

Twitter Thread by Noah Smith



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1/Here is a thread about climate change that's going to make a lot of people mad.

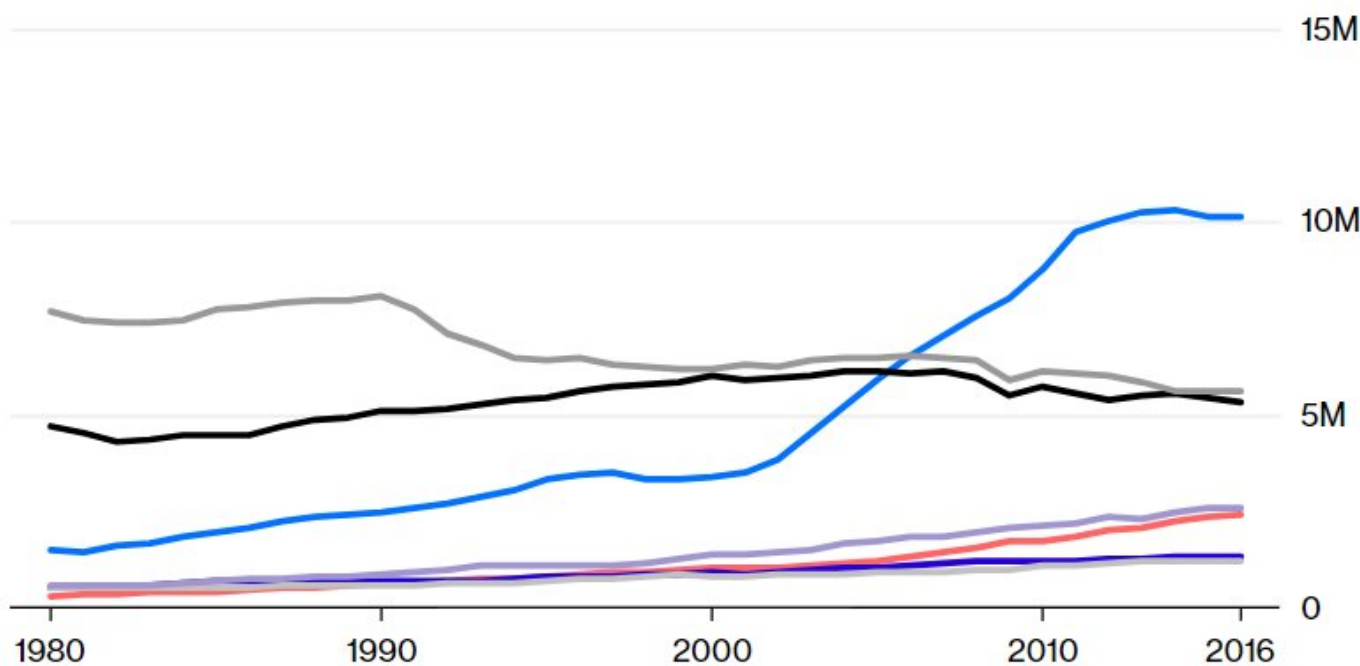
Basically, America, on its own, has a LOT power to stop climate change than almost anyone admits.

2/China now emits far more CO2 than the U.S. It emits almost as much as Europe and the U.S. combined.

One Huge Outlier

Annual CO2 emissions in tons

China / U.S. / Europe / India / Africa / South America / Middle East



Source: Global Carbon Project

3/In fact, even this huge disparity dramatically understates the degree to which China is in the driver's seat of climate change.

China, being still much poorer than us, has much more room to grow its economy. Hence, the emissions gap will only grow larger.

The true imbalance is much larger than it appears on this graph. Developed countries grow slowly -- perhaps around 2 percent a year. China, because it's still catching up, grows much faster, at around 6.5 percent. That rapid growth is why China's emissions have soared since 2007, even as the U.S. and Europe have made modest progress. As China continues to catch up, its already enormous share of global emissions will only grow, unless it takes dramatic steps to decarbonize its economy. To its credit, China has made moves to limit coal use. But the country's emissions continue to rise.

4/This leads to an uncomfortable but unavoidable fact: The battle to halt climate change will be won or lost in China.

America's power - and thus, the power of American politicians, activists, businesses, etc. - to save the planet from climate catastrophe is very marginal.

5/This is just a fact. But it's an uncomfortable one for a people like Americans who are used to thinking that the world lives or dies at their command.

Thus, I see many Americans desperately trying to preserve the illusion of control with respect to climate change.

6/The first way we Americans try to preserve the illusion of control is by bringing up moral arguments.

We note that we emitted more carbon than China throughout history, and that our per capita emissions are higher.

But of course the climate cares nothing for morality.

7/Another way we Americans try to preserve the illusion of control is by claiming that China is doing their part, China is reducing emissions, China has the problem under control, so we just need to focus on ourselves.

This is, sadly, bullshit.

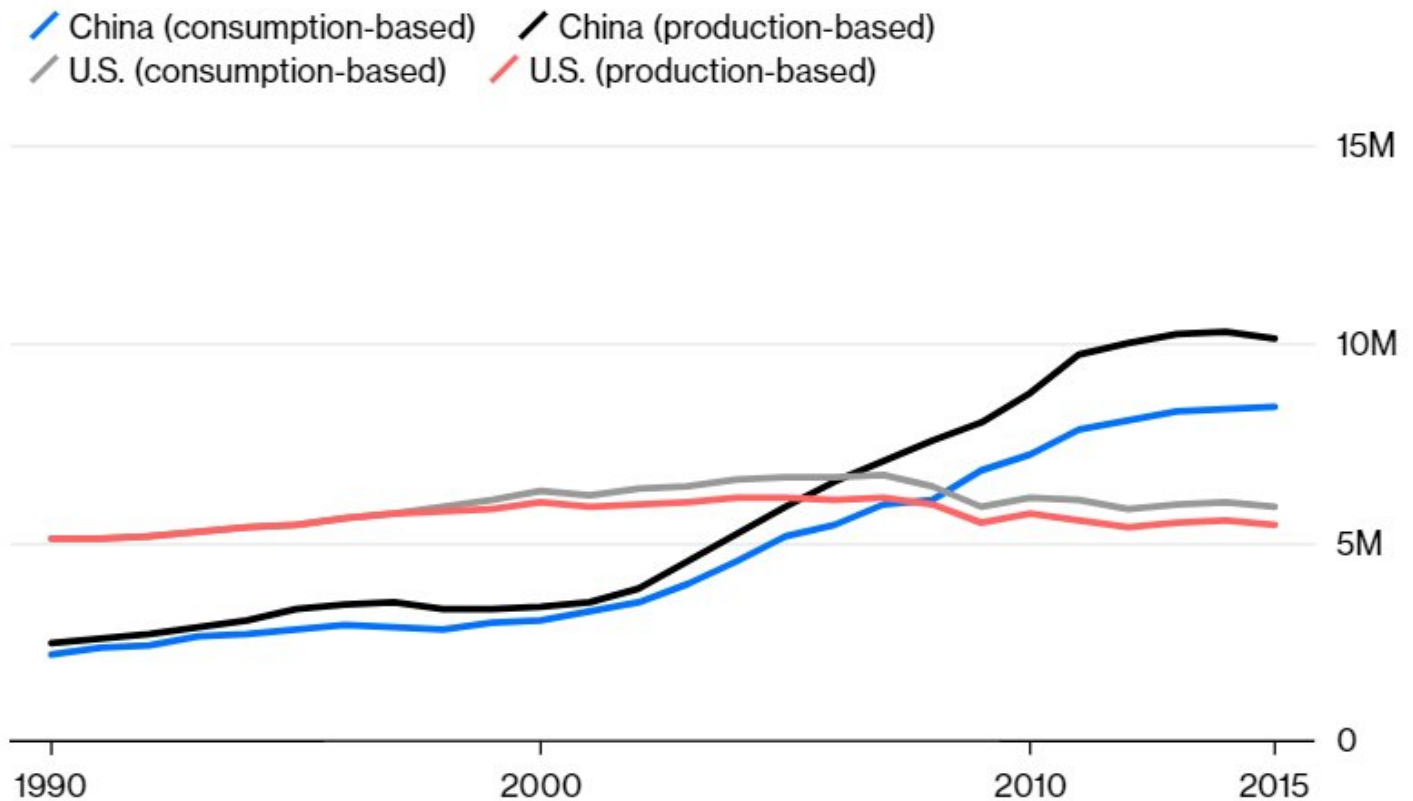
<https://t.co/yObzAQ3KWu>

8/A third way we Americans try to preserve the illusion of control is by claiming that America exports its emissions to China (by offshoring carbon-intensive industries).

But in fact, this accounts for only a small piece of the rise in China's CO2 emissions.

Maybe the U.S. Didn't Offload All Its Pollution to China

Annual CO2 emissions in tons



Source: Global Carbon Project

9/Of course, I screwed this whole thread up with a typo in the first tweet, which should have read "a LOT less power" instead of "a LOT power", but let's go on.

10/Another way we Americans try to preserve the illusion of control is by claiming that China will follow our lead on emissions - that if we cut emissions unilaterally, they'd follow suit.

Of course, we've ALREADY cut emissions. Nobody followed our lead.

11/Nor did China start slashing emissions after Kyoto, or after Paris.

The idea that we Americans rule the world via our moral leadership is just another illusion of control.

12/Yet another way we try to preserve the illusion of control is by making the false claim that "degrowth" in rich countries will solve the problem.

In fact, China already contributes far more to global growth than we do.

<https://t.co/MhuMG8DI2W>

China's 2019s contribution to global growth will soon be double that of the U.S., and India's 2019s will be larger than that of the entire euro zone <https://t.co/ikvDGRNkCf> pic.twitter.com/2iptZJgSNm

13/And finally, the biggest and most important way we Americans try to preserve the illusion of control is by simple denialism.

Many Americans pretend that climate science is more uncertain than it really is, or that climate scientists are dishonest, etc. <https://t.co/k06dJgzP4H>

14/It's all just an illusion.

America is NOT in the driver's seat when it comes to climate change, and it's time for us to acknowledge that horrible, gut-wrenching fact. Because it is a fact.

15/Does this mean America should abandon our efforts to fight climate change?

Of course not!!!

We should be taxing carbon, building green infrastructure, researching green energy technology, etc.!

16/BUT, on our own, this won't be nearly enough.

We need to do all we can to encourage China to decarbonize.

This includes sharing all of our green energy tech with China, and even trying to pay them to decarbonize.

There is thus lots of scope for improvement. The U.S. should consider both carrots and sticks to make that happen. ARPA-E, the U.S.'s energy-technology research agency, should be dramatically scaled up. Either all technologies produced by ARPA-E should be given to China for free, or the agency turned into a joint venture with China, ensuring that Chinese companies are able to replace coal with solar and wind as quickly as possible. In many cases, it's bad when China copies American technology -- in this case, it's exactly what the planet needs. Of course, these technologies should also be given to India, Africa and other developing countries seeking to lift their people out of poverty. This technology transfer could be accompanied by direct payments to China to help it replace its coal plants with green alternatives.

17/It probably also includes other, less friendly and positive incentives.

Another potential approach is conditional tariffs on Chinese products. Instead of only taxing the carbon content of Chinese-made goods, the U.S. could threaten to put tariffs on all Chinese products unless it agrees to leave more of its coal permanently in the ground. Banning exports of coal from the U.S., and heavily subsidizing exports of solar and wind technology, would also help make coal less attractive around the world. Tariffs could also be placed on coal exporters like Australia, Indonesia and Russia, encouraging them to keep their own coal safely underground.

18/But the horrible truth is, even all of these incentives probably have only a marginal ability to sway China's decisions.

Like it or not, the future of our planet is in the hands of some folks in Beijing.

(end)