

Explore the Facts: China & Climate Change

Is China reaching its 2015 targets?

What did China set out in its 2015 Paris Agreement contribution?

Prior to the Paris Agreement, China submitted four [goals](#) for 2030:

- * **Carbon dioxide emissions to reach their peak by around 2030** with best efforts made to achieve this earlier
- * **Reducing carbon dioxide emissions by 60-65%** (per unit of GDP) from 2005 level
- * **Expanding the share of non-fossil fuel energy sources** in the energy mix to around 20%
- * **Raising forest volume** by around 4.5 billion cubic metres from 2005.

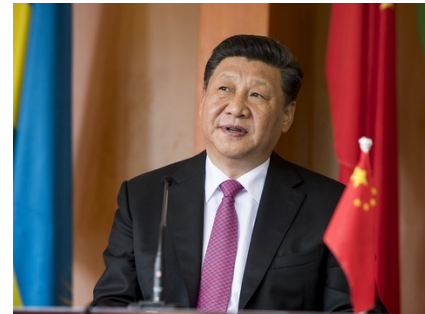


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As China has not yet set out any route map for its ambitious goals, it is difficult to say with any certainty whether China will reach its targets (see [Climate Action Tracker](#) for up to date information).

What challenges does China face in reaching its goals?

Prioritisation of economic growth over real change for the environment

The Chinese National Energy Administration continually approves new coal power plants for construction. Environmental inspectors recently [accused](#) officials at the National Energy Administration of a “*deviation in ideological understanding*” for allowing large quantities of coal to be burned, endangering China’s goals. In 2020, while coal consumption in the rest of the world decreased, China commissioned 38.4GW of coal powered power-plants. This was directly responsible for an increase in the global consumption of coal in 2020: growing for the first time since 2015. China has invested heavily in coal power stations in other countries through its [Belt and Road Initiative](#) and a pledge has only just been made to halt growth abroad.



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Local priorities: Often infrastructure projects such as coal plants are used to raise [GDP figures in local areas](#). In 2020, 75% of new coal power plants approved for construction were put forward by local authorities seeking to increase GDP. Many provinces, especially in the north-east which is heavily reliant on coal, want more time to pursue growth before publishing carbon peaking plans and curbing emissions. Communism has also had a strong tie to coal mining (see [Times article](#)).

Fuel security: China has a very energy inefficient economy: local factories use between 10-30% more energy than those in Europe and North America. This means that President Xi cannot decarbonise the country without threatening energy security: fuel shortages occurred in October 2021 after coal mine closures. The mines reopened.

Carbon capture technologies required have not yet been invented: In order to meet its targets, China needs to find new ways in which carbon dioxide can be captured. Although the country has significantly expanded its nuclear energy capacity, this is not enough to balance out the coal emissions, so carbon capture and storage technologies are needed. Currently there are no methods by which lots of carbon can be captured at once, and it is likely that President Xi will be unable to achieve the targets without yet-to-be invented carbon storage technologies. Planting trees will store carbon however this would need to be done “*at colossal scale to make the difference needed*”, as [The Economist](#) comments.

Where is the internal pressure to reduce emissions?

From citizens: Chinese citizens value clean air and water, staging regular demonstrations against pollution. A European diplomat [commented](#) that President Xi is convinced “*ecology is part of the social contract between the Communist Party and the people.*”

From Chinese bosses of European companies: The executives have told officials it is challenging to expand or open new production sites if the electricity on offer locally comes from coal.



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A combination of pressure from above and below may provide the impetus for Chinese officials to change local energy mixes. Ma Jun, who runs a Beijing-based organisation tracking and publishing pollution data, [argues](#) that pressure from foreign businesses and local citizens might push officials to make change.

What are China’s climate ambitions?

Net Zero by 2060

The world warmly welcomed the announcement to the UN General Assembly by President Xi (Sept 2020) of a new **goal of reaching carbon neutrality by 2060**. This means achieving a balance between carbon emissions and carbon reductions, with the latter involving strategies such as carbon capture and storage (CCS) and tree planting. President Xi also indicated he planned to halt the rise of carbon emissions by 2030.



Image: [Creative Commons](#)

New five year plan: In March 2020, China released its 14th Five Year Plan. This set a target of growing the share of non-fossil fuel consumption from 16% in 2020 to 20% in 2025. Whilst this new goal is important, it is still a slow move to renewables which “*suggests the overhaul needed for China to meet its Paris ... commitments is still a long way off*” ([The Economist](#)).

UN Climate Ambition Summit: President Xi announced four new targets at this summit (Dec 2020)

- * **Reducing carbon intensity by over 65% by 2030** (up from 60-65% carbon dioxide emissions per unit of GDP) in comparison to 2005 levels
- * **Nearly tripling wind and solar capacity** by 2030 to 1200cGW, up from 415GW at the end of 2019
- * **Increasing forest volume by 6 billion cubic meters** from 2005 levels
- * **Expanding the share of non-fossil fuels in primary energy consumption** to 25% by 2030 (up from 20%).

Beyond the Paris Agreement targets: China has ambitions to lead the world in the field of climate change. [The Economist](#) comments, “*soon, the most disruptive force in global climate politics may be China’s ambition.*” China’s political system means that the government can push through legislation quickly to support its goals, in a way that Western democracies cannot. Furthermore, Chinese companies have been directed to develop new clean energy technologies which may allow rapid decarbonisation of the economy.

Questions to explore *(References are shown overleaf to aid further research)*

1. How important is climate change in China’s foreign policy?
2. How far should Belt and Road Initiative projects be included in China’s emissions total?
3. How does Xi Jinping’s stance on climate change compare to previous Presidents?
4. What direction do you think China’s future climate policy will take?

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References

Whilst we strive to provide only links to useful and ethical websites, we have no control over their content. The links do not imply a recommendation for all the content found on these sites.

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