

COVER STORY

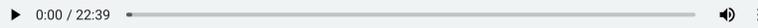
## The Climate Crusaders

John Kerry and Xie Zhenhua are seen as uniquely capable of getting the U.S. and China to cooperate on climate change. But when it comes to the world's two biggest emitters, a rivalry might be just as useful.

BY KATRINA NORTHROP AND ELI BINDER — APRIL 4, 2021



Illustration by Luis Grañena



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Xie Zhenhua was supposed to retire long ago, but every time the Chinese bureaucrat tried to leave government service, something blocked his exit. In 2015, he tried to step down as China's lead climate negotiator before the Paris Climate Change Conference, but he was reinstated just a few months later. Given his impressive career helping shape China's environmental policy, he was seen as crucial to reaching a deal. So, the pudgy, bespectacled Tianjin native went to work as China's top climate official, and the relationship he cultivated with Todd Stern, the lead U.S. negotiator in Paris, played a key role in making the agreement a reality.

After Paris, Xie once again thought he was done. He took an academic gig running an environmental institute at his alma mater, Tsinghua University, hoping to influence climate policy from the sidelines. But Beijing pulled him back into the action. After Joe Biden was elected U.S. President and announced that he would make John Kerry, who served as U.S. Secretary of State during the Paris negotiations, his special climate envoy, China announced that Xie, now 71, would rejoin the government as Kerry's counterpart.

Climate experts in the U.S. were elated.

"It is great news that Kerry was appointed and great news that Xie was brought back. It creates the best conditions for cooperation," says [Alex Wang](#), a law professor at University of California, Los Angeles who specializes in U.S.-China climate relations.



Then-Secretary of State John Kerry sits with U.S. Special Envoy for Climate Change Todd Stern at the Paris Climate Change Conference in 2015.

Credit: State Department

Xie and Kerry had developed a good rapport in Paris, multiple people who worked alongside them told *The Wire*, and they have been in regular touch since being appointed. Their combined diplomatic finesse and political clout makes them uniquely capable of advancing deals — at a time when hostilities between the two countries appear to be on the rise.

Indeed, even as the Biden administration has coordinated multilateral sanctions against China for a mass internment program in Xinjiang, it has also signaled a readiness to work with China on climate issues. After the first

high-level meeting between China and the Biden administration in Alaska last month, U.S. Secretary of State Blinken [said](#), “On climate, our interests intersect.”

Chinese officials agreed. A [column](#) in *Xinhua*, the official Chinese state news agency, said, “The two sides are committed to strengthening dialogue and cooperation in the field of climate change.” And in the first baby step towards cooperation, the U.S. and China [announced](#) in March that they would co-chair a G20 study group on climate-related financial risks.

“**If we can't work with China, I don't know what the future is going to be like for our children and our grandchildren.**”

— [Daniel Reifsnnyder](#), who led the U.S. State Department's climate change team from the George H.W. Bush through the Obama administrations

The motivation is painfully clear. Last year tied with 2016 for the earth's hottest year on record. And extreme weather is becoming more frequent, causing death, destruction and displacement. Climate scientists say the earth can only afford a temperature increase of [1.5](#) degrees Celsius above pre-industrial levels without triggering a climate catastrophe, and many say that without extreme action, it is difficult to imagine a future in which New York and Shanghai remain above water.

Experts on both sides of the Pacific say that no matter the state of other areas of the U.S.-China relationship, the two countries must find a way to work together on the existential threat facing humanity.

“If China and the U.S. won't cooperate, it will be very challenging for the whole world to come together to combat climate change,” says [Ma Jun](#), director of the [Institute of Public & Environmental Affairs](#) and one of China's most prominent environmentalists. Ma laments the fact that the U.S. stepped back from climate cooperation during the Trump administration, saying, “We can't afford to wait any longer.”

“If we can't work with China, I don't know what the future is going to be like for our children and our grandchildren,” says [Daniel Reifsnnyder](#), who led the U.S. State Department's climate change team from the George H.W. Bush through the Obama administrations.



Xie Zhenhua has played a leading role in the politics of combatting climate change.

Xie coming back to the negotiating table, however, gives Reifsnnyder hope.

“He’s a brilliant guy. He’s tough, very intelligent, very capable, and he’s also very far seeing,” says Reifsnnyder. “He understands the need for the U.S. and China to work together in this area.”

Xie has been working on environmental policy for more than 20 years. Armed with a bachelor’s in engineering physics from Tsinghua University, and a law degree from Wuhan University, he rose through China’s leadership ranks in the state environmental protection agency, where he was named minister. He stepped down after a terrible explosion at a chemical plant in Jilin Province in 2005, but then served as vice chairman of the powerful National Development and Reform Commission (NDRC), the former state economic planning agency. Two years later, he took on the role as China’s lead climate negotiator. He now returns to that post, after time away from government. Whether he has enough power in Beijing to be effective is unclear, analysts say, but Xie seems determined to work with his counterparts.

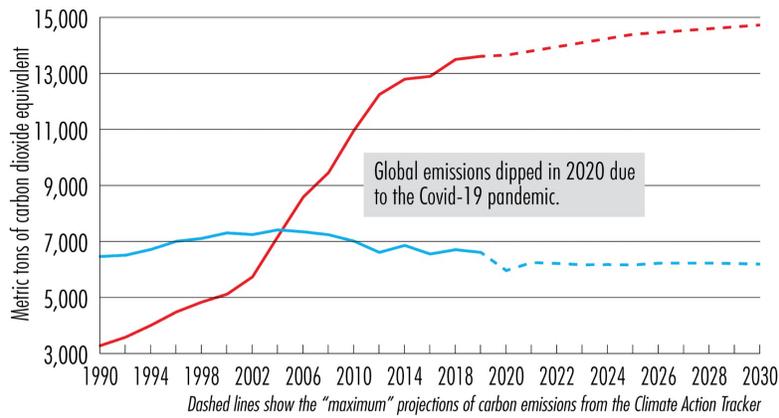
Kerry, for his part, is also keen to cooperate. The longtime politician has [called](#) climate change “deeply personal to me” — he even met his wife, Teresa Heinz, at the 1992 climate conference in Rio — and he tried, unsuccessfully, to [pass](#) cap-and-trade legislation as a senator in 2009. Now, brought out of retirement to assume the role of climate envoy, he has [said](#) his strategy towards China is to compartmentalize — to separate climate out from all the other noise in the U.S.-China relationship — in order to make real progress.

In his [remarks](#) at a global climate summit on March 23, the 77-year-old Kerry said: “This should not be a year to wring our hands and point fingers. This must be the year to point the way to a cleaner future and to join hands in a cooperative journey to get there — for all of us and all our people.”

But while everyone acknowledges the need for cooperation between the world’s two biggest carbon emitters, less clear is what, exactly, that would look like. When it comes to a challenge as daunting as climate change, after all, there are no easy first steps the U.S. and China can take together that will have a major impact. Instead, although cooperation is the buzzword of the moment, the U.S.-China competition might be just as useful.

## The Emissions Race

[The U.S.](#), as part of the Paris Agreement, promised to decrease its emissions to about 27 percent below its 2005 level by 2025. In April, it is expected to announce another, more ambitious target. [China](#) promised in September to peak its carbon emissions by 2030 and reach carbon neutrality by 2060.



Data: [Climate Action Tracker](#)

## STEPPING UP TO THE PLATE

When the United Nations General Assembly met last September, the international community's attention was focused on Covid-19. But when Xi Jinping's turn came to [address](#) the world by video, he dropped a bombshell.

"Humankind can no longer afford to ignore the repeated warnings of nature and go down the beaten path of extracting resources without investing in conservation, pursuing development at the expense of protection, and exploiting resources without restoration," Xi told the sparsely filled General Assembly hall. Then, he [announced](#) that China was going to ramp up its ambition to combat climate change by peaking its carbon emissions before 2030 and reaching carbon neutrality by 2060.

Xi's pledge, which some credit Xie with masterminding, made China one of the most ambitious countries on climate and took the world by surprise, including those in China. It also signified a major change in tone.



President Xi Jinping announced plans for China to achieve carbon neutrality by 2060 at the virtual U.N. summit on climate change in September.

"China never really wanted to be considered a leader on climate change," says [Angel Hsu](#), a professor at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill who researches Chinese climate policy. "For many years, China's line was 'common but differentiated responsibility' — meaning that developed countries created this problem and it was their responsibility to solve it."

Xie himself is famous for advancing that argument in previous negotiations, including at the 2011 Durban Climate Change Conference, when he heatedly [banged](#) the table as he pushed back against binding emission targets.

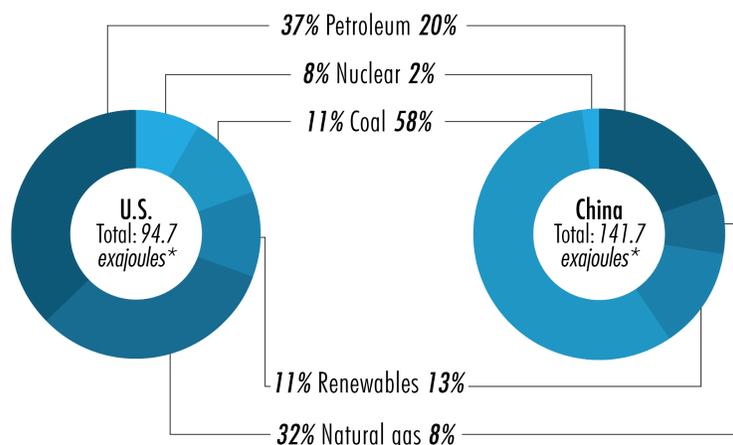
“We’re developing countries,” he said to the assembled negotiators. “We want to develop, eradicate poverty and protect the environment. We’ve already done what we’re supposed to — and you haven’t even done it. Who are you to say these things?”

Although China clung to the title of “developing country” for years, its emissions over the past few decades have come to mirror, and then surpass, those of developed countries. When China joined the World Trade Organization in 2001, it accounted for 14 percent of global carbon emissions, according to data from the Global Carbon Project. By 2006, China’s emissions topped 20 percent of the world’s. Today, China accounts for nearly 30 percent and is by far the world’s largest emitter of carbon.<sup>1</sup>

China’s dirty footprint was fueled by a construction boom in its rapidly growing cities and its dominant role as the world’s factory floor, producing emissions that previously would have been generated by the countries buying Chinese goods. China also depends heavily on coal for its power generation. It is the world’s [biggest](#) producer and consumer of coal.

## The Energy Divide

The United States and China are the world’s two largest energy consumers, but their sources don’t always line up. The biggest discrepancy comes in the form of coal, a massive pollutant that accounts for more than half of China’s energy consumption.



\*Exajoules are units of energy, equivalent to 23.9 million tonnes of oil equivalent (Mtoe), 34.1 million tonnes of coal equivalent (Mtce), or 948 trillion British thermal unit.  
Sources: U.S. Energy Information Administration, BP Statistical Review of World Energy 2020

2019 consumption for the United States and China.

Data: [EIA](#), [BP](#)

While not as wealthy as the U.S. on a per capita basis, China boasts world-class infrastructure, scientific know-how, and advanced clean energy industries, which means it could reduce its emissions if it chose to do so. Indeed, as China’s emissions skyrocketed, many Western officials started to pressure Beijing, arguing that China was no longer a developing country, at least in the traditional sense, and that it was using that label to shirk its responsibility.

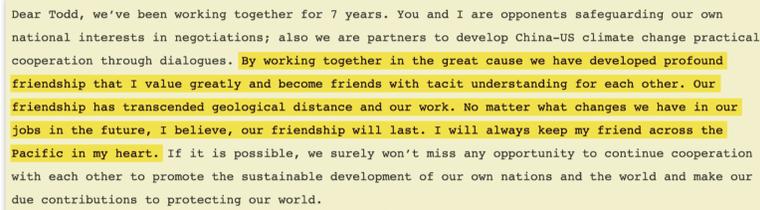
“It’s kind of lonely being the number one emitter in the world. Everyone is looking at you,” says Reifsnnyder.

In the run-up to the Paris Agreement, China came under pressure from all sides to take action. Kerry, in a 2014 [speech](#), said it was “imperative that the United States and China lead the world with genuine reductions that put us on a path to real progress,” and called it “our shared responsibility.”

The pressure worked. Starting with the 2015 Paris Agreement, China signaled that it was ready to step up to the plate. Under Xie’s steady leadership, the Chinese climate team began to engage with their U.S. counterparts. Xie took Todd Stern, who led the U.S. delegation, to

visit his hometown. And Stern, in turn, took Xie to a Chicago Cubs [baseball game](#).

“By working together in the great cause,” Xie wrote in a 2015 email to Stern that was [leaked](#), “we have developed profound friendship that I value greatly and become friends with tacit understanding for each other. Our friendship has transcended geological distance and our work. ... I will always keep my friend across the Pacific in my heart.”



Dear Todd, we've been working together for 7 years. You and I are opponents safeguarding our own national interests in negotiations; also we are partners to develop China-US climate change practical cooperation through dialogues. **By working together in the great cause we have developed profound friendship that I value greatly and become friends with tacit understanding for each other. Our friendship has transcended geological distance and our work. No matter what changes we have in our jobs in the future, I believe, our friendship will last. I will always keep my friend across the Pacific in my heart.** If it is possible, we surely won't miss any opportunity to continue cooperation with each other to promote the sustainable development of our own nations and the world and make our due contributions to protecting our world.

In a 2015 leaked email, Xie referred to his “profound friendship” with U.S. counterpart Todd Stern.

Credit: [WikiLeaks](#)

Though it was not always easy, especially at the beginning, a genuine relationship formed, a half-dozen people told *The Wire*, and the goodwill extended across the teams.

“I really enjoyed the spirit” of the negotiations, says [Zou Ji](#), who was on China’s delegation at the Paris negotiations. “We had a common goal. We *had* to reach an agreement. We *had* to work together to combat global climate change.”

That mandate created results: In a joint [announcement](#) by the two countries, the U.S. announced its intentions to decrease its net emissions by 26 to 28 percent below its 2005 level by 2025, and China announced it would peak its emissions around 2030. The other participating nations took note.

“The cooperation has a signalling effect on the rest of the world,” says [Thom Woodroffe](#), a senior advisor on multilateral affairs at the Asia Society Policy Institute. “If the U.S. and China are seen to cooperate on climate, other countries find it increasingly difficult to not do anything.”

The leadership from the U.S. side, however, was short lived. Just a few months after the Paris agreement was signed, Donald Trump was elected president, and he quickly announced that the U.S. would withdraw from the agreement — despite Kerry’s protestations.

“I ask you on behalf of billions of people around the world,” Kerry said in a [speech](#) after Trump was elected. “Do your own due diligence before making irrevocable choices.”

Although cities, states and scientists continued to work with global counterparts on climate issues under the Trump administration, U.S. leadership disappeared from the global climate stage.

“There wasn’t any discussion of climate cooperation,” says [Matthew Turpin](#), who worked in the Obama and Trump administration’s in the Pentagon and as the U.S. National Security Council’s Director for China until 2019. “That wasn’t even a topic of discussion. And nothing was coordinated at a federal level.”

But power, like nature, abhors a vacuum, and it wasn’t long before Xi realized the opportunity he had been given. Xi’s September speech at the U.N. signalled that China, not the U.S., was assuming the mantle of climate leadership. According to [Bloomberg News](#), it was Xie who originally drafted the proposal for carbon neutrality, along with his colleagues at Tsinghua, which eventually landed on Xi’s desk. And afterwards, climate analysts in Beijing say the change was instantaneous.

“Those announcements triggered lots of momentum,” says [Li Shuo](#), the policy director for Greenpeace China. “All the key subnational players are now mobilized and required to act.”

“ **If the U.S. and China are seen to cooperate on climate, other countries find it increasingly difficult to not do anything.** ”

— [Thom Woodroffe](#), a senior advisor on multilateral affairs at the Asia Society Policy Institute

When Biden assumed office in January, he immediately rejoined the Paris agreement and created the new position of special presidential envoy for climate. In one of his first official acts as climate envoy, Kerry apologized to the United Nations for the U.S. absence. “We come back, I want you to know, with humility for the absence of the last four years, and we’ll do everything in our power to make up for it,” he [said](#).

Biden’s decision to tap Kerry as climate envoy sent a message to China, observers say.

“That was the moment when the penny dropped for the Chinese,” Woodroffe says. “If China had not agreed with the principle of approaching climate as a stand alone issue, the way Kerry does, they wouldn’t have appointed Xie in response.”

But Kerry and Xie aren’t entering the same world they left. Trust, which is a prerequisite for the delicate dance of climate cooperation, is at an all time low. The U.S. has determined China is committing [genocide](#) in Xinjiang. It has blacklisted many of China’s leading technology companies. China recently carried out a large scale hack of U.S. networks and has militarized the South China Sea. The hurdles to any form of large scale cooperation will be much higher than either party faced in Paris.

In addition to the U.S.-China tensions, both countries also face domestic constraints. On the U.S. side, there is political opposition, mainly from the Republican party, and in China, there is pushback from incumbent industries. Beijing’s latest five year plan, for instance, included only [modest](#) climate planning. These constraints will shape both countries’ climate diplomacy just as much as the constraints of the U.S.-China relationship.

Moreover, the world is now past the point of merely setting and agreeing to carbon targets.

“Back before Paris, political leadership just needed to push things forward,” says [Fan Dai](#), the director of the California-China Climate Institute, which aims to enhance collaboration between U.S. states and China. “But now the more important thing is policies in place to support implementation.”

In other words, says UCLA’s Wang, “Now we are in a rubber meets the road phase.”

To actually make progress on climate change, economies need to be transformed. And here, experts say, the myopic focus on cooperation isn’t enough.

“I am not sure collaboration is going to be the most important part of progress,” says [Deborah Seligsohn](#), a professor at Villanova University who studies climate change and previously worked on climate issues for the World Resources Institute and the U.S. State Department. “The key to progress on the environment is going to be robust competition, especially among companies.”



Xie and Kerry shaking hands at the Paris climate summit in 2015.

Credit: U.S. State Department

### 'THE MOONSHOT DYNAMIC'

Cooperation and competition are often seen as opposite ends of the spectrum, but when it comes to U.S.-China efforts to combat climate change, experts think the two dynamics can reinforce one another. After all, if the U.S. and China compete to develop clean energy, provide green finance for the rest of the world and lead on climate change, the world stands to benefit.

In clean energy industries, such as solar panels, electric vehicles and wind turbines, the two countries have already been competing for years. But analysts say the race has taken on more urgency recently as China has made advances. Electric vehicles, for instance, are seen as a critical factor in ending reliance on fossil fuels, and China has made significant progress in the industry with Chinese brands like Nio and BYD now going head-to-head with Tesla.

“China is a leader in the development of many clean energy techs that the world will need to address climate change,” says [Joanna Lewis](#), the director of the Science, Technology and International Affairs Program at Georgetown University. “Engagement with China on clean energy used to be about telling China what they could do better. But the U.S. and other countries can actually learn from China’s impressive achievements in these areas.”

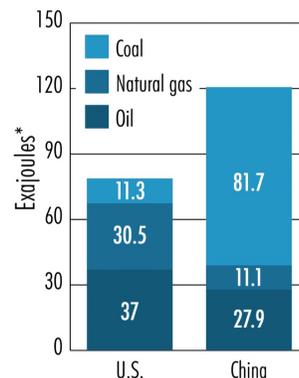
Indeed, President Biden recently announced an [EV initiative](#) that includes a \$174 billion investment to ensure U.S. automakers don’t get left behind, and observers say that having the weight of the government behind green companies is crucial, both for the climate and the economy.

“The companies that succeed in this century are going to be clean energy companies,” says [Thomas Hale](#), a professor of public policy at Oxford’s Blavatnik School of Government and author of a recent [policy brief](#) on the issue. “If we hold them back, we let China eat our lunch, as Biden has said.”

Climate finance for the developing world is also ripe for competition. Currently, China’s policy development banks are the [largest](#) public financiers of global power developments,

### Polluting Giants

2019 numbers show China, which has 4x the population of the U.S., far outstripping the U.S. in coal consumption but behind in oil and natural gas.



\*Exajoules are units of energy, equivalent to 23.9 million tonnes of oil equivalent (Mtoe), 34.1 million tonnes of coal equivalent (Mtce), or 948 trillion British thermal units.

Data: [BP](#)

but [75 percent](#) of that funding has been for fossil fuel projects, especially coal. That [includes](#) about \$50 billion invested in [overseas coal projects](#) and \$75 billion in overseas oil projects over the past 12 years.

If the U.S. began competing to provide energy financing, experts hope that might push these projects to become greener.

“On climate finance to the rest of the world, it’s all about, can the U.S. give a better deal?” adds Hale. “A competition on who can provide financing to Pakistan, for example, is good for the world, and good for climate change.”

More fundamentally, the mantle of global climate leader is now up for grabs. When the Trump administration exited the Paris agreement, the role was China’s for the taking. But now, with the U.S. back in the game, the two will have to compete for the title. That kind of one-upmanship may lead to significant results.

“Now that we have the U.S. pushing hard for climate,” says Wang, the UCLA law professor, “that sets up a moonshot dynamic between the U.S. and China.”



Xie Zhenhua discussing the risks for corporations around climate change at the Fortune Global Forum in 2013.

Credit: Fortune Global Forum, [Creative Commons](#)

On April 22, for instance, the U.S. is hosting the “[Leaders Summit on Climate](#),” where American officials are expected to announce a more ambitious emission target than what was agreed to in the Paris agreement. The ball will then be in China’s court, and the pressure is on.

“We know the climate challenge does not get successfully addressed without significant additional action by China,” a State Department spokesperson told *The Wire*.

The trick for Kerry and Xie, experts say, will be to ensure that the competition continues to serve the cooperative spirit. In clean energy industries and climate finance, for instance, the U.S.-China competition could devolve into attempts to undercut the other side. To avoid that, Villanova’s Seligsohn says one might look to the World Trade Organization as a potential model.

“Competition is difficult,” Seligsohn says. “But the WTO model sets a bunch of rules under which

countries can compete. The object here is to establish parameters for decarbonization. Then the U.S. and China and their companies can compete to produce the best products, methods and policies for reducing carbon pollution.”

An essential part of the U.S.-China climate dynamic, then, is coordination, not cooperation, notes [Kelly Sims Gallagher](#), the director of the Climate Policy Lab at Tufts’ Fletcher School and former senior China advisor for the State Department’s Climate Change office under Obama. “If both countries know the other country is doing this policy in this domain, they will know they aren’t at a competitive disadvantage,” she says. “We need to make sure we are talking.”

Ultimately, Kerry and Xie are responsible for that exchange, and making sure that both the cooperation and competition stay productive. Given their reputations, relationship, and commitment to the task at hand, observers say there is reason for hope.

“It is time for some optimism,” Wang says. “The U.S. and China are oriented towards carbon neutrality. We shouldn’t lose sight of that, despite the short term barriers. More than ever, we

can be optimistic.”



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● COVER STORY



## Pole Position

BY EYCK FREYMANN

In public, Chinese diplomats and climate negotiators deny that they see any link between climate change and geopolitics. But there is a deeply cynical consensus within China's academic and policy communities that climate change creates geopolitical opportunities that China can exploit — and must exploit before its rivals do. Greenland was the proof of concept for this strategy. And it caught the U.S. flat-footed.

● THE BIG PICTURE



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BY GARRETT O'BRIEN

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● Q & A



## Jörg Wuttke on China's Self-Destruction

BY ANDREW PEOPLE

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