took one tour each through other countries in the 1970s and 1980s. Although tours to Japan were likely cheaper because the two countries were relatively nearby, the interest in touring Japan indicates that China wanted to learn about Japanese experiences during its early stages of environmental diplomacy.

### 2.4 Establishing principles and positions on global environmental issues

While Japan provided a regional example of how to tackle environmental challenges, China participated in international environmental diplomacy, particularly after the late 1980s as its economic and diplomatic capacities improved. In the early 1990s, China

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29Qu, “Retrospection of Premier Zhou Enlei,” 473.
30Review report that Chinese delegation attended the Conference, 214.
31Ask by Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Ministry of Fuel Chemistry, 211.
32Qu, We Need a Transformation, 9–13.
33China Environmental Protection Administration, 377–444.
34The study tours to Japan can be found in the chronology of China environmental protection are June 1975, September 1978, May 1985, and May 1989. Other countries where the Chinese government organized study tours except for UN meetings are the U.S. in May 1980, April 1981, and September 1987; Denmark in November 1983; Kenya in February 1987; the U.K. in May 1988; and Finland in April 1989.
35Wang, China Environmental Diplomacy, 149–153.
successfully negotiated a multilateral agreement with developed countries, which formed its environmental diplomacy principles. This agreement was the Montreal Protocol, which banned the use of chlorofluorocarbons (CFC), a substance that was contributing heavily to the destruction of the ozone layer. At the Saving the Ozone Layer conference in March 1989 in London, the Chinese government expressed its support for the Vienna Convention[^36] and the Montreal Protocol, with amendments. China recommended that the Protocol include the establishment of foundation, the transfer of alternative substances and technology to developing countries without any compensation, and flexible adaptation of CFC control standards for developing countries under the principle “more emitted, more reduced.”[^37] In the next year, China ratified the Vienna Convention while continuing to negotiate with the UNEP and other countries for an amendment to the Montreal Protocol. At the third Conference of Protocol (COP), held at UNEP in 1991, China ratified a revised Protocol that reflected China’s insistence on terms of “common but differentiated responsibility.”[^38]

The report from the London conference in March 1989 mentioned that China should be aware of the impact of environmental diplomacy conducted by developed countries on its international position as well as the need of response to a request by developing countries.[^39] At the 16th Conference of State Council Commission on Environmental Protection in October 1989, Song Jian, the then state councilor and president of the Commission, pointed out the need for environmental diplomacy.[^40] For the first time, the Chinese government had acknowledged the importance of environmental diplomacy.[^41] After working through the tough negotiations over paying for global environmental protection in the Montreal Protocol, the Chinese government realized that environmental diplomacy must play a crucial role in international negotiations on environmental issues.

As environmental problems continued to worsen in the late 1980s, UN assemblies began discussing the need for a follow-up conference 20 years after the UN Conference on the Human Environment.[^42] To prepare for the UNCED, known as the “Earth Summit,” held in Rio de Janeiro in 1992, China worked with other developing countries to advocate for the right of development while also protecting the environment. The “Beijing Declaration” was adapted at the Ministerial Meeting on Environment and Development in Developing Countries held in Beijing in 1991, which reflected China’s principles and positions regarding global environmental issues as below.[^43]

By 1990, the Chinese government had firmly established its principles and positions regarding global environmental issues on the basis of its practices of environmental diplomacy since the 1970s.[^44] China’s principle of “common but differentiated

[^36]: Vienna Convention which promoted research, observation and information exchange about measures to protect the ozone layer was adopted in 1985 and entered into force in 1987. See its website, [http://ozone.unep.org/en/treaties-and-decisions/vienna-convention-protection-ozone-layer](http://ozone.unep.org/en/treaties-and-decisions/vienna-convention-protection-ozone-layer).

[^37]: State Council Commission on Environmental Protection, 54–59.

[^38]: Wang, China Environmental Diplomacy, 129–135, 260–268; China Environmental Protection Administration, 334 and Wang, China Environmental Protection Administration (II), 48.

[^39]: State Council Commission on Environmental Protection, 58–59.

[^40]: Ibid., 72; Wang, China Environmental Diplomacy, 262.

[^41]: Ibid., 135–6.

[^42]: Ibid., 139–4.

[^43]: China Environmental Protection Administration, 53–55.
responsibilities’’ (CBDR), which was adapted in the Montreal Protocol, was compatible with these foundational principles and positions. CBDR became a key strategy to obtain technological and financial assistance from developed countries as seen in the process of negotiation on the Montreal Protocol.

Sometimes, environmental diplomacy had to be tied to political diplomacy, as China learned during the Earth Summit. In June 1989, students and citizens demonstrated in China’s Tiananmen Square to support the nation’s democratization. These demonstrators were violently suppressed by the military, and major developed countries had halted economic relations with China. The country considered the Earth Summit an important opportunity to soften or dissolve economic sanctions, emphasizing as, “to further improve the relation with Western countries to break their sanctions to China completely,” in the “Ask for Policies and Measures on Participation in the UN Conference on Environment and Development,” written by Ministry of Foreign Affairs in March 1992.45

The China Council for International Cooperation on Environment and Development, a high-level international advisory body comprising Chinese and foreign experts, had been established just before the Earth Summit.46 This council acted as a unique multilateral consultative mechanism on China’s environmental issues and went beyond political conflict between China and developed countries. This council is considered an achievement of China’s environmental diplomacy to establish a cooperative mechanism with experts in developed countries.

As discussed above, we can see two key factors to form China’s environmental diplomacy at the early stage: UN-based multilateral negotiations on global environmental issues and attentions to Japanese experiences and lessons on environmental pollution during its rapid economic growth. In terms of the Chinese principle on global environmental issues, CBDR is a key strategy to lead a global environmental discussion in favor for developing countries. In the next section, it will be revealed how such a strategy interacted with the regional environmental cooperation in East Asia.

3 China’s involvement in regional environmental cooperation in Northeast Asia

3.1 Bilateral cooperation

In terms of regional environmental cooperation in Northeast Asia, China has been active since the 1990s. By 2007, China had signed bilateral agreements and other forms of environmental cooperation with 40 countries (see Table 1).47 The first document of bilateral environmental cooperation was signed with the U.S. in 1980.48 In Northeast Asia, China signed a document with Mongolia in 1990, North Korea in 1992; South Korea as a form of “arrangement” in 1993 and as a form of memorandum in 2003; Russia in 1994 and 2006; and Japan in 1994, 1998, and 2007.

45 State Council Commission on Environmental Protection, 521.
46 Wang, China Environmental Diplomacy, 94–99.
47 Department of International Cooperation, State Environmental Protection Agency, Archive of Bilateral Environmental Cooperation, ii.
48 China Environmental Protection Administration, 335.
Table 1. Bilateral environmental cooperation with China (by 2007).

| Year of the signature | Name of countries |
|------------------------|------------------|
| 1980                   | The U.S. (Japan) |
| 1990                   | Mongolia         |
| 1993                   | South Korea      |
| 1994                   | Russia, Japan    |
| 1995                   | Ukraine, Italy, Australia |
| 1996                   | Poland, Tajikistan, Pakistan |
| 1997                   | France, Romania, Uzbekistan |
| 1998                   | UK, Canada, Japan, Sri Lanka |
| 1999                   | Canada           |
| 2000                   | Bulgaria, Italy, Germany, Australia, Peru |
| 2002                   | the Netherlands, Belgium, Slovakia, Sweden, Spain, Finland, Morocco |
| 2003                   | Egypt, Canada, US, Korea |
| 2004                   | Czech, Italy, Hungary, Singapore, Iran |
| 2005                   | Iceland, Belgium, Brazil, US, Cuba, North Korea |
| 2006                   | Russia           |
| 2007                   | Thailand, Japan, Australia |

Source: Compiled by the author from Archive of Bilateral Environmental Cooperation.
Note: These signatures include agreement, memorandum, communique, action plan, and arrangement (between China and Korea). Countries in Northeast Asia are underlined. The Far East Russia belongs to Northeast Asia.

China signed the environmental cooperation agreement with Russia in 1994 and memorandum in 2006. The memorandum focuses on cooperative monitoring of water-quality crossing the border between the countries. In 2005, there was an accident of water contamination of toxic materials of benzene in Songhua Jiang River that flowed into Amur River in Russia due to the mismanagement of a petrochemical plant in Jilin City. The memorandum would be a diplomatic solution to this accident that China as an upriver country could avoid any conflict with Russia as its downriver country in terms of water pollution in their international rivers.49

In 1980, China signed the agreement of science and technology cooperation with Japan and provided the basis for the agreement in 1994.50 Additionally, China signed a communique with Japan in 1998 and 2007.51 For bilateral environmental cooperation with the countries in Northeast Asia, Japan has been most important to China for several reasons. First, after World War II, Japan realized the fastest economic growth among East Asian countries and started offering aid in the region. In 1979, Japan launched official development aid (ODA) to China. Before the termination of any new Yen Loan project to China in 2008,52 Japan had been a top donor to China in terms of bilateral economic cooperation in the world. In 2007, just 1 year before terminating any new project, the amount of ODA from Japan to China was $435.66 million USD, which was 32.6% of the total amount of ODA to China. Germany was China’s second biggest donor in 2007, providing $289.28 USD in aid, which was 21.6% of the total aid to the country.53 It is also noted that Japanese ODA to China had started to focus on environmental issues in response to mounting environmental problems in China and

49 Archive of Bilateral Environmental cooperation, 53–54.
50 Ibid, 110.
51 Ibid, 122–3, 148–9.
52 The termination of new Yen loan project to China in 2008 was the contract base of project and some projects already made a contract but not finished yet had continued until their completion.
53 Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, “Date book of ODA 2010,” http://www.mofa.go.jp/mofaj/gaiko/oda/shiryo/kuni/10_databook/index.html#1.
their potential impact on Japan since the 1990s. According to the data from 2000 to 2007 on countries in Development Assistance Committee (DAC), Japan had been a top donor for China in terms of contract-based amount of environmental ODA that accounted for about 40–60% among DAC countries.\(^5^4\)

As mentioned earlier, China watched Japan grapple with environmental issues like pollution and disease and learned from the country’s efforts to improve technology and regulations.\(^5^5\) Furthermore, Japan’s bureaucratic culture originated in ancient China, while the two countries today have different political systems; the governments can communicate more easily because they share some bureaucratic practices.\(^5^6\) Moreover, it should be noted that not only governmental officials but also Chinese scholars and researchers in the field of environmental sciences and technologies visited Japan to share mutual interests and exchange information and results with their Japanese counterparts.\(^5^7\) China has enjoyed a beneficial relationship with Japan, learning from Japanese environmental protection experiences, while also enjoying a large amount of financial aid.

### 3.2 Multilateral cooperation

In East Asia, a series of multilateral environmental cooperation agreements became active after the Earth Summit at Rio de Janeiro.\(^5^8\) China has been involved in Northeast Asian Conference on Environmental Cooperation (NEAC), 1992; Acid Deposition Monitoring Network in East Asia (EANET), as an observer in 1998 and a participant in 2000; Northeast Asian Subregional Programme of Environmental Cooperation (NEAPEC), 1993; North-west Pacific Action Plan (NOWPAP) 1994; Tripartite Environment Ministers Meeting (TEMM), 1999; and Joint Research Project on Long-Range Transboundary Air Pollutants in Northeast Asia (LTP) 2000 (see Table 2). China has also participated in other regional initiatives beyond the sub-region of Northeast Asia such as ECO Asia (Environment Congress for Asia and the Pacific), 1991; ASEAN + 3 Environment Ministers Meeting, 2002; and EAS EMM (East Asia Summit Environment Ministers Meeting), 2007.\(^5^9\)

In the preface of the first archive of *China’s International Regional Environmental Cooperation*, Xu Qinghua, the then director of the Department of International Cooperation in the State Environmental Protection Agency, mentioned that the old Chinese idiom, “building friendship and partnership with neighboring countries” (与邻为善,以邻为伴) governs CCP diplomacy with neighboring countries. This idiom appeared in the political report at the 16th Party Congress in 2002, where regional cooperation first appeared in parallel with bilateral relations in a political report at the party congress.\(^6^0\) Xu has also stated that “China will sustain its diplomatic

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\(^5^4\)Takehara, *Japanese Type of ODA and Public Finance*, 424–425.

\(^5^5\)Qu, *We Need a Transformation*, 9–13; Wang, *China Environmental Diplomacy*, 180.

\(^5^6\)I was told this kind of story from several Chinese counterparts in several joint research projects between our institute and them. It is also true, however, that there have been not a few gaps between us and them in terms of political sensitivities in some issues.

\(^5^7\)China Environmental Protection Administration, 336–337.

\(^5^8\)Matsuoka, “Environmental governance in Asia”, 9–11 and Takahashi, *The Comparative Politics of Transboundary Air Pollution*, 265–269.

\(^5^9\)Xu, *China’s International Regional Environmental Cooperation*, 347; See also each website of the institutions.

\(^6^0\)Xu, *China’s International Regional Environmental Cooperation*, iii.
policy of bringing ‘harmony, security and prosperity to neighbors’ (睦邻、安邻、富邻) and play an important role by positive and responsible attitudes in regional environmental cooperation.”

Although these phrases demonstrate a moderate and positive attitude toward diplomacy, the Chinese government has also pursued the same principles and positions on global environmental issues in actual negotiations with its neighbors in terms of CBDR. Such principles were particularly noticeable in the negotiations on NOWPAP, where the idea of cost sharing was discussed in several meetings.

NOWPAP was adapted in 1994 by four member states: China, Japan, South Korea, and Russia, as part of the Regional Seas Programme of UNEP. This program contributed to the Global Programme of Action for the Protection of the Marine Environment from land-based activities in the Pacific North-west region, whose goal is “the wise use, development and management of the coastal and marine environment so as to obtain the utmost long-term benefits for the human populations of the region, while protecting human health, ecological integrity, and the region’s sustainability for future generations.” The program has approved several activities such as an oil, hazardous, and noxious substance spill contingency plan, marine litter activity, and data and information sharing. It has a unique governance structure with coordinating offices in Toyama, Japan as well as Busan, South Korea. One center is located in each member state.

Besides competition over which countries would have the regional coordinating office, which was settled in 2000 when Japan and South Korea each got an office,

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**Table 2.** Chinese participation in multilateral environmental cooperation in East Asia and beyond.

| Year of the Start Cooperation/Name of Cooperation/Participating Nations |
|-----------------------------------------------------------------------|
| 1991 Eco Asia: Asia Pacific region countries                          |
| 1992 NEAC: China, Japan, South Korea, Russia, Mongolia               |
| 1993 NEASPEC: China, Japan, South Korea, North Korea, Mongolia, Russia |
| 1994 NOWPAP: China, Japan, South Korea, Russia                       |
| 1998*** EANET: Cambodia, China, Indonesia, Japan, Laos, Myanmar, Malaysia, Mongolia, Philippines, South Korea, Russia, Thailand, Vietnam |
| 1999 TEMM: China, Japan, South Korea                                 |
| 2000 *LTP: China, Japan, South Korea                                |
| 2002 ASEAN+ 3: ASEAN 10 countries + China, Japan and Korea           |
| 2007 **EAS EMM: Asia 21 countries, ASEAN, Europe 30 countries, EU    |

Source: Xu, China’s International Regional Environmental Cooperation, 347–348.
Notes: *NEASPEC Secretariat, 8; **[www.mofa.go.jp mofaj/area/asem/index.html](http://www.mofa.go.jp mofaj/area/asem/index.html); ***As an observer in 1998. Eco Asia: Environment Congress for Asia and the Pacific; NEAC: Northeast Asian Conference on Environmental Cooperation; NEASPEC: Northeast Asian Subregional Programme of Environmental Cooperation; NOWPAP: North-west Pacific Action Plan; EANET: cid Deposition Monitoring Network in East Asia; TEMM: Tripartite Environment Ministers Meeting; LTP: Joint Research Project on Long-Range Transboundary Air Pollutants in Northeast Asia; ASEAN+ 3: ASEAN plus three; EAS EMM: East Asia Summit Environment Ministers Meeting.

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61Ibid., iv.
62Ibid., 104–92.
63See the website of NOWPAP at [http://www.nowpap.org/](http://www.nowpap.org/).
64Ibid. Four centers are Data and Information Network Regional Activity Centre (Beijing, China), Marine Environmental Emergency Preparedness and Response Regional Activity Centre (Daejeon, South Korea), Special Monitoring and Coastal Environmental Assessment Regional Activity Centre (Toyama, Japan) and Pollution Monitoring Regional Activity Centre (Vladivostok, Russia).
65Xu, China’s International Regional Environmental Cooperation, 135–136.
the four members had to negotiate how to share the financial burden for the Program Fund. At the third meeting, South Korea proposed that each country should have a basic burden while only Japan should take on an additional financial burden three times higher than other countries in “equal participation, common responsibility and available capacity of payment.” Following the South Korean proposal, China insisted that financial contribution to the Program Fund should consider the “principle of voluntary contribution as well as common but differentiated principle” in addition to the UN standard proposed by South Korea. However, Japan insisted that they should not follow the UN standard but share a unified ratio for the Program Fund. According to the report of the sixth meeting of NOWPAP, Japan payed 125,000 US dollar, which meant 25,000 US dollar as an addition to the basic and unified contribution 100,000 US dollar proposed by South Korea.

Transboundary air pollution has been a sensitive regional environmental issue for China because China is an upwind country seen as a major source of transboundary air pollution, while Korea and Japan are both downwind seen as major victims of this. For example, China chose to be an observer at the first meeting of EANET, an international monitoring network for acid rain initiated by Japan, held in Yokohama, Japan, in 1998. In addition, it is said that the Chinese government has been reluctant to disclose results of transboundary air pollution modeling to the public because of sensitivity to its responsibility.

Thus, China’s commitment to regional environmental cooperation has been a mixture of conciliatory and defensive attitudes.

4 Shift in China’s commitment to regional environmental governance in Northeast Asia

4.1 Responses to increasing environmental securities in the country

Although China has maintained a cautious attitude toward transboundary pollution originating from the country in terms of regional environmental negotiations, it could not avoid addressing the increasing risks from environmental pollution. During persistent heavy smog in 2011, the U.S. embassy in Beijing announced a data of higher density of PM2.5, which could increase the risk to human health as people absorb micro-particles mixed with various pollutants into the alveoli of the lungs. The fact of data and its risk spread through Beijing via social networking sites. This event pushed both the local and central government in Beijing to make efforts to control air pollution.

At the 18th TEMM held in Shizuoka, Japan, in 2016, China, Japan, and South Korea agreed to enhance cooperation for air quality improvement and endorsed the action

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66 Ibid., 115.
67 Ibid., 115, 127, 175, 187.
68 Ibid., 135.
69 Ibid., 71.
70 An episode presented by a Korean participant at the 2017 Joint Workshop on Networking for Environmental Sustainability Cooperation in East Asia, hosted by Sejong Institute, Korean Environment Institute, Institute of Developing Economies and Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Republic of Korea, in Seoul, October 12, 2017.
71 Wang, “Particular Matters, Big Actions.”
plan of the Tripartite Policy Dialogue on Air Pollution. Furthermore, at the 19th TEMM held in Suwon, South Korea, in 2017, three countries agreed to share and review the report of LTP at the TEMM 20 to be held in Beijing in 2018.\textsuperscript{72} This level of cooperation indicates a positive shift in China’s commitment to transboundary air pollution issues. However, it should be noted that China has still been reluctant to conduct joint research on PM2.5 in China’s air, which is the most serious concern in all three countries.\textsuperscript{73} Moreover, the publicity of the report of LTP at TEMM 20 has not been realized due to disagreement by China.\textsuperscript{74}

\textbf{4.2 Increasing capacity through economic development}

Since 2008, Japan, which used to be a top donor of ODA to China, has not approved any new Yen Loan projects to China. The termination was a one-sided decision by the Japanese government and China was forced to accept it. In addition, it is possible that the Japanese government’s decision was influenced by increasing anti-China sentiment among the Japanese public. Some Chinese leaders and media outlets have criticized Japanese leaders, and there are concerns among some Japanese over China’s growing space development programs, increase in military forces, and growing economy.\textsuperscript{75} While some in Japan worry over China’s growing power, the country has put its newfound strength toward fighting climate change. At the G20 (Group of Twenty) held in Hangzhou, China, in 2016, China conducted a ceremony to ratify the Paris Agreement jointly with the U.S. The Paris Agreement required all parties to take measures to reduce carbon dioxide in order to slowdown the increase of the global temperature, which should be controlled below two degrees compared to the dawn of the Industrial Revolution in the nineteenth century. President Xi Jiping invited American President Barack Obama and the Secretary-General of the UN, Ban Ki-moon, to the ceremony. In his speech, the Chinese president reiterated the country’s principles and positions on global environmental issues and stressed the responsibility of developed countries as well as China’s willingness to implement “the concepts of innovative, coordinated, green, open and shared development, comprehensively advance energy conservation, emission reduction, and low-carbon development.”\textsuperscript{76} Before the Paris Agreement, the Chinese government had submitted its Intended Nationally Determined Contribution (INDC) to the secretariat of the UN Framework of Climate Change Convention (UNFCCC) and promised that the amount of carbon dioxide emission in China will peak around 2030.\textsuperscript{77} China’s shift from a defensive attitude to a positive commitment to mitigate climate change can partially be attributed to the country’s increasing capacity. Since the end of 2017, China announced a CO\textsubscript{2} emission trade scheme for the power industry on the basis of trial programs in several cities.\textsuperscript{78}

\textsuperscript{72}Chu, “Resilience Evaluation of the TEMM Cooperation,” 42–43. The publicity has been postponed to the next TEMM.
\textsuperscript{73}Ibid., 46.
\textsuperscript{74}http://news.dwnews.com/global/news/2018-06-20/60065581.html. Dwnews.com, June 20, 2018.
\textsuperscript{75}An interview for a deputy-director of Department of East and Central Asia in a Japanese government agency in March 2018.
\textsuperscript{76}“Xi Jiping chairs the 11th G20 Summit and attends other related events.”
\textsuperscript{77}See China’s INDC at http://www4.unfccc.int/submissions/indc/Submission%20Pages/submissions.aspx.
\textsuperscript{78}Xinhua Net, December 20, 2017. http://www.xinhuanet.com/fortune/2017-12/20/c_1122137497.htm.
As China takes the place of the regional powerhouse, formerly occupied by Japan, the country may decide to bypass regional cooperation initiatives and seek new initiatives outside the region. For example, China’s initiative on One Belt, One Road (OBOR), as a grand global strategy beyond a regional policy,\textsuperscript{79} has been expanding to the field of environment and energy issues involving not only governmental sectors but also research institutes and NGOs. At COP 23 of the UNFCCC held in Bonn in November 2017, the China Green Carbon Foundation as a non-profit organization and the Natural Resources Defense Council (NRDC) as an international environmental NGO based in the U.S. jointly held a side event, “One Belt, One Road: National Determined Contributions and Green Development.” It is said that the event has been successful in involving participants from Southeast Asia and Africa.\textsuperscript{80} The OBOR initiative is open for Northeast Asian countries; however, it seems that Japan is not recognized as a major counterpart of China in this initiative.

### 4.3 Increasing tensions with neighboring countries

In addition to China and Japan’s cleavage over the history of the Sino-Japan war in the twentieth century, a political conflict over the territory of Senkaku/Diaoyu Dao islands in the East China Sea has risen to the surface in recent years.\textsuperscript{81} In September 2010, the captain and crew of a Chinese fishing boat struck two Japanese Coast Guard boats and were detained in Okinawa. The incident had significant ramifications – the travel plans of ministerial level officials were halted and an environmental forum was postponed by one-sided decision of Chinese authorities. Furthermore, when the Japanese government nationalized the islands in September 2012, a youth exchange program as well as some environmental cooperative exchanges and meetings between Japan and China were postponed by China. The tensions between the two countries did not decrease until the top-level meeting between Premier Abe and President Xi at APEC in Beijing in November 2014.

It should be noted, however, that environmental cooperation between the two countries never stopped although some government and academic exchanges and conferences were postponed or informalized. A deputy minister of China substituted in the 15th and 16th meeting but the TEMM never ceased meeting. Moreover, China and Japan have launched a new initiative on marine environmental cooperation since 2017. The first Marine Debris Workshop was held on the 7th Japan–China high-level consultations on maritime affairs in Shanghai, and officials and experts from both sides reached the consensus to conduct further research of microplastics in the ocean.\textsuperscript{82} These facts indicate that mutual trust still exists between the two countries in environmental cooperation due to longstanding bilateral relations on environmental cooperation.

It is also said there is a linkage between political conflict and stagnation of cooperation between South Korea and China. Recently, when the Terminal High Altitude Area Defense missile developed by the U.S. was prepared in South Korea, it “hurt(s) Korea–China relations” including the regional environmental cooperation in Northeast Asia. It is said that the 19th TEMM was postponed from April until August due to this issue.\textsuperscript{83}

\textsuperscript{79}Aoyama, “One Belt, One Road.”
\textsuperscript{80}An article issued on November 24, 2017, on the website of NRDC. http://coalcap.nrdc.cn/work/info?id=55&type=1.
\textsuperscript{81}Otsuka, “Development and Perspectives of Environmental Cooperation toward Sustainable East Asia.”
\textsuperscript{82}December 5, 2017 at the website of Ministry of the Environment, https://www.env.go.jp/en/headline/2348.html.
\textsuperscript{83}Chu, “Resilience evaluation of the TEMM cooperation,” 48.
4.4 Future of transnational networking

In addition to official aid, various non-governmental cooperative activities such as joint research, conferences, training, and human exchanges have been occurring between China and Japan since the late 1990s. According to the survey on an environmental non-governmental organization’s activities in China, which includes both Chinese and Japanese NGOs, there are 35 organizations in China and 21 in Japan that provided information on their activities during 2 years since 2009.\textsuperscript{84} The multilateral environmental cooperative initiatives in Northeast Asia also advocate for involving various non-state actors including researchers, NGOs, business, and youth, although there are still barriers for them to participate in official cooperative initiatives.\textsuperscript{85}

Particularly in China, the role of non-state actors, except for business, has been largely constrained by the party and governmental control. Moreover, there is a wide concern over a new regulation that all foreign NGOs in China have to register at a public security authority after receiving approval from related governmental divisions.\textsuperscript{86} A transnational network on sustainable environmental cooperation is expected to develop despite the difficulties and weakness of regional environmental cooperation in Northeast Asia. However, it would depend on support and tolerance for activities by non-state actors in each country as well as the degree of contention between the state and non-state actors in each country. Furthermore, political sensitivities in Sino–Japan relations in terms of the war memories and territorial dispute sometimes discourage non-state actors in China to have a close connection with their Japanese counterparts.

I also found a stagnation of scholars’ exchange that could be influenced by recent cross-strait tension between CCP in the mainland and Democratic Progress Party in Taiwan. At the 6th International Symposium on Environmental Sociology in East Asia, which was held at National Taiwan University in October 2017, there were 169 participants from Taiwan, Japan, South Korea, and other countries. However, there were no participants from Mainland China.

However, certainly, they express their friendship and trust to each other and their network has been growing rather than shrinking to date in Northeast Asia. Here, one can find a principle similar to that of the government in terms of neighboring partnerships between two countries, which can build hope for a sustainable future in Northeast Asian region. We can also see the sustainable China’s diplomatic policy with neighboring countries at the 19th National Congress of the Communist Party of China in October 2017. President Xi states, “China will deepen relations with its neighbors in accordance with the principle of amity, sincerity, mutual benefit, and inclusiveness and the policy of forging friendship and partnership with its neighbors.”\textsuperscript{87}

5 Conclusion

This article points out that there are different principles found in environmental diplomacy in China: CBDR in global environmental issues and building friendship and partnerships with neighboring countries, which have affected China’s commitment

\textsuperscript{84}China Environment Handbook, 284–314.
\textsuperscript{85}Chu, “Resilience Evaluation of the TEMM Cooperation,” 49.
\textsuperscript{86}Interviews with Some Foreign NGOs in Beijing in 2016.
\textsuperscript{87}Xi, “Secure a Decisive Victory in Building a Moderately Prosperous Society.”
to regional environmental cooperation in the way of mixture of modest and defensive attitudes. Moreover, in the context of regional environmental cooperation, the article argues that Japan has been an important factor for China to learn Japanese experiences as well as to enjoy Japan’s affluent financial assistance. Recent economic and social development in China has made its commitment more positive in global environmental cooperation on the one hand and more uncertain in terms of regional environmental governance on the other hand.

The recent shift in China’s commitment to regional environmental governance could provide neighboring countries an opportunity to rethink their strategy to maintain and develop environmental cooperation with China. We are facing many common challenges in terms of environmental sustainability in the region, such as transboundary air pollution, marine pollution, environmental pollution in global and regional supply chains, and energy transition. It would be important to find out how to seek mutual interests and benefits in their cooperation between countries in the region beyond complex and uncertain situations.

There can be a hope for a sustainable future in terms of neighboring partnerships between practitioners including experts and NGOs engaging in environmental cooperation for a long period. It would be challenging but worthwhile to seek how transnational networks of non-state actors could find a way of development beyond the limitation in their opportunities to commit to the regional environmental governance.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

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