

*Clean Air at What Cost? The Rise of Blunt Force Regulation in China*, by Denise van der Kamp. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2023. xiii+300 pp. US\$117.00 (cloth), US\$29.99 (paper, e-book).

China's war on pollution has produced striking images of empty factories, clear skies, and sudden economic shocks—reminders that environmental enforcement can be as disruptive as it is effective. Air pollution remains a major global problem, especially in developing countries like China. Over the past decade, massive centrally led regulatory initiatives have been implemented to clean up the air quality in China. In *Clean Air at What Cost?*, Denise van der Kamp joins a long tradition in the study of Chinese politics by examining the use of campaigns (short-lived, acute actions) to achieve quick policy outcomes that also entail substantial socioeconomic and human costs. The book argues that this approach is fundamentally about solving principal-agent problems: higher-level political leaders resort to extreme, one-shot measures to compel local officials to comply with orders in contexts where routine enforcement and credible punishment are weak.

The book is composed of three parts. The first part conceptualizes blunt force regulation as distinct from command-and-control regulation, emphasizing its indiscriminate application and unpredictability. The second part develops the core argument that blunt force regulation is a response to weak bureaucratic control. Van der Kamp illustrates her argument with case studies and limited quantitative evidence, linking its prevalence to proxies for bureaucratic noncompliance. The third part examines consequences and alternatives, finding that while blunt force regulation can achieve rapid pollution reduction, it is inefficient, undermines compliance norms, and can be politically risky.

The book's descriptive evidence is vivid, with detailed accounts of regulatory crackdowns from the 1980s to the 2010s, and the writing is accessible for readers new to Chinese politics and environmental governance. Its case studies could serve as useful teaching material for undergraduate courses, and it adds to a growing body of literature that integrates bureaucratic politics with research on campaign-style enforcement.

At the same time, several aspects of the argument invite scrutiny. First, the book overstates its challenge to “a long-standing perception that the Chinese state has immense enforcement powers and coercive capacity” (3). Much of the existing literature has long emphasized the limits of central control. Similarly, while blunt force regulation is presented as novel, the phenomenon closely resembles campaign-style enforcement, raising the question of whether it is in effect “old wine in new bottles.”

Second, the framing could more fully engage alternative explanations. The book gives limited attention to campaigns as political signaling—whether to demonstrate loyalty to superiors, appease public concerns, or project resolve. It also does

not discuss the emergence of “regularized campaigns” in which waves of stringent enforcement become institutionalized. Given that the analysis stops in 2018, the book does not address developments in the years since then, during which central environmental campaigns have been further routinized.

Third, several empirical underpinnings warrant caution. For example, the claim that factory closures are chosen instead of fines because they make compliance easier to verify is central to the book’s proposed mechanism, but it rests on a single illustrative case, leaving its general applicability uncertain. The proxy for bureaucratic compliance (per capita revenue) is problematic, as it is influenced by multiple factors, including political leaders’ strategic choices about regulatory stringency. Using PITI scores conflates transparency with actual enforcement compliance, and the modeling of neighbors’ emissions overlooks variables such as prevailing wind patterns that strongly influence pollution flows.

Fourth, some claims underplay political and institutional dynamics that complicate the weak-capacity argument. After 2012, environmental protection was elevated in cadre evaluations, making stringent enforcement compatible with—rather than contradictory to—the conventional emphasis on growth. Moreover, as other work has noted, leaders sometimes deliberately order laxer enforcement to maintain social stability, even when the authorities’ enforcement capacity is sufficient. In such cases, lack of action reflects strategic trade-offs rather than an inability to enforce routine regulations.

Finally, the generalizability of the hypotheses is uneven. Hypothesis 2 posits that blunt force regulation is more common in developing countries, but the empirical testing draws almost entirely on Chinese cases, with brief descriptive references to India, the Philippines, and the United Kingdom serving only as illustrative examples. Hypothesis 3 claims that blunt force regulation improves regulatory outcomes even in weak-enforcement settings, but again this argument relies solely on Chinese evidence. As a result, the comparative scope implied by the theoretical framing remains largely untested.

Despite these conceptual and empirical limitations, *Clean Air at What Cost?* foregrounds the bureaucratic control dimension of campaign-style enforcement and offers rich qualitative details. Scholars well-versed in the literature may find the conceptual novelty limited and the quantitative analysis unconvincing, but for readers seeking a descriptive overview of China’s pollution crackdowns through the lens of center-local relations, this book will be a useful addition—even if it leaves key theoretical and empirical questions unresolved.

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