

Does the U.S.-China climate statement mean real cooperation ahead?

The joint statement suggests that China could boost its climate targets

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On [Earth Day](#), 40 world leaders will gather virtually for President Biden's [Leaders Summit on Climate](#), following Climate Envoy [John F. Kerry's](#) trip to China last week and the release of the first [U.S.-China joint climate statement](#) in more than four years.

What does the statement mean for bilateral climate engagement, given the significant tensions between the two countries?

New climate actions from China may be forthcoming

Most significantly, the joint statement leaves the door open for China to announce more ambitious climate targets. China's [14th Five-Year Plan](#) goals and previous [Paris agreement](#) targets will make the Paris goal of limiting global warming to well below 2 degrees Celsius and preferably 1.5 degrees Celsius difficult, if not impossible, to achieve. Given China's contribution to global emissions, its actions have the power to drive or to impede global ambition.

China's [14th Five-Year Plan](#), released in March, includes relatively conservative climate targets, probably due to its failure to meet previous energy intensity targets and the push for reinvigorated economic growth coming out of the pandemic. As a result, China technically could still meet its [14th Five-Year Plan](#) targets while still growing overall emissions.

The carbon and energy intensity reduction targets are also out of line with the targets that [recent modeling analyses](#) tell us would be required to keep global temperatures from rising by more than 1.5 degrees Celsius. So the language in the joint statement about "keeping the Paris agreement-aligned temperature limit within reach" is significant in terms of signaling China's willingness to work to achieve global goals.

Last September, President Xi Jinping announced China's plans to achieve [carbon neutrality](#) before 2060. However, as I've [written here](#) previously, it's not clear that's possible without more ambitious near-term goals. China's 2060 carbon neutrality goal also may not align with an under 2 degrees Celsius global goal. [Climate-change modeling](#) from Tsinghua's Institute of Climate Change and Sustainable Development (formerly led by Minister Xie Zhenhua, until he was [appointed](#) China's Special Envoy for Climate Change in February), the 2060 target could align with a global 1.5 degrees Celsius goal if China's total greenhouse gas emissions begin falling gradually between 2020 and 2030, then decline by 8 to 10 percent per year after 2030. But this would require a rapid and unprecedented 90 percent drop in greenhouse emissions by mid-century.

In short, China's near-term goals for 2025 and 2030 might not be enough to achieve its own 2060 carbon neutrality goal — while the 2060 goal may not be ambitious enough to achieve a global climate stabilization pathway that would restrict warming to 1.5 degrees Celsius. That's why the joint statement signaling that China will revisit these near-term goals, and clarify its long-term carbon neutrality strategy, could be quite significant.

The statement previews areas for technology cooperation

While the statement does not explicitly lay out a new bilateral dialogue process, such as the Obama-era Climate Change Working Group, the two sides will hold future discussions on a variety of policy and technology areas, including carbon capture, utilization and storage; renewable energy; efficient buildings; and low-carbon transportation. Also mentioned are areas that will be increasingly important for climate mitigation: green hydrogen, mitigating non-CO2 greenhouse gases such as methane, and aviation and maritime emissions.

On technology and experience sharing, in some respects the roles are now reversed. China has become the world's biggest living laboratory for scaling up low-carbon technology, with experience integrating large amounts of wind and solar power that few United States regions can duplicate. As U.S. automakers pledge to go all electric, Chinese researchers are already studying how to optimize battery size and charging infrastructure with real-time behavioral data that U.S. researchers and companies won't have for years. Partnerships with China to leverage current platforms and experience — if designed strategically — could benefit future U.S. innovation while protecting U.S. intellectual property.

The statement alludes to global pressure to stop financing coal plants

The statement doesn't specify an end to financing coal projects abroad, but does include language on maximizing international investment and finance of low-carbon and renewable energy in developing countries. China has been in the spotlight for its large investments in coal plants in the developing world, and — unlike Japan and South Korea — has yet to take any concrete steps to address it. Research shows China is already playing an important role in deploying renewable energy throughout the developing world, but its fossil energy investments are still far greater.

The statement reaffirms that both sides see value in engagement

Even during periods of extreme tension within the U.S.-China relationship, both sides have long viewed climate change and clean energy cooperation as a relatively safe harbor. Kerry was the first senior U.S. official in the Biden administration to travel to China. And the fact that Kerry apparently traveled there on China's invitation signals that China also sees engagement on climate change with the U.S. as a high priority, and something it is willing to do even as tensions run high in other areas.

Ultimately, U.S.-China cooperation is vital to making progress on climate change. Cooperation ensures that diplomatic channels of communication are open, making success on key multilateral decisions more likely. The scaling up of bilateral engagement during the Obama administration led to near-constant meetings and dialogue between U.S. and Chinese officials on topics crucial to the multilateral climate negotiations. The two sides also held numerous technical exchanges to understand emissions data, trends and drivers, and this helped to build mutual understanding as well as mutual trust.

As we saw at COP15 in Copenhagen, damaged U.S.-China relations can disrupt the entire process; U.S. and Chinese

negotiators found themselves disagreeing publicly over a variety of issues, ranging from financial support for developing countries to the measurement, reporting and verification of emissions inventories.

In contrast, a strong U.S.-China foundation played a critical role in the ultimate success of the Paris agreement at COP21. This will be particularly important this year in the run up to COP26 in Glasgow, Scotland – which, as Kerry notes, may be “the last best opportunity we have to get real and serious” about climate change.

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