

## Book Review

**Scott M. Moore, *China's Next Act: How Sustainability and Technology are Reshaping China's Rise and the World's Future*. Oxford University Press, 2022, 320 pp. + xvii**

Scott M. Moore's *China's Next Act: How Sustainability and Technology are Reshaping China's Rise and the World's Future* presents a compelling and nuanced argument that moves beyond the standard frameworks of great-power competition to analyze China's global role. This book is a vital and timely contribution to the field of China studies and international relations. In a landscape dominated by talk of a new Cold War, Moore successfully pulls the focus to the transnational, non-military issues that will inevitably shape humanity's shared future. His core argument that China's rise is now inextricably linked to its sustainability dilemma, is persuasive, well-structured, and supported with compelling evidence from sectors like renewable energy, water policy, and

diplomacy. The book's most significant achievement is its reframing of China's global engagement from a zero-sum struggle for dominance to a complex, interconnected challenge of managing global commons. By explaining Chinese actions in the Pacific through the need for fisheries access and influence over ocean governance, Moore provides a more coherent and less alarmist explanation than theories centered solely on military basing. This makes the book an indispensable guide for policymakers in the West, urging them to compete not just on military might but on offering better, more sustainable solutions to partners in the developing world.

The book's central thesis is that the defining challenge of China's rise in the 21st century is no longer just its economic or military growth, but how it manages and is shaped by "transnational sustainability issues", particularly climate change, energy transition, resource scarcity, and public health. Moore, drawing on his background in environmental policy and China studies, argues that China is caught in a "sustainability dilemma." In this regard, China is simultaneously: (1) The world's largest emitter of greenhouse gases and a source of significant pollution; (2) The leading manufacturer and deployer of renewable energy

technologies; and (3) A country facing severe domestic constraints in water, arable land, and key natural resources.

This dilemma, Moore contends, forces China to look outward. Its foreign policy is increasingly driven by a pragmatic need for “resource security” (water, food, energy, critical minerals) rather than a purely ideological or territorial ambition. The book reframes China’s international engagements, including its activities in the Pacific Island Countries (PICs), not as a simple “resource grab” but as a complex strategy to secure the inputs needed for its own survival and continued development.

Moore argues that China’s unprecedented economic growth has collided with ecological and resource limits. This is not a distant concern but a present-day crisis that shapes policymaking at the highest levels. Managing the world’s second-largest economy and a population of 1.4 billion people, many of whom are entering the middle class, requires staggering quantities of resources. China is already the world’s top importer of oil, natural gas, iron ore, soy, and other key commodities. Yet China faces acute domestic scarcity. It is water-stressed, with per capita water availability far below the global average. Arable land is limited, and while China possesses some mineral deposits, it remains heavily dependent on imports for critical minerals like lithium, cobalt, and rare earths, which essential for everything from smartphones and electric vehicles to advanced military hardware. Even China’s ambitious green transition, central to its “Ecological Civilization” vision, demands massive upfront resource investments. Building solar panels, wind turbines, and EV batteries is resource-intensive, creating a paradox: to become green in the future, China must secure vast quantities of minerals today.

Moore distinguishes China’s actions from colonial or imperial models of the past. Rather than pursuing expansionist conquest, China’s approach is pragmatic. The goal is not territorial acquisition but the security and stability of supply chains. This is achieved through long-term contracts, strategic investments in extraction and infrastructure, and diplomatic relationships that position China as a preferred partner. While China does have territorial disputes, such as in the South China Sea, Moore contends that its broader global engagement, particularly in Africa, Latin America, and the Pacific, is not about claiming land for settlement or direct rule. Instead, it is about constructing a resilient web of resources that flows back to the mainland. This strategy is commercial and diplomatic, leveraging economic power rather than military force. China’s

resource strategy is multifaceted. It includes investment in extraction, such as copper in Peru, cobalt in the DRC, and iron ore in Australia. It also involves building logistics infrastructure like ports, railways, and pipelines, which not only facilitate trade but also create strategic footholds. Diplomatically, China uses aid, political support, and climate cooperation to build influence with resource-rich countries.

The book is organized into nine chapters. The Introduction frames China's rise not just in terms of power politics, but through its role in global sustainability and technological transformation. Chapter 2 depicts the End of Growth and the Rise of Sustainability. It argues that China's economic model is shifting from rapid growth to sustainability, driven by environmental limits and social pressures. Chapter 3 analyses China's Climate Challenge. It explores China's central role in global climate efforts, highlighting domestic constraints and international implications of its energy transition. Chapter 4 is about the Global Battle over Technology, which examines how competition over emerging technologies, such as the artificial intelligence (AI), biotech, green tech, which is reshaping geopolitics and global governance. Chapter 5 explains China's Innovation System; It analyzes the strengths and weaknesses of China's innovation ecosystem, including state-led initiatives and private sector dynamics. Chapter 6 describes the Politics of Global Challenges that discusses how transnational issues like pandemics and climate change are politicized, and China's evolving stance in multilateral forums. Chapter 7 is about China's Global Role in Sustainability and Technology, which details China's influence in setting global norms and standards, especially in green finance, infrastructure, and digital governance. Chapter 8 tells us about the Future of US-China Relations. The chapter argues that sustainability and tech will increasingly define the bilateral relationship, with cooperation and competition intertwined. The concluding part, chapter 9, explains a New Era of Global Politics. It calls for a reframing of international relations to prioritize shared challenges over zero-sum rivalry, with China as a pivotal actor.

The book's significant key concepts include: (a) The Ecological Civilization. Moore analyzes this official Chinese ideology not just as empty rhetoric, but as a flexible and powerful framework that legitimizes both domestic action and foreign policy, providing a "green" justification for its overseas investments and partnerships; (b) The Pacific as a Microcosm. The Pacific Island Countries are used as a key case study. Moore explains China's interest in the region through the lens of fisheries (securing tuna stocks), ocean governance (influencing rules for the "Blue Economy"), and climate diplomacy (positioning itself as a leader for

developing nations). Furthermore, while the Pacific is used effectively as an illustration, the analysis remains largely Sino-centric. A fuller picture would require weaving in more of the “view from the shore”: how Pacific Island nations, with their own acute climate priorities and “Blue Pacific” identity, are skillfully playing great powers against each other to maximize their own benefits; (c) China’s Shift in Power Tools, which argues that influence in the future will be wielded not just with aircraft carriers, but through control over green technology supply chains, setting global standards for sustainability, and “vaccine diplomacy.”

The strengths of Moore’s book lie in several grounds. First, its greatest strength is its rejection of the “China Threat” vs. “China Opportunity” binary. It provides a sophisticated, multi-faceted explanation for Chinese behavior that accounts for both its vulnerabilities and its strengths. Second, the book’s focus on non-traditional security. By centering the argument on environmental, health, and resource drivers, Moore captures a critical and often underappreciated dimension of 21st-century statecraft. This feels more relevant and modern than analyses focused solely on military basing or diplomatic recognition. Third, the book captures the effective reframing of motives by offering the concept of “resource security.” This concept is a powerful corrective to the more sinister narrative of a deliberate “debt-trap diplomacy.” It presents Chinese actions as often driven by pragmatic, internal pressure rather than purely expansionist malice, making its behavior more predictable and analytically accessible. Lastly, the book is considered as timely and relevant. Published in 2023, the book expertly incorporates recent events, including the COVID-19 pandemic (and China’s “mask/vaccine diplomacy”) and the China-Solomon Islands security pact, placing them within its overarching framework.

Moore used the Pacific Island Countries (PICs) as a case study. For Moore, the Pacific Islands offer a compelling case study of this “resource security” framework. Rather than interpreting China’s presence in the region as a military encirclement of Australia or a direct challenge to the U.S., Moore suggests we view it through the lens of securing critical resources. Fisheries are a prime example. The Pacific Ocean holds over half the world’s tuna supply, and for a protein-conscious nation like China, access to these fisheries is a matter of food security. This explains China’s vast distant-water fishing fleet and its active engagement with small Pacific nations that control large exclusive economic zones (EEZs). China’s goal is not only to catch fish but also to influence the regional bodies that set fishing quotas and rules. China is also positioning itself for the future of the “Blue Economy.” The Pacific seabed is rich in polymetallic nodules

containing nickel, cobalt, copper, and manganese, minerals vital for high-tech and green industries. China, a global leader in deep-sea exploration, seeks to shape the governance of these resources by building strong ties with PICs. Climate diplomacy is another tool. As Pacific nations face existential threats from climate change, China presents itself as a leader in climate action and a reliable partner for adaptation projects. This builds goodwill and increases the likelihood that PICs will support China in international forums, including those governing fisheries and seabed mining. Moore argues that viewing China's Pacific policy solely through a military-strategic lens misses the point. The ports China helps build are as much about supporting fishing fleets and resource extraction as they are about potential naval use. The diplomacy is aimed at securing votes in regional fisheries organizations. China's ambition is not to colonize the Pacific, but to become an indispensable player in its resource ecosystem, ensuring the steady flow of food, energy, and minerals vital to its survival and continued ascent.

Despite its significant, relevant, timely, and critical view on China's act, this book finds its limitations. While the book uses the Pacific as a case study, the perspective of the PICs themselves can sometimes feel secondary. The analysis is more about what China is doing "to" or "in" the region, rather than a deep exploration of how Pacific Island leaders and communities are actively shaping, resisting, or leveraging China's engagement for their own ends. Furthermore, while Moore rightly complicates the simplistic "debt-trap" narrative, some may argue he leans too far in absolving China of any responsibility. The book could benefit from a more detailed discussion of the legitimate concerns about debt sustainability, governance, and transparency, even if the primary intent is not strategic entrapment. The book could more critically interrogate the gap between the ideology of "ecological civilization" and on-the-ground practices of Chinese companies abroad. Is this framework a genuine driver of policy or a sophisticated form of greenwashing that legitimizes continued resource-intensive growth? Finally, a key criticism is whether Moore overestimates the primacy of sustainability while downplaying continued hard-power ambitions. The simultaneous rapid modernization of the PLA, assertiveness in the South China Sea, and threats towards Taiwan suggest that sustainability is a "new, crucial layer" of strategy, not a replacement for traditional geopolitics. The book's strength is also the source of its main weakness. In his focused pursuit of this sustainability thesis, Moore creates an analytical framework that is occasionally too tidy. The relentless pace of China's military modernization and its coercive diplomacy in the Taiwan Strait and South China Sea are potent reminders that

traditional hard power has not been relegated to the past. Sustainability is a powerful new act in the play, but the older, more familiar acts of military and geopolitical competition are still being performed on stage simultaneously.

Despite these limitations, *China's Next Act* is essential reading, highly recommend to students, scholars, and policy makers. It may not be the final word on China's complex evolution, but it is a profoundly important one. It forces the reader to look beyond the immediate headlines of confrontation and consider the deeper, structural forces that are reshaping China's relationship with the world. It is a must-read for anyone seeking to understand the nuanced and critical role that climate, resources, and health will play in the geopolitics of this century.

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## Notes

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