

To lead, nation's growth must be sustainable



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In 1993, China moved from being a net exporter to a net importer of oil.

Now it is coal's turn. In 2009, China became a net importer of coal for the first time, and the trend toward greater coal imports is predicted to continue.

This has stimulated interest among Western observers. Many worry that the shift will lead to rock-eting coal prices and pose problems for developed countries' endeavors to curb global carbon emissions.

Such worries are not unfounded. In 2003, China's net coal exports were as much as 80 million tons, whereas the nation purchased 104 million tons of the commodity in 2009.

Reasons behind the shift include the recent clampdown on unsafe and illegal mining in North China's Shanxi Province and Central China's Henan Province, as well as extremely cold winters in North China since 2008. However, a risky trend is burgeoning: China is more reliant on energy than ever before.

Seeking and using energy sources globally has been an important characteristic of important powers in human history.

Both the UK and the US followed this route after domestic energy output could not satisfy the growing energy demands of modern life.

But China needs to transcend this model and show the world a new, sustainable path to modernity.

As Martin Jacques, author of *When China Rules the World*, once put it, the UK taught the world how to produce in the 19th century, the US showed the world how to consume in the 20th century, and China needs to demonstrate how to develop in a sustainable way if it's going to lead the world in the 21st century.

The biggest deficiency of the old route to modernity is that poverty alleviation for the existing population has been undermining the interests of future generations. For Chinese, the costs are especially unbearable.

The modern Western lifestyle is based on consumerism and extracting fuel. An ordinary American with a life expectancy of 80 years consumes 1,000 trees and 262.4 tons of oil throughout his or her life.

That volume would need to be multiplied by 1.3 billion people if Chinese intend to copy the US lifestyle. The consequences of such a move would be bad for both China and the rest of the world.

Chinese, many of whom are currently impoverished, surely have the right to live as decent a life as Europeans and Americans do. However, they have to live such a life in a way that relies less on coal and oil and uses more clean energy instead.

If China succeeds in finding the most energy-efficient route to modernity, other countries will also benefit; but if China fails, the huge costs might be carried by the whole world.