

How Xi Just Saved the World

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In a little-noticed speech this week, China permanently changed the global fight against climate change.

Adam Tooze, *Foreign Policy*, September 25, 2020



China's President Xi Jinping waves to delegates as they arrive for the opening ceremony of the 11th National Women's Congress at the Great Hall of the People near Tiananmen Square on October 28, 2013 in Beijing. Feng Li/Getty Images

“China will scale up its Intended Nationally Determined Contributions by adopting more vigorous policies and measures. We aim to have [carbon dioxide] emissions peak before 2030 and achieve carbon neutrality before 2060.”

Xi Jinping's speech via video link to the United Nations General Assembly on Sept. 22 was not widely trailed in advance. But with those two short sentences China's leader may have redefined the future prospects for humanity.

That may sound like hyperbole, but in the world of climate politics it is hard to

exaggerate China's centrality. Thanks to the gigantic surge in economic growth since 2000 and its reliance on coal-fired electricity generation, China is now by far the largest emitter of carbon dioxide. At about 28 percent of the global total, the carbon dioxide produced in China (as opposed to that consumed in the form of Chinese exports) is about as much as that produced by the United States, European Union, and India combined. Per capita, its emissions are now greater than those of the EU if we count carbon dioxide emissions on a production rather than a consumption basis.

Global warming is produced not by the annual flows of carbon but by the stocks that have accumulated over time in the Earth's atmosphere. Allowing an equal ration for every person on the planet, it remains the case that the historic responsibility for excessive carbon accumulation lies overwhelmingly with the United States and Europe. Still today China's emissions per capita are less than half those of the United States. But as far as future emissions are concerned, everything hinges on China. As concerned as Europeans and Americans may be with climate policy, they are essentially bystanders in a future determined by the decisions made by the large, rapidly growing Asian economies, with China far in the lead. China's rapid rebound from the COVID-19 shock only reinforces that point. With his terse remarks, Xi has mapped out a large part of the future path ahead.

As the impact of his remarks sank in, climate modelers crunched the numbers and concluded that, if fully implemented, China's new commitment will by itself lower the projected temperature increase by 0.2-0.3 degrees Celsius. It is the largest favorable shock that their models have ever produced.

There's an obvious question, of course: Is Xi for real?

There are reasons to be skeptical. Xi is not promising an immediate turnaround. The peak will still be expected around 2030. Recent investments in new coal-fired capacity have been alarming. A gigantic 58 gigawatts of coal-fired capacity have been approved or announced just in the first six months of this year. That is equivalent to 25 percent of America's entire installed capacity and more than China has projected in the previous two years put together. Due to the decentralization of decision-making, Beijing has only partial control over the expansion of coal-burning capacity. If Beijing is actually to implement this policy, there are huge political as well as technological challenges ahead. There have been some encouraging noises about new renewable energy commitments. But the transition costs will be huge, and Beijing has to face its own fossil fuel lobby. As one commentator remarked, Chinese officials laugh when they earnestly seek advice from Europeans on problems of the "just transition" and realize that the entire fossil fuel workforce that has to be taken care of in Germany is smaller than that of a single province in China. It will be an upheaval similar to the traumatic 1990s shakeout of Mao Zedong-era heavy industry.

But as ambitious as the objective may be, Xi would not be making such an announcement lightly. Within China, his words have huge weight. The first test of the seriousness of China's commitment will come when we get the final details of the 14th

five-year plan, the road maps that have guided China's economic development since the beginning of the Communist era. They will begin to emerge by the end of the year.

Toward the outside world, the significance is no less momentous. Hitherto the only big bloc fully committed to neutrality was the EU. The hope for this year was an EU-China deal that would set the stage for ambitious new targets to be announced at the COP26 U.N. climate conference planned for Glasgow in November. Rather than a summit in Leipzig, the Sino-EU meeting took place via videoconference. The exchanges were surprisingly substantive. The Europeans wanted China to commit to peak emissions by 2025 and made menacing references to carbon taxes on imports from China if Beijing did not raise its ambition. They have given a cautious welcome to Xi's U.N. statement. They can hardly have expected more.

Xi's move is all the more striking given the deterioration of China's relations not just with the United States but with the EU and India. This summer, Indian and Chinese troops skirmished in the Himalayas, and Germany pivoted to an Indo-Pacific strategy aligned with South Korea and Japan. Now the pressure will be on India, long China's partner in resisting calls from the West for firm commitments to decarbonization, to make a similarly bold climate announcement.

Though Europe will cheer Xi's commitment, in strategic terms it underlines how awkward the EU's position is. On the one hand, the Europeans increasingly want to stake out a strong position on Hong Kong, Xinjiang, human rights, and any geopolitical aggression in the South China Sea. Europe's residual attachment to the United States is real. But China has now underscored how firmly it aligns with a common agenda with the EU on climate policy. The contrast to the Trump administration could hardly be starker.

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Beijing has acted unilaterally. It is playing by the rules of the Paris climate agreement, which revolve around independent national commitments. Beijing has not asked for a quid pro quo from Europe or anyone else. Nor has it waited for the outcome of the U.S. election in November.

This ought to give Americans from all sides pause. If the Republican China hawks mean what they say, it surely should be puzzling to them that Beijing, which they accuse of foisting the climate issue on the world to hobble America, is now making a huge and unilateral commitment on decarbonization.

But Xi's move should also be a wake-up call for advocates of proactive climate policy on the Democratic side. Against the backdrop of climate negotiations in the Bill Clinton and Barack Obama eras, their approach tends, in its own way, to be highly transactional. The conceit that one can still hear from veterans of U.S. climate diplomacy is that the world is waiting for America to come back to the table and that no big deal like that at Paris in 2015 is conceivable without the United States.

But 2020 is not 2015. The sobering truth is that neither the EU nor China is any longer conditioning its climate policy on the United States. If you are serious about the issue, how could you? If Washington does come around to supporting a Green New Deal of the Joe Biden variety, that will, of course, be welcome. But in light of America's cavalier dismissal of the Paris agreement, even if a new administration were to make a new and more ambitious round of commitments, what would that amount to? So long as the basics of the American way of life remain nonnegotiable and climate skepticism has a strong grip on public opinion, so long as the rearguard of the fossil fuel industries is

allowed the influence that it is, so long as one of the two main governing parties and the media that supports it are rogue, America's democracy is not in a position to make credible commitments.

Whatever the outcome of the election, Donald Trump will surely carry through on his declaration that the United States is exiting the Paris agreement. The day on which that decision comes into effect is Nov. 4. Trump's inversion of U.S. policy is possible because Obama never put the Paris agreement to Congress. Indeed, after the abortive cap and trade legislation of 2009, the cornerstone of the original Green New Deal, the Obama administration abandoned major legislative initiatives on climate change. Instead, it relied on regulatory interventions and the force of cheap fracked gas to deliver a modest decarbonization agenda, anchored on ending coal.

In the future too, the two things that can be counted on to drive the climate agenda in the United States are technology and markets. And the same goes for other recalcitrant fossil fuel addicts around the world. If there are affordable and high-quality technological options, the switch to green will happen. Due to the advances in solar and wind power, we are rapidly approaching that point. Whatever Trump's bluster, coal is on its way out in the United States, too.

The U.S. environmental movement remains a vigorous and inspiring voice. America's science base and business nous, as well as the enthusiasm of capital markets for ventures like Tesla, can be counted on as drivers of progress. There are no doubt positive synergies to be had between market-driven energy choices in the United States and the industrial policy options that the European and Chinese bids for neutrality will open up. Solar and wind have already given examples of that. But amid the shambles of U.S. policy both on climate and the coronavirus, it is time to recognize a qualitative difference between the United States and Europe and China. Whereas Europe and China can sustain an emphatic public commitment to meeting the challenges of the Anthropocene with international commitments and public investment, the structure of the U.S. political system and the depth and politicization of the culture wars make that impossible. Perversely, the only way to build bipartisan political support for a green transition in the United States may be to pitch it as a national security issue in a cold war competition with China.

Of course, one should not despair of a more creative and positive scenario for the United States. The Green New Deal points the way. The push from the left has shifted the terms of debate across the Democratic Party. Of late, there are even voices in the Republican Party calling for an accommodation with the reality of global warming. But who knows how the electorate will decide on Nov. 3 and whether America's institutions will hold up. For the United States, everything hangs in the balance. For the rest of the world, that is not the case.

As Xi made clear on Sept. 22, as far as the most important collective issue facing humanity is concerned, the major players are no longer waiting. If the United States joins the decarbonization train, that will be all well and good. A constructive U.S.

contribution to U.N. climate diplomacy will be most welcome. But the era in which the United States was the decisive voice has passed. China and Europe are decoupling.

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