

RECONNECT CHINA

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Why “Ecological civilisation”? The values driving China’s green turn under Xi Jinping

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Over the past few years, China has emerged as a key player in the global arena of environmental protection. China is simultaneously the most polluting country (though not in per capita emissions) and the country that invests the most in renewable energy. Since 2007, environmental protection policies in China are framed under the umbrella term of “ecological civilisation”.

This policy brief analyses the key values (i.e. beliefs and worldviews) driving the construction of an “ecological civilisation”. It highlights that the values driving China’s authorities are better understood in terms of “green growth”. This is because it does not entail a paradigmatic transformation of China’s current development path but attaches a prominent role to green technologies as China’s new growth engine.

Two main motivations are behind the adoption of “ecological civilisation” by China’s authorities: first, for China’s foreign policy, the “ecological civilisation” aspire to become an alternative model that compete with the Western one. Second, the domestic promotion of “ecological civilisation” by Beijing has gradually reduced the space for bottom-up actions, motivated by the

belief that only a top-down approach to behavioural control is efficient. Under Xi Jinping, the “ecological civilisation” has even assumed personalised-politics features, in its becoming “Xi Jinping Thought on Ecological Civilisation”, so it is even more driven by the view that only a strict top-down control can practically solve environmental problems.

This has practical and conceptual implications for the European Union (EU). At the practical level, while continuing the cooperation with China in the environmental field, the EU should pay attention to avoid supporting narratives (and sub-narratives) that celebrate the Chinese political approach to the environment. At the same time, the concept of ecological civilisation represents a conceptual challenge for the EU. This should lead to elaborating EU’s own narratives and imagination for a global future, and also reconsidering the key drivers of our approach to safeguard ourselves and the rest of the Earth.

Policy recommendations:

- *Monitor, analyse and trace the key narratives, ideologies and values driving China’s authorities’ actions in the field of environmental protection*

- Also map the slogans, policy descriptors, standardised formulae, and keywords within the official discourses on ecological civilisation, both those in Chinese and those officially translated into English [essential to understand the approach in translating these terms].
- Avoid supporting sub-narratives and using terms that implicitly or explicitly recognize the superiority of the Chinese political model, and carefully assess the opportunities and risks in using terms that legitimize the Chinese political system, particularly at the expense of the liberal-democratic models supported by the EU
- Craft new narratives and concepts based on EU's values that can provide new visions for a global sustainable future.

INTRODUCTION

On September 24th, 2025, the president of the People's Republic of China (PRC), Xi Jinping, announced China's 2035 Nationally Determined Contribution (NDC) – that is, its climate target under the Paris Agreement – in his video speech to the United Nations Climate Summit 2025 held in New York. In this announcement, Xi specified that “China aims to reduce economy-wide greenhouse gas emissions by 7% to 10% by 2035 compared with the peak, striving to do better”, but left the peak undefined.¹ This pledge was later confirmed at the 30th Conference of the Parties (COP30) held in Belém, Brazil, by the Chinese Vice Premier Ding Xuexiang.²

The NDC released four years ago covers only carbon dioxide (CO₂) emissions from the energy sector.³ However, the new targets set by Xi fall far short of what would be required to align with the Paris Agreement objective of limiting global warming to well below 2° C above pre-industrial levels. Analysts have already pointed out that China will likely exceed its own targets,⁴ which are projected to remain below the 30% reduction deemed compatible with the Agreement's baseline scenario. Nonetheless, Xi's statement is significant, as China is the world's largest emitter of greenhouse gases (though its per capita emissions – at 10.81 metric tons of CO₂ equivalent in 2024 – rank significantly lower compared to those of several other countries, such as Australia with its 22.26 t CO₂eq and Canada with 19.76 t

CO₂eq).⁵ Additionally, Xi's NDC announcement came the day after US President Donald Trump's verbal violent attack on green policies: in his lengthy (and at times erratic) speech at the UN General Assembly, Trump devoted significant space to describing what he defines as the “scam” of the climate issue and renewable energy policies, dismissing European efforts on this front as a “suicidal energy idea”.⁶

Internationally, efforts to mitigate the anthropogenic impact on the natural environment are generally framed under the concept of “sustainable development”. In the PRC, however, “ecological civilisation” (*shengtai wenming* 生态文明, also translatable as “civilise ecologically”) has become the defining slogan of the country's environmental policy. “Sustainable development” was introduced in the 1990s in China (translated as *ke chixu fazhan* 可持续发展, literally, a “development that can be maintained”, which implies that it could in no way jeopardise the priority given to “development” understood as “economic growth”). However, the prominence of “sustainable development” has waned in recent years, giving way to the ascendance of the “ecological civilisation”.

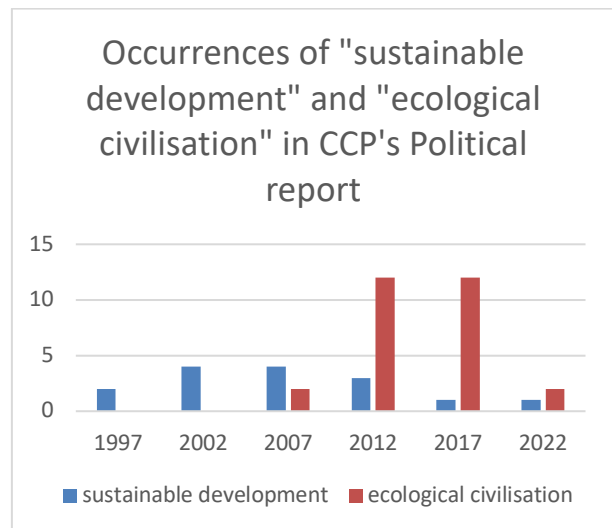


Figure 1: Graph elaborated by the author based on the keyword research. The research was conducted on a corpus comprising all the full transcriptions of the Political reports issued by the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) in the original Chinese language.

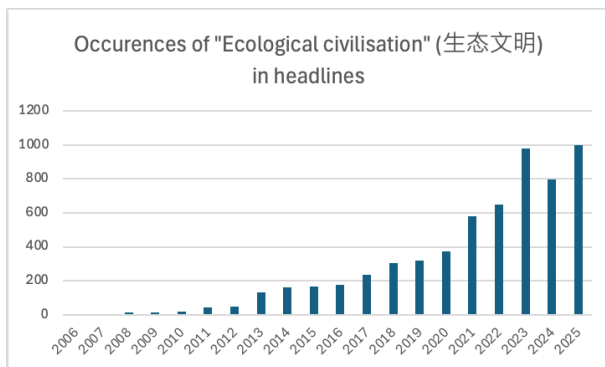


Figure 2: The graph is provided by the ReConnect China database and shows the occurrence of “ecological civilisation” in laws, regulations, policies, and news at both the central and local levels in the PRC. Created on September 22, 2025.

Imported from the Soviet Union,⁷ “ecological civilisation” entered Chinese intellectual debate in the 1980s and the Chinese official lexicon during the Hu Jintao and Wen Jiabao decade (2002–2012). In 2012, it was incorporated into the Party constitution at the 18th National Party Congress, and in 2018, it was also enshrined in the Constitution of the PRC. Under Xi Jinping, it has become a key “strategy” (*zhanlüe* 战略) – not merely a “policy” (*zhengce* 政策) or a “measure” (*cuochi* 措施) –⁸ tightly connected to the country’s goals both domestically and internationally.

Given the growing importance attached to “ecological civilisation”, it is crucial to explore what this concept entails and the values and motivations behind it, both at home and abroad. The following pages attempt to do so and will demonstrate that Beijing’s environmental protection policies are better understood as “green growth,” based on the instrumental use of green technologies to drive further economic growth. Therefore, it does not fundamentally transform the key values underlying China’s current development path, but rather assigns technology a prominent role as both a solution to environmental degradation and a new engine of economic growth. At the same time, domestically, the official promotion of the “ecological civilisation” has constrained the space for bottom-up initiatives and has increasingly been transformed into a leader-centred narrative in which the CCP (and particularly its leader, Xi Jinping) is making significant efforts to educate the population to behave ecologically. The policy brief will

then focus on the implications of China’s “ecological civilisation” for the EU.

CHINA’S “ECOLOGICAL CIVILISATION” FOR A GREEN PLANET? THE INTERNATIONAL DIMENSION OF THE “ECOLOGICAL CIVILISATION”

The concept of “sustainable development”, first coined in the 1980s, was groundbreaking because it brought social, economic, and environmental aspects under one roof. However, its official interpretation in China in the 1990s primarily focused on addressing the scarcity of natural resources amid the country’s massive population. This approach, informed by the “first polluting and then cleaning up” rationale, was less about protecting the natural environment, preserving biodiversity, or mitigating climate change. Indeed, the need to embrace “sustainable development” was promoted alongside family planning, the so-called “One-Child policy”, highlighting demographic control as a key component of resource management.⁹

This perspective was also evident in Beijing’s approach to international environmental policy. When China joined negotiations for the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC), it, like other developing countries, strongly advocated for the principle of “common but differentiated responsibilities.”¹⁰ This principle holds that while all nations are responsible for climate actions, their obligations should vary in proportion to their level of development. Under this view, developed countries like the United States and those in the European Union were expected to lead and make the first emission cuts. In contrast, developing countries could participate voluntarily.

Beijing’s promotion of the “ecological civilisation” marks a significant shift from earlier attitudes, especially under Xi Jinping: while China continues to identify itself as a developing country in UN climate talks – despite its noticeable economic growth –¹¹ it has assumed greater responsibilities in the climate field. For example, it has emerged as a major donor of climate-related finance.¹² China provided a total of \$34.3 billion in bilateral and multilateral finance to developing countries between 2013 and 2021, averaging \$3.8 billion per year.¹³

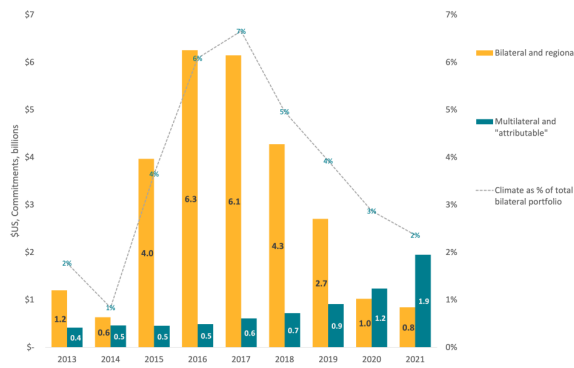


Figure 3: China's climate-related finance to developing countries under the BRI. Graph elaborated by the Center for Global Development.¹⁴

Yet, notwithstanding this new approach, Beijing aims to maintain the legal distinction between voluntary funding by China and the mandatory financial contributions of industrialised countries. The Paris Agreement reaffirms the *obligations* of developed countries to support developing countries in building “clean, climate-resilient futures”,¹⁵ though in practice, little has been done.¹⁶ China's status as a developing country means it is not legally bound. Indeed, China's leadership invokes the principle of “common but differentiated responsibilities” when it does not want to commit significant funds, as it did regarding financial support for the Tropical Forest Forever Facility, the rainforest protection mechanism promoted by Brazilian President Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva.¹⁷

The “apparent paradox”¹⁸ – where China maintains its status as a developing country while also contributing to climate finance – is also justified historically in Chinese official narrative: China's polluting industrialisation started long after that of the developed countries and has therefore produced fewer emissions historically. This position is significantly strengthened by emphasising the colonial past of many developed countries. In Beijing's terms, this historical power dynamic translates into “carbon colonialism,”¹⁹ suggesting that the former major polluters and colonial powers have no moral standing to demand stricter environmental targets from the other nations.

In line with this post-colonial claim, the “ecological civilisation” has flown into China's official master-narrative of civilisation-state: by promoting the “ecological civilisation” internationally, Beijing promotes the need to recognise the dignity of non-Western civilisations, especially those of the Global South, and their contributions to the construction of “harmony

between humans and nature”. This emphasis has become even more prominent with the launch of Xi Jinping's third major initiative, the Global Civilisation Initiative (GCI), which again leverages the rhetoric of *wenming* (civilisation). Announced in March 2023, the GCI followed the Global Development Initiative (GDI) and the Global Security Initiative (GSI), advocating for respect for the diversity of civilisations. The “ecological civilisation” leverages the rhetoric of civilisation to promote an image of China's approach (*fang'an* 方案) as a solution to the problems facing the Earth, and as a model for other developing countries.²⁰ It thus aims to give voice to an alternative modernity, distinct from the Western one. Specifically, it is officially described as rooted in the Chinese high traditions of Confucianism, Daoism and Buddhism.²¹ At the same time, it is also described as a solution to the contradiction between economic development and environmental protection, as it relies on the strategic use of green technologies to drive economic growth.

The debate surrounding “ecological civilisation” over the past few decades has included voices arguing for a new path that challenges capitalist development.²² However, the way the “ecological civilisation” has been officially framed (especially since Xi Jinping came to power) raises doubts about whether it is inherently an alternative development path and can “change things radically”²³. The first reason for doubt lies in its conceptualisation as a step *after* “industrial civilisation”,²⁴ in line with the Marxist understanding of historical progress. In this way, it wants to mark its distance from the Western model, while at the same time acknowledging the need to first go down the path of industrial pollution before reaching the “ecological civilisation”. The implementation of this view of economic development-first has led to a shift in air pollution towards Western China in recent years. Against the backdrop of an overall improvement in the country's air quality, the Western “underdeveloped” regions, including Guangxi, Yunnan, and Xinjiang, have witnessed a relocation of high-polluting industrial activities.²⁵ This Westward relocation demonstrates that the “ecological civilisation” is still informed by the idea, prevalent in the 1990s, that environmental degradation is a necessary price to pay to alleviate poverty. Therefore, it underscores a value system in which economic growth

– under the banner of poverty reduction – is still prioritised over protecting the natural environment.

Furthermore, as represented as an alternative to the Western model, the “ecological civilisation” appears to be trapped in the logic of duality and driven by the value of competition. While demonstrating Beijing’s growing confidence on the international scene, this confidence appears to go hand in hand with the perceived decline of Western hegemony. Indeed, Chinese authorities launched their key goals in the realm of climate change, often against the backdrop of the US’s diminishing commitment in this field. Achieving “peak carbon” emission by 2030 and becoming “carbon neutral” by 2060 – two landmarks in Beijing’s contribution to the fight against climate change – were mentioned for the first time during the first Trump administration, as the US stepped back from the Paris Agreement. Recently, the 2035 NDC presented in New York was reiterated against the backdrop of the second US Donald Trump administration’s withdrawal from the Paris Climate Agreement early in 2025 and the promotion of a set of other policies aimed at minimising US environmental regulations and policies.²⁶

Climate appears to be leveraged discursively to present China as a responsible power that *voluntarily* contributes (in line with its developing-country status). This occurs at a time when the leading superpower, the US, which, conversely, should be legally bound under the Paris Agreement, no longer commits itself to the global cause.²⁷

THE DOMESTIC DIMENSION: THE CIVILISING MISSION EMBEDDED IN THE “ECOLOGICAL CIVILISATION”

Besides its international ambitions, the official promotion of the “ecological civilisation” also responds to China’s domestic needs to tackle the country’s severe environmental degradation after decades of high-speed economic growth, and maintain social stability. The late 2000s – early 2010s witnessed a surge in public concern about air quality and pollution, leading to a rise in environmental protests in China.²⁸ In 2015, “Under the Dome,” a documentary film produced and directed by renowned investigative journalist Chai Jing, which focused on air pollution in China, further intensified public concerns. Viewed by more than 100 million people within

48 hours of its release,²⁹ the film exposed corruption in local governments and the energy sector.

It is therefore unsurprising that environmental issues drew the attention of China’s leadership, rising to the top of Beijing’s political agenda. Authorities were not deaf to the requests of some environmental NGOs,³⁰ and took action to address these public concerns. In 2014, the Environmental Protection Law was revised for the fourth time (it came into force on January 1, 2015), followed by a series of new laws addressing air, water, and soil pollution.³¹ The national judicial system was strengthened to accommodate the needs for an improved environmental rule of law, resulting in the creation of 382 environmental tribunals, circuit courts, and collegiate benches in 2014.³² In 2015, the leadership issued the “1+6 Plan”, comprising a single overall plan for regulatory reform to promote the “ecological civilisation” in combination with six additional documents which set out the principles for environmental laws, standards, regulations and screening activities at all government levels.³³ More than laws and regulations, a key significant change has been that local officials are now evaluated not only on their economic performance and social stability but also for their effectiveness in protecting the environment.³⁴

In the meantime, China has made remarkable progress in clean energy.³⁵ The field of clean energy (solar and wind power, but also hydropower and nuclear power) was expanding, and clean-energy technologies contributed more than 10% to China’s economic growth in 2024 for the first time.³⁶ Electric vehicles are increasingly prevalent on the streets in China.³⁷ These measures led to the drastic reduction of air pollution. For example, between 2013 and 2021, particulate pollution declined by 42.3%, and by 5.3% from 2020 to 2021 alone.³⁸

Green technology and clean energy are clearly presented as the solution. Clean energy was defined as a “pillar industry” already in the 12th Five-Year Plan (2011–15),³⁹ and it remains a key driver of the country’s GDP growth.⁴⁰ In Beijing’s view, clean energy is not only an environmental necessity but also a key instrument for addressing China’s energy security concerns, given that China remains the world’s largest oil importer.⁴¹ Simultaneously, clean energy is regarded as a foundational economic growth engine pivotal to China’s

pursuit of modern prosperity.⁴² One may wonder why these measures are not referred to as “green growth” instead of “ecological civilisation”. One possible reason is related to the other meaning that *wenming* has: “civilise”.⁴³

The state’s efforts in environmental protection go hand in hand with an increase in control over society. The top-down initiatives under the umbrella of *shengtai wenming* have progressively limited public and scholarly debate, confining it within the boundaries set by the CCP;⁴⁴ there is no longer space for debate centred on a real alternative way of “development.” The film documentary “Under the Dome,” mentioned above, effectively illustrates how the environment, once it became a field of state intervention, turned into a sensitive topic. After receiving official support from the government website (namely, *People’s Daily Online*) and even from Chen Jining, Minister of Environmental Protection at the time, the film was censored and taken down from social media by the official propaganda bureau.⁴⁵ The censorship of the film documentary demonstrated that the window for bottom-up action in the environmental protection field had been closed.

The environment has become another field where the paternalistic Chinese state feels it must educate the Chinese population on how to behave ecologically,⁴⁶ and where China’s success is to be celebrated. To this end, several official Chinese documents have sought to educate the public to adopt an eco-friendly behaviour: “Guidelines on Citizens’ Ecological Behaviour”⁴⁷ drafted in 2018 and finalised in 2023 and a Five-Year Plan (2021–2025) entitled “‘Beautiful China, I’m an Actor’ Action Plan to Enhance Public Ecological Civilisation Awareness (2021–2025)” were launched in 2021 by the Ministry of Ecology and Environment.⁴⁸ Pilot forms of evaluation of the population’s performance in sorting waste together with their moral behaviour are implemented at the local level.⁴⁹

In this way, the potential of ecological civilisation for bringing about an alternative understanding of “development” that is not necessarily linked to “growth” has been undermined, and protecting the environment has been transformed into another component along the path towards the “national rejuvenation of the Chinese nation”. To further confirm this, since 2018, the concept

of “ecological civilisation” has no longer been called that, but rather “Xi Jinping’s Thought on ecological civilisation”.⁵⁰

IMPLICATIONS FOR THE EU

Ecological civilisation marks Beijing’s new approach to the global climate issue: while maintaining its status as a “developing country”, it has led Beijing to be much more proactive in environmental protection both at home and abroad. The way in which such proactivity has been implemented in China and on the world stage has important implications for the EU, both practical and conceptual.

To begin with, at the practical level, in continuing the collaboration in the field of environmental protection, the EU should remain vigilant and avoid supporting narratives that undermine bottom-up initiatives and celebrate the “Chinese political model” of environmental protection. Collaboration between the EU and China has already proven fruitful: China’s first carbon market was launched in late 2017 following extensive cooperation with the European Commission.⁵¹ Additionally, the EU-China High-Level Environment and Climate Dialogue (HECD), established in 2020, has proven to be an essential framework for maintaining open dialogue, even in times of tension in EU-China relations, although, more recently, rising competition in clean technology has made broader climate cooperation also an area of political tension.

However, in a historical moment when the climate and environment are increasingly politicised in China, it is even more important for the EU and its member states to maintain awareness and resilience against instrumentalisation by Chinese authorities. Therefore, when setting up focus-specific collaboration in environmental protection, the broader picture of the values and motivations behind China’s green policies should not be overlooked. Support for civil society initiatives between the EU and China should also be promoted to provide more space for bottom-up action in EU-China collaboration and to counter the view that only top-down actions are effective.

Alongside these practical implications for EU-China relations, the “ecological civilisation” also represents a conceptual (or even philosophical) challenge for the EU. It was mentioned that under Xi Jinping, the concept of

“ecological civilisation” has been reduced to mere “green growth” combined with a kind of paternalistic moral guidance by the state. Yet, the elaboration of this concept – especially in its early stage – forces us to rethink the key patterns that inform our own understanding of “development” and consider alternative paths that are finally able to break themselves free from the driving logic of “business,” to which the Green Deal and even more the Green Industrial Deal are still anchored (after all, “deal” comes from the business lexicon)⁵². Finding a way to give voice to an alternative vision of development is crucial not only for the EU itself but also for the EU’s relations with the Global South, which legitimately aspire to improve their populations’ living standards.

Therefore, the EU should, on the one hand, increase scrutiny of China’s narratives and avoid supporting those

that sustain China’s top-down, strict control and limit bottom-up action. On the other hand, the EU should also create new narratives and concepts based on EU values, but that go beyond the EU’s interests and can provide a new collective imagination for a global sustainable future.

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ENDNOTES

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⁸ Clivio, C. (2019). La civiltà ecologica della nuova era di Xi Jinping. *Sinosfere*, 7, 29-37.

⁹ The Political report issued in 1997 at the 15th National Congress of the CCP, clearly links the “concept of sustainable development with the need to control China’s demographic growth: China is a country with a large population and relatively scarce resources. In the process of modernization, it must implement a sustainable development strategy. It is necessary to adhere to the basic national policies of family planning and environmental protection, and properly handle the relationship between economic development and population, resources, and the environment (我国是人口众多、资源相对不足的国家，在现代化建设中必须实施可持续发展战略。

坚持计划生育和保护环境的基本国策，正确处理经济发展同人口、资源、环境的关系。)。 The full transcription of the Political report in the original Chinese language is available at: https://www.gov.cn/test/2007-08/29/content_730614.htm (accessed October 2, 2025).

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¹⁴ Ibidem

¹⁵ The Paris Agreement reaffirms the obligations of developed countries to support the efforts of developing country Parties to build clean, climate-resilient futures, while for the first time encouraging voluntary contributions by other Parties. United Nations Climate Change: <https://unfccc.int/most-requested/key-aspects-of-the-paris-agreement#:~:text=Finance%2C%20technology%20and%20capacity%2Dbuilding,projected%20levels%20of%20public%20finance>. (accessed October 1, 2025).

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²¹ Various articles published on China’s official media describe the roots of the concept as seeking into Chinese traditional thought, including the one just quoted, published on *Seeking Truth* by Gong Weibin (2025, September 17).

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