

NEWS AND ANALYSIS

## Can COP Kickstart U.S.-China Climate Action?

So far, nobody is even sure whether Xi Jinping will show up.

BY KATRINA NORTHROP — OCTOBER 17, 2021



Xi Jinping speaks at the 2015 United Nations Climate Change Conference (COP21). He is not expected to attend this month's COP26 conference in person. Credit: [UN Climate Change](#)

The most important international meeting on climate change for six years is set to take place in Glasgow in less than two weeks, yet there are still many unknowns about China's approach. Nobody is even sure whether its leader, Xi Jinping, will show up.

Xi hasn't left China for [nearly two years](#), largely thanks to the COVID-19 pandemic, and the latest reports from the U.K. suggest he won't attend the meeting. But while his absence from the [COP26](#) meeting that's expected to draw over 100 global [leaders](#) — including U.S. President Joe Biden — would be notable, attendees will still be keen to hear about the intentions of China, the world's largest emitter of greenhouse gases.

Alok Sharma, the British politician who is serving as the President of COP26, has already [told](#) *Sky News* that “the ball is very much in [China's] court” when it comes to making the meeting a success.

COP26 is a two-week United Nations summit at which nearly 200 countries will gather to discuss the path towards cutting carbon emissions globally. This year, delegates are tasked with building on the results of the Paris Agreement, the climate treaty signed at the COP meeting in 2015.

China has already made several eye-catching commitments. Last year, Xi announced the country would aim to achieve carbon neutrality by 2060 and to reach peak carbon emissions by 2030.

And in a speech to the United Nations General Assembly last month, China's leader [announced](#) it would stop building overseas coal plants. China is currently the largest funder of coal-fired power plants globally: State-run policy banks have poured more than \$51 billion into projects in countries like Pakistan, Indonesia and Turkey, according to Boston

University's Global Development Policy Center (GDP Center) [data](#).

"It was a significant announcement at an opportune time before the COP and a year after the carbon neutrality announcement," says [Joanna Lewis](#), the director of the Science, Technology and International Affairs Program at Georgetown University. "That was a constructive signal."

But there is still little detail available on how China intends to achieve its long-term climate goals. The country's recent [energy shortages](#) have meanwhile shown how difficult it could prove for China to wean itself off coal-powered electricity, which still accounts for [60](#) percent of China's power generation capacity.

The electricity crunch has stemmed from increased demand from electricity-intensive industries, combined with power plants' unwillingness to operate at a loss amid surging coal prices. Up until this week, provincial governments capped the amount that generators are allowed to hike their electricity prices. In response, officials in major coal-producing areas like Inner Mongolia and Shanxi province have ordered coal miners to [increase their output](#), while the central government has also announced measures to support coal production.

Even before the current crisis, China had started [73 gigawatts](#) worth of new coal power projects just last year — five times as much as all other countries combined, according to the Centre for Research on Energy and Clean Air (CREA). Moreover, the country's recently announced 14th five-year plan contained no commitments to phase down coal usage domestically.

Many worry that the current energy crisis will complicate any attempt to limit coal production in the near future. "It is certainly a concern," says [Lauri Myllyvirta](#), lead analyst at CREA. "Chinese media is blaming this shortage on climate targets, or renewable energy. It could affect how eager the leadership is to announce new targets."

China is expected to submit a plan, the so-called "1+N" framework, ahead of the COP conference detailing how it will achieve its targets. "The target comes from the top and the nitty gritty needs to be worked out," says [Cecilia Han Springer](#), senior researcher with the Global China Initiative at the GDP Center, adding that she hopes that China will release roadmaps for specific industries, like aluminum and steel, and targets for non-CO<sub>2</sub> greenhouse gases, like HFCs and methane.

The overarching goal of the 2015 Paris Agreement was to limit the global temperature increase to well below 2 degrees celsius above pre-industrial levels. Since then, it has become clear that anything above a [1.5 degree increase](#) would be catastrophic for much of the world.

Many countries have recalibrated their climate targets accordingly, especially after a UN [report](#) in August showed that the world has already warmed by 1.2 degrees. Yet Chinese officials, who have long taken the position that it is mainly the responsibility of developed countries to fix the climate problem, have not done so.

“ “ **The dynamic in the 2014 to 2017 period was a race to the top. Both countries were trying to be the global climate leaders... If they were in a bike race, they were both biking really fast. Then Trump got off the bike, and tried to reverse the bike. China stopped pedalling and started coasting.** ” ”

— *Kelly Sims Gallagher, a professor at Tufts' Fletcher School who oversaw Chinese climate diplomacy under President Obama*

For China to be aligned with the new 1.5 degree target, experts say its government would have to take more drastic steps, including moving up its targeted peak emissions date to before 2030. “China would need to stop emissions growth as soon as possible and then quickly decrease them after the peak,” says Myllyvirta. “There is not space to get stuck at a high emissions level for many years.”

Much depends on whether the U.S. and China can put aside their other differences to work together on climate change. The signs aren't overly encouraging: Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi recently [told](#) U.S. climate envoy John Kerry that the topic of climate change could not be an “oasis” in U.S.-China ties that could be “divorced” from the rest of the relationship.

Kerry, who has traveled to China twice in the past year, [told](#) the AP this week that he was pessimistic about the results of the conference. “By the time Glasgow’s over, we’re going to know who is doing their fair share, and who isn’t,” he said.

“A big variable, which would change everything, would be U.S.-China high level engagement. The range of possibilities would be broadened,” says [Li Shuo](#), a Beijing-based senior advisor at Greenpeace. “Engagement not only matters, it works.”

The U.S.’s shifting stance on climate change — particularly the Trump administration’s announcement that they would withdraw from the Paris agreement in 2017 — may have reduced the pressure on China, says [Kelly Sims Gallagher](#), a professor at Tufts’ Fletcher School who oversaw Chinese climate diplomacy under President Obama.

“The dynamic in the 2014 to 2017 period was a race to the top. Both countries were trying to be the global climate leaders,” says Gallagher. “If they were in a bike race, they were both biking really fast. Then Trump got off the bike, and tried to reverse the bike. China stopped pedalling and started coasting.”

One potential area for collaboration lies in providing climate finance to the developing world. At the UNGA, Biden [announced](#) that the U.S. would provide over \$11 billion annually by 2024 to help low-income countries shift to clean energy and mitigate the impacts of climate change. At an international biodiversity summit this week, Xi [committed](#) \$232.5 million to help developing countries protect biodiversity.

[Laura Edwards](#), a China policy program associate at the Center for American Progress, a Washington D.C.-based think tank, says, “I am cautiously hopeful that at the very least we might see the bare minimum actions. Overall, until we see a real shift in China’s energy approach, it does not look great for the climate outlook. I am not sure the COP will change that.”



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## COVER STORY



### Pole Position

BY EYCK FREYMAN

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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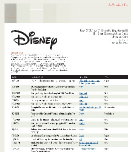
## Q & A



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BY ANDREW PEAPLE

The EU Chamber of Commerce in China president talks about China's self-inflicted problems; how he gets away with being so outspoken; and why he believes in China's comeback gene.



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