



## Carbon emissions: China no longer has any excuse to wait

Posted by [Jerome a Paris](#) on June 22, 2007 - 2:00am in [The Oil Drum: Europe](#)

Topic: [Environment/Sustainability](#)

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In today's (20/06/07) review of the news over at the [European Tribune](#), we have the following story:

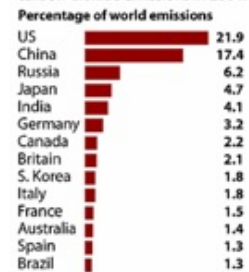
### [China passes US as world's biggest CO2 emitter](#) (Guardian)

[A]ccording to figures released yesterday by the Netherlands Environmental Assessment Agency, which advises the Dutch government, soaring demand for coal to generate electricity and a surge in cement production have helped to push China's recorded emissions for 2006 beyond those of the US.

The agency said China produced 6,200m tonnes of CO2 last year, compared with 5,800m tonnes from the US. Britain produced about 600m tonnes. But per head of population, **China's pollution remains relatively low**, about a quarter of that in the US and half that of the UK.

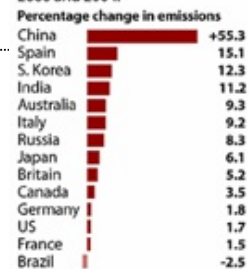
### The biggest emitters ...

The US and China emitted more than a third of the world's total carbon-dioxide emissions in 2004.



### ... and the fastest growth

Most countries increased their carbon-dioxide emissions, while Brazil had a slight drop between 2000 and 2004.

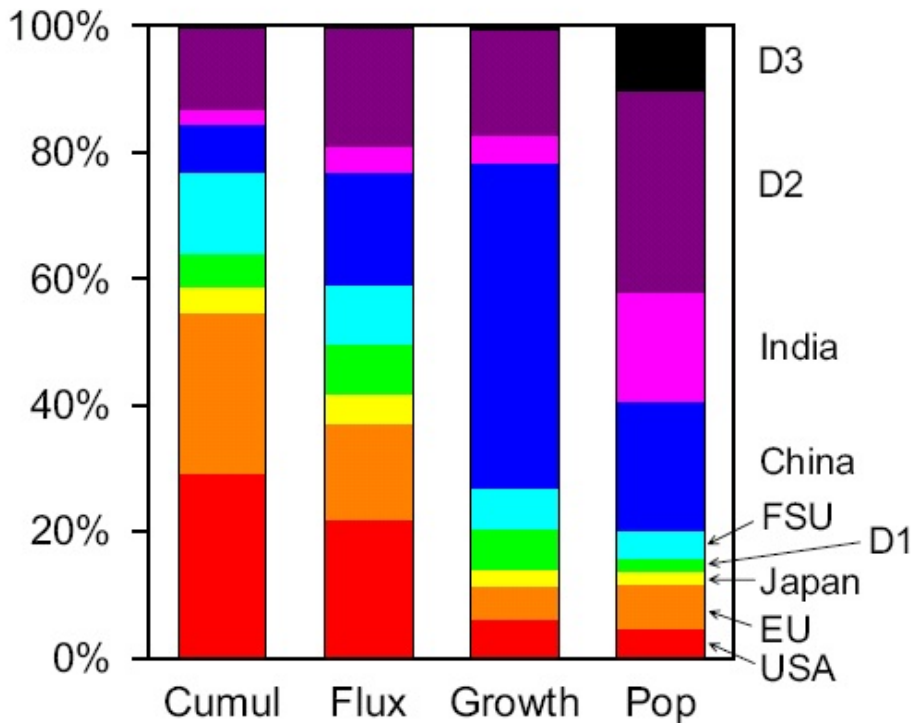


(Note: their report only takes into account carbon emissions from fossil fuel burning and cement manufacturing. The graph on the right comes from a [separate article in the Christian Science Monitor](#) - courtesy of [Magnifico](#).)

That "relatively low per capita level of emissions" was a very real argument when Kyoto was first drafted, as we were talking about a different order of magnitude in individual emissions, and China had a point when they said that it would be unfair to 'penalize' their development (ignoring right now, of course, the fundamental debate about whether it would actually have 'penalised' them to take a lead over the West in sustainable development) by curbing their emissions - in essence, their argument was to let the first world tackle the problem, which it substantially created, first, before China did anything.

But now, we see that Chinese per capita emissions are equal to half the British ones, and two thirds of the French ones, and are set to overtake the latter before the end of this decade. On current trends, they will catch up with US per capita emissions before 2020. And current trends in that respect are largely driven by regulatory and investment decisions already made or made *in the next few years* - as regards power production, as regards environmental standards for cars, as regards construction standards and their enforcement - so they no longer have the luxury to wait and see.

The following graph (from [Global and regional drivers of accelerating CO2 emissions](#)) shows the relative weight of various countries in terms of historical emissions, current ones, and overall



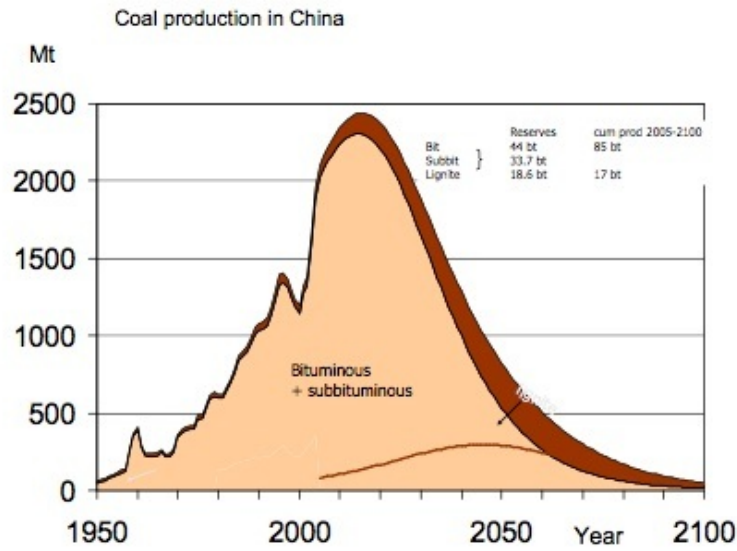
**Fig. 5.** Relative contributions of nine regions to cumulative global emissions (1751–2004), current global emission flux (2004), global emissions growth rate (5 year smoothed for 2000–2004), and global population (2004). Data sources as in Table 1, with pre-1980 cumulative emissions from CDIAC.

China's emissions are now significant both on an absolute and on a per capita basis, and China's emissions growth is *by far* the largest contributor to ongoing increases in emissions, something we now know must urgently be slowed down, stopped and, ideally, reversed. This will not happen without China participating fully in this effort.

Harping about the past and how much we've contributed to past emission with our development is true, but fundamentally irrelevant. The point is the Western way of life (underpinned, in many ways, by the rape of nature - and of other countries) is not sustainable. Why does China want to join us? They should, for their own good, and as a great way to take leadership of the world, do things differently. In fact, if they follow the Western route, they will be the first to pay the consequences. We had the luxury of dumping our externalities on the whole planet for a while. Now nobody has that luxury anymore, because the garbage bin is overflowing.

We can't change the past, but we can still choose how the future can be. And so can the Chinese. In fact, so must the Chinese. It's time to tell the Chinese that their 'per capita' argument is no longer *meaningful*. And maybe point them to the fact that current trends are unsustainable and driving them towards a major crash (see [China's coal production to peak in a couple of years](#)).

**Figure A-3:** Coal Production in China – scenario based on present reserve estimates



It's possible, but unprovable, that resource constraints will make carbon emissions a less urgent problem; the more we (or the Chinese) spew out in the short term, the more untractable the atmospheric consequences are likely to be. It's also pretty unlikely that supply limitations are going to bring about *orderly* changes in our economic activity and reductions in emissions. The good news, so to speak, is that the solution to both problems (carbon emissions and resource constraints) is the same: lower use of fossil fuels, and the earlier we organise that trend, the more chances we have of it not taking place on a brutal, imposed way.



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