Sino-American Climate Diplomacy

By **Kevin Tu**

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During COP26, Beijing and the Biden administration committed to reviving Sino-American cooperation on climate issues, in the name of their common interest in climate stability. However, their attempt to isolate this question from the numerous disagreements between China and the United States has a slim chance of success. The two biggest global emitters must improve the general framework of their bilateral relations so that they can then work closely and effectively on the climate.

politique étrangère

In the era of the Covid-19 pandemic, climate extremes dominate headlines around the world, now that human influence has warmed the climate at an unprecedented rate over the past two thousand years.[1] As the world's two largest carbon dioxide (CO_2) emitters, China and the United States have a key role to play in any global climate solutions. However, the rapid deterioration in China-US relations in recent years has complicated their capacity to work together.

Background: China-US relations against the current of power rebalancing

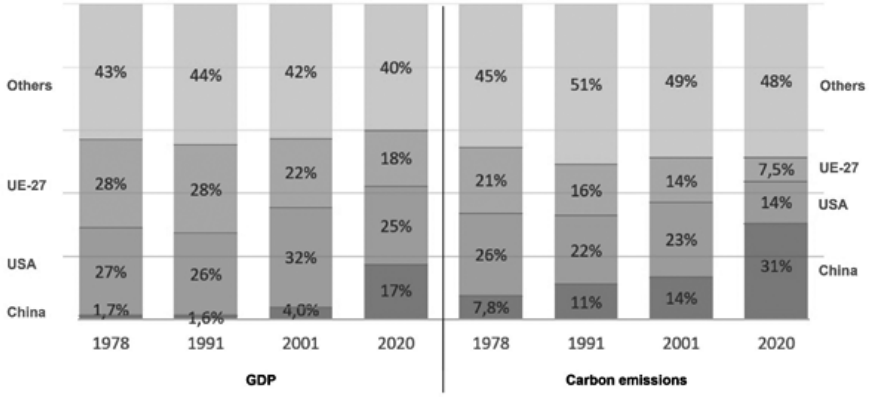
In 1978, Deng Xiaoping opened China's inward-looking, agrarian economy to the outside world. The "reforms and opening up" policies were, naturally, endorsed by the US, which promptly transferred diplomatic recognition from Taipei to Beijing on January 1, 1979. Since then and until 1991, China's nominal gross domestic product (GDP) grew at a breakneck

1. "Climate Change 2021: The Physical Science Basis. Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change", Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, 2021.

pace of nearly 15 percent annually. However, due to a drastic depreciation of the Chinese yuan (¥) against the US dollar ($), from 1.7 ¥/ $ in 1978 to 5.3 ¥/ $ in 1991, China's mediocre share of the global economy measured by current $ declined slightly, from 1.7 percent in 1978 to 1.6 percent in 1991.

Then came the collapse of the former Soviet Union in 1991. The end of the Cold War brought a profound redistribution of power among states, markets, and civil society. National governments started to share power—including political, social, and security roles at the core of sovereignty—with businesses, with international organizations, and with a multitude of citizen groups, known as nongovernmental organizations (NGOs). The steady concentration of power in the hands of states that began in 1648 with the Peace of Westphalia, coincidently followed by a redistribution of power from a gradually declining East to the ascending West, was temporarily over.[2]

Evolution of global GDP and CO_2 emission mix : 1978, 1991, 2001, 2020



Source: World Bank and Our World in Data.[3]

In the context of the aforementioned power shift, China decided to further embrace globalization and joined the World Trade Organization (WTO) in 2001, the same year that the September 11 attacks in the US sent geopolitical shock waves across the globe. In retrospect, the period prior to 2001 may be categorized as the "win-win" phase of China-US

2. J. Mathews, "Power Shift", *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 6, No. 1, 1997.
3. H. Ritchie and M. Roser, "CO_2 and Greenhouse Gas Emissions", Our World in Data, August 2020, available at: ourworldindata.org.

relations, as the importance of both countries in the global economy increased. To the satisfaction of the American elites, China remained a junior partner of the US throughout the entire period, accounting for only 13 percent and 60 percent of American GDP and CO_2 emissions in 2001, respectively.

Since then, surfing the rising waves of globalization, China has increasingly prospered at the expense of relative American decline, making it harder to overlook the zero-sum aspect of bilateral relations. From 2001 to 2020, more than half of China's growth in the global GDP mix was achieved, along with a corresponding American decline. Due to its coal-reliant energy structure and energy-intensive economic growth model, China surpassed the US as the world's largest CO_2 emitter in 2006. Four years later, China replaced Japan as the second largest economy in the world. To make the situation even more bitter in the eyes of the less and less confident American elites, the economy of an increasingly assertive China, measured in purchasing power parity, surpassed that of the US for the first time in 2017.

Starting in January 2018, the Trump administration began imposing tariffs and other trade barriers on China, citing concerns over intellectual property theft, discriminatory subsidy policies, non-reciprocal investment conditions, and abuse of emerging-nation status as part of WTO membership. Since then, the economic conflict between the world's two largest economies has escalated to other arenas; to name a few, the origins of the Covid-19 pandemic, military standoff in the South China Sea, encroachment of the One-China policy concerning Taiwan, and human rights-related disputes in Hong Kong and Xinjiang.

During the rebalancing of power from a relatively declining West to a rising East since the beginning of the new millennium, the waves of globalization eventually backfired, as evidenced by the widespread populism across the West in general and by the political ascendancy of Donald Trump in particular. Coincidently, nations started to pull power back from non-state actors, another trend in power rebalancing that has been further reinforced by the urgent need for decisive government interventions to fight against the Covid-19 pandemic and to tackle the climate crisis. For instance, by repeatedly pulling out of international organizations and agreements, the Trump administration significantly weakened the rule-based international order. By issuing the Overseas NGO Law in 2017, China required international NGOs to register with the Ministry of Public Security or its provincial equivalents.

Following an abrupt downturn in bilateral relations, kicked off by Washington's initiation of an increasingly bitter US-China trade war in 2018, experts on both sides have turned to different frameworks to explain the decline in relations. On the US side, influential analysts have frequently touted the "Thucydides Trap" as an explanation for the structural stress that arises when a rising power challenges a ruling one. Above all, in 12 of 16 similar cases over the past 500 years, the result has been bloodshed.[4]

In contrast, some Chinese analysts have framed the new era of China-US relations as a by-product of Beijing's abandonment of Deng Xiaoping's long-standing 1990 dictum to "hide your strengths and bide your time". During the author's private conversations with Chinese elites, the so-called "Zhou Yu-Zhuge Liang complex" was also frequently mentioned to explain the perceived inevitability of US efforts to contain China. In the classic Chinese story, a jealous Zhou Yu relentlessly attempts to outwit the smart Zhuge Liang, who is nevertheless innocent.[5]

There is a strong conviction among many Chinese elites that the Japanese economy's recent stagnation could at least be partially explained by the US containment of Japan, best exemplified by the US-initiated Plaza Accord in 1985.[6] If Washington could not even tolerate the economic ascendance of its ally Japan in the 1980s, Chinese analysts assume that China's chances of avoiding similar treatment cannot depend on its ability to make concessions to the US.[7]

History of China-US climate diplomacy

Formal international negotiations were launched in December 1990 to address growing scientific and political concern about human-induced climate change. Following the inception of the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) in 1992, the international community has established a framework for international cooperation to combat climate change by limiting average global temperature increases. Since then, additional international agreements in support of the UNFCCC have been introduced, notably the 1997 Kyoto Protocol, the

4. G. Allison, "The Thucydides Trap: Are the U.S. and China Headed for War?", *The Atlantic*, September 24, 2015, available at: www.theatlantic.com (accessed on December 3, 2021).
5. K. Tu, "Prospects of China-U.S. Climate Diplomacy: The Perspective From Beijing", *China Brief*, Vol. 21, No. 8, 2021, available at: jamestown.org.
6. "China won't Repeat Japan's Plaza Accord Mistake", *Global Times*, March 29, 2018, available at: www.globaltimes.cn (accessed on December 2, 2021).
7. "The Real Nature of U.S.-initiated Trade War", available at: opinion.people.com.cn (accessed on December 2, 2021).

2009 Copenhagen Accord, the 2015 Paris Agreement, and the 2021 Glasgow Climate Pact.

It is worth noting that the Rio de Janeiro Earth Summit in 1992 served as a significant catalyst for the development of environmental NGOs (ENGOs) in China; the Chinese delegation to the summit had been embarrassed by "their inability to participate in a meaningful way" at the NGO conference that occurred side by side with the government negotiations. Such an unpleasant experience convinced Beijing that ENGOs could play an important role in environmental protection, while improving China's international image. Beijing was thus willing to allow increased public participation in order to reach this goal.[8] Since then, a gradually thriving ENGO community has made positive contributions to move China's climate stance into an increasingly positive direction, as evidenced by its proven track record on capacity-building and its key bridging role between China and the international community.

Although the US Senate promptly gave its consent to the UNFCCC, so that the US became the fourth nation to ratify the UNFCCC (the first among industrialized countries), America has since been half-hearted about its international climate pledges. Following the Clinton administration's endorsement of the Kyoto Protocol in 1998, President George W. Bush quickly stated his opposition upon taking office in 2001. In 2015, the Obama administration teamed with China to conclude the Paris Agreement, only for President Donald Trump to pull the US out of the deal in 2017. Then, on his first day in office in January 2021, President Joe Biden took steps to put the US back into the Paris Agreement. Consequently, it is legitimate for America's counterparts, including China, to question the long-term credibility of climate pledges made by the US government.

By comparison, the issue of climate change attracted virtually no public or political attention from the Chinese in the 1960s, and only a little during the energy policy debates of the developed world in the 1970s. When China's "open door" era started in 1978, China's GDP accounted for less than 2 percent of the world total. Yet, due to China's heavy reliance on carbon-intensive coal and the widespread application of inefficient technology in its industrial sector, China's CO_2 emissions already accounted for around 8 percent of the global total, ranking second only to the US. Since then, China's share of global CO_2 emissions has increased rapidly; it now accounts for nearly one third of the world total.

8. T. Klink, "The Role of Environmental NGOs: From China to the Netherlands", Macalester International, 2008, available at: digitalcommons.macalester.edu.

China began to coordinate its climate change policy in 1988 when it established an inter-agency group that helped to formulate its positions for forthcoming international climate negotiations. Subsequently, the National Climate Change Coordination Leading Small Group (CCCLSG) was established in 1990. The 15-member committee in turn set up working groups on impact assessment and a response strategy to the UNFCCC. In 1992, China ratified the UNFCCC, the fifth country in the world to do so. China has been an active and visible participant in the international climate negotiations, usually acting in concert with the developing-country group (G77/China). China's positions have usually been in line with those of the G77 countries, but Chinese representatives have often felt a need to reiterate the Chinese views in addition to the G77/China statements.[9]

During the evolving climate debates prior to COP21 in 2015, Chinese policymakers and academia generally weighed greenhouse-gas emissions control as significant liabilities instead of potential assets to the national economy. Thus, sticking with "common but differentiated responsibilities" and rejecting mandatory emissions caps had long been the bottom line for Beijing's climate policy. Ironically, although the Bush administration used the absence of key developing countries as an excuse to justify its withdrawal from the Kyoto Protocol in 2001, the sudden disappearance of US pressure on China actually made it possible for Beijing to maintain a "wait and see" climate policy for quite a while.

As China and the US often sat on the opposite side of the climate negotiation table, bilateral tensions related to climate change gradually built up and culminated at COP15 in 2009. Prior to the Copenhagen conference, China had set three specific goals. On mitigation, Beijing maintained that COP15 should further lay out more ambitious emission reduction targets for developed countries under the Kyoto Protocol's second commitment period. On supporting developing countries against climate change, Beijing proposed that developed countries should provide new, additional, adequate and predictable financial resources. On climate mitigation actions by developing countries, Beijing suggested that they be supported and enabled by developed countries in a measurable, reportable and verifiable way. Although China achieved most of its negotiation goals in Copenhagen, the responses of the Western media to China's climate commitments were rather negative. Following a high-profile showdown, US

9. K. Tu, "Future Prospects of China's Policy on Climate Change", *China Brief*, Vol. 9, No. 1, 2009, available at: jamestown.org.

officials tended to criticize China's allegedly unconstructive role at COP15. For example, US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton wrote in her memoir that the purpose of China at Copenhagen was to isolate the US by bringing together countries like India, Brazil and South Africa on its side, while President Obama hinted that China was to blame for the lack of a substantial deal.[10]

Given the necessity of balancing economic growth with portraying itself as a responsible power, as well as an increasingly clear understanding among Chinese decision-makers and scientists of climate change's adverse impacts, Beijing bided its time in developing an increasingly proactive and comprehensive energy and climate policy. By joining the Paris Agreement in 2015, China helped President Obama leave a legacy on climate policy, in exchange for less contentious bilateral relations. Meanwhile, external climate-related pressure imposed by the international community, especially the US, has been wisely turned by Beijing into a positive driving force to build the world's largest clean energy market.

Even before President Trump announced his intention to withdraw the US from the Paris Agreement in June 2017, China sensed that the Trump administration had little appetite for working together on climate issues. With both the US and EU in mind, Chinese President Xi Jinping announced during his video address to the United Nations General Assembly in September 2020 that China aimed to peak national carbon emissions before 2030 and achieve carbon neutrality before 2060. In other words, China drastically and unilaterally upgraded its long-term climate ambitions without asking America or the EU for anything in return. In doing so, it threw its weight firmly behind the policies that the EU has embraced, thus preventing drastic deterioration in Sino-EU relations while putting the US in an awkward position in international climate politics.[11]

As US-China tensions have continued into the presidency of Joseph Biden, climate change has become a rare area for bilateral collaboration. However, despite the official return of the US to climate diplomacy with its rejoining of the Paris Agreement, sustained bilateral tensions make the prospects of climate cooperation rather uncertain.

To fend off rising domestic concern that climate diplomacy with China would be transaction-oriented and detrimental to other foreign policy

10. G. Xiaosheng, "China's Evolving Image in International Climate Negotiation: From Copenhagen to Paris", *China Quarterly of International Strategic Studies*, Vol. 4, No. 2, 2018, pp. 213–239.
11. K. Tu, "China's Global Climate Boost", *Project Syndicate*, November 26, 2020, available at: www.project-syndicate.org.

goals, before the inception of the Biden presidency, the US Special Presidential Envoy for Climate John Kerry said unequivocally in January 2021 that climate would be a "critical, standalone issue" that would never lead to a weaker China policy.[12] His remarks immediately sparked a negative response from the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs spokesperson Zhao Lijian, who stressed that "China-US cooperation in specific areas, unlike flowers that can bloom in a greenhouse despite winter chill, is closely linked with bilateral relations as a whole".[13]

When President Biden invited Chinese President Xi Jinping to attend the Leaders Climate Summit in April 2021, Beijing did not confirm Xi's attendance until after Kerry had accepted an invitation to meet his counterpart Xie Zhenhua in Shanghai. During the trip, Kerry also met with Chinese Vice-Premier and Politburo Standing Committee member Han Zheng via video link. Following Kerry's trip, a joint statement was issued in which both countries agreed to cooperate with each other and with other countries to tackle the climate crisis.

At the Leaders Climate Summit, President Xi reaffirmed China's commitments to climate action, highlighting that China's comprehensive decarbonization efforts would engage all sectors and stakeholders. The most noteworthy part of his speech was an explicit reference to a coal "phase-down" for the first time, stating that China would "strictly limit" coal power projects and coal consumption during the 14th Five-year Plan (FYP) period between 2021 and 2025, and "phase it down" gradually in the 15th FYP period between 2026 and 2030.[14]

However, similar to what happened during the Trump era, as US-China relations remained tense, President Xi unilaterally made another major climate commitment during his video address to the United Nations General Assembly in September 2021: that China would not build any new coal-fired power plants abroad and would step up its support for developing green and low-carbon energy in developing countries. China-supported development of coal-fired power overseas has already slowed down in the past five years, thanks to the decreasing competitiveness of coal power compared to renewables, and a declining appetite among host

12. A. Ward, "John Kerry Promises US Climate Change Diplomacy won't Lead to Weaker China Policy", *Vox*, January 27, 2021, available at: www.vox.com (accessed on 2 December, 2021).
13. "Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Zhao Lijian's Regular Press Conference on January 28, 2021", Embassy of the People's Republic of China in the Arab Republic of Egypt, January 28, 2021, available at: eg.china-embassy.org (accessed on December 2, 2021).
14. "Remarks by Chinese President Xi Jinping at Leaders Summit on Climate", *Qiushi*, April 23, 2021, available at: en.qstheory.cn (accessed on December 3, 2021).

countries. Even so, this announcement was widely perceived as a major climate win ahead of COP26 in Glasgow. Despite another major climate pledge without any teaming with either the Biden administration or the EU, China was still under tremendous international pressure to further step up its climate ambition, mainly in setting a firm date by 2025 for peaking its national greenhouse-gas emissions, when COP26 was kicked off in Glasgow on October 31, 2021.

In a surprise announcement at COP26 on November 10, 2021, China and the US agreed to boost climate cooperation over the next decade, stating that both sides would "recall their firm commitment to work together" to achieve the 1.5°C temperature goal set out in the 2015 Paris Agreement. They called for stepped-up efforts to close the "significant gap" to achieve that target. Their unexpected declaration featured a list of very specific issues including regulatory frameworks and environmental standards, decarbonization and electrification of end-use sectors, carbon capture, utilization and storage (CCUS), methane emissions control and grid integration of variable renewables, paving the foundation needed to conclude the Glasgow Climate Pact reached three days later.

Nevertheless, as the devil is often in deeds instead of words, the international community should watch closely whether it proves to be politically correct on the Chinese side to encourage implementation of the aforementioned technical cooperation clauses signed with America in Glasgow, and whether it proves to be politically plausible on the US side to secure government funding in support of meaningful US-China climate collaboration, if any, in the years to come.

Prospects of China-US climate diplomacy

As the world's largest energy consumer and producer, the Chinese energy economy is full of contradictions. On the one hand, China's heavy reliance on carbon-intensive and pollution-prone coal makes it the world's undisputed leading carbon-emitting economy. Consequently, it is easy to describe the gigantic Chinese energy economy in an eye-catching way; for example, to point out that China alone burns more than half of global coal. Nevertheless, dirty coal, rising carbon emissions and filthy air are far from giving the entire picture of the Chinese energy economy. As the largest clean energy market in the world, China has so far installed more than one third of global solar and wind capacities, and deployed near half of the world's electric vehicle stock.[15]

15. K. Tu, "Prospects of a Hydrogen Economy with Chinese Characteristics", *Études de l'Ifri*, Ifri, October 2020.

In the absence of major geopolitical disruptions, China is expected to develop an increasingly proactive and comprehensive energy and climate policy. Nevertheless, whether the actual pace of China's clean energy transition is compatible with the Paris Agreement goals will depend not only on the country's willingness to move away from an energy-intensive and investment-oriented growth model, but also the external environment China may face in the coming decades.

Granted, China's climate pledges were first announced as an ambition, not a legislated policy. However, given China's unique one-party political system, not only will key Chinese stakeholders quickly follow suit; future administrations are also expected to take President Xi's pledges seriously. For instance, after September 2021, state-owned Chinese banks and construction companies promptly decided not to be involved in any greenfield coal-fired power projects abroad. Meanwhile, many local Chinese governments even over-reacted to the dual carbon targets by initiating campaign-style carbon reduction actions, and the State Council of China was forced to issue orders to suppress such practices to avoid disrupting China's vulnerable economic recovery.

As an ascending major nation that has not yet achieved the status of a fully advanced economy, China is arguably the modern era's first "hybrid" superpower, and President Xi's two-phase climate pledge reflects how the Chinese themselves see their hybrid status.

The country's climate ambitions of peaking national carbon emissions by 2030 reflect the persistence of its people's developing-country mentality. After all, many Chinese, and especially the current leadership, still vividly remember growing up in a poor, backward country. But, with China expected to become a high-income country by 2030, that mindset is giving way to a "rising superpower" mentality among younger generations, which helps to explain why China aims to become carbon-neutral just ten years after the US and the EU.

From the perspective of Beijing, the scale of the 2060 carbon-neutral goal cannot be understated. China now aims to eliminate some ten billion tons of annual CO_2 emissions from 2030 onward, equivalent to decarbonizing the entire French economy every year for 30 years. Sooner or later, China will have little choice but to double down on its climate mitigation efforts in all sectors, particularly energy, industry, transport and building. Coupled with President Xi's announcement of stopping overseas coal-fired-power investment, Beijing considers that it has already made a reasonable contribution to the global climate agenda, and thus is increasingly

frustrated by the consistent voice from Western countries and media that China still needs to do more to address the climate crisis. Nevertheless, China's climate ambition could be further stretched if Beijing's rising anxiety over security could be calmed by a less hostile external environment, and especially more benign China-US relations.

Currently, Chinese experts hold a deep suspicion that a future US administration might walk away again from the Paris Agreement. Coupled with diminishing mutual trust, China's intention to work with the Biden administration on climate change is primarily motivated by its desire to add a bumper to prevent the free fall of bilateral relations. Making the situation even more subtle, China shows no interest in pressing the US to close its noticeable gap between words and deeds. Meanwhile, as the US is not considered by China as a climate role model, Beijing is unlikely to be easily swung by America to further upgrade its climate ambition. In the absence of noticeable improvement in bilateral relations, China-US climate diplomacy may not necessarily lead to substantial progress in global clean energy transition. By comparison, given the EU's rather consistent track record on global climate leadership, if the EU keeps distancing itself from the America-centered anti-China alliance (if any) in the future, the bloc would possess much greater potential to engage China to further upgrade the latter's climate ambition.

To hedge against the worst-case scenario that toxic China-US relations will prevent any meaningful bilateral cooperation, Beijing has drastically upgraded the political priority of "security", including energy security. Against the backdrop of a widespread power crunch across 20 Chinese provinces in September 2021, rising anxiety over energy security has been translated into a blessing for both renewables and for domestically abundant but carbon-intensive coal, as evidenced by the Central Economic Work Conference's statement in December 2021 that China's energy revolution should be based on the country's coal-reliant national circumstances. In other words, the trajectory of China's national coal consumption during the 14th FYP period is expected to edge higher than would otherwise be the case.

* * *

Chinese analysts have largely agreed with former US Secretary of State Henry Kissinger's claim that China-US relations will never return to what they once were, and some even accept that the two countries are already engaged in a new type of cold war. Nevertheless, Beijing has opted to

continuously engage the Biden administration and hopes that climate collaboration may serve as a bumper to prevent the free fall of bilateral relations. Given the looming danger of the climate crisis and the necessity of engaging China in any global climate solutions, Washington should resist the worst instincts among its China hawks who want to wage all-out war to contain Beijing.

In particular, Washington must immediately stop the incremental encroachment on the One China policy concerning Taiwan, as such strategically dangerous provocations may be unexpectedly escalated into a nightmare that neither the US nor China could afford to cope with. Instead, Washington should encourage both sides of the Taiwan Strait to preserve the status quo of peace and stability by restoring the ambiguity of its China policy.

Since December 2019, major nations of the world have failed to put aside their prejudices and unite to resolve the challenges posed by the Covid-19 pandemic. To fulfill its pledge of restoring America's respected leadership on the world stage, the Biden administration should seriously consider cooperating with other major economies, especially the EU and China, to jointly fight against coronavirus. Otherwise, it is difficult to build back mutual trust with other nations to effectively address any global common challenges, including climate crisis.

Although a degree of supply-chain decoupling between the US and China seems to be inevitable, Washington should avoid imposing additional sanctions and tariffs against Chinese clean energy products, especially solar panels and wind turbines. If meaningful US-China climate collaboration indeed deserves to be nurtured during the remaining period of the Biden presidency, Washington should show its sincerity by resolving bilateral trade disputes related to clean energy products through negotiations instead of confrontation.

As the Chinese saying goes, one hand clapping makes no sound. In other words, blaming Washington alone is unlikely to reset China-US relations in a mutually acceptable direction. If Beijing could instead seriously examine through the lens of other countries, especially America, its own disruptive foreign policy and ideological gestures since 2013, it would benefit China's understanding of how to alleviate rising anxiety in certain parts of the world over its rapid political, ideological and economic ascendance. Amid worsening attitudes towards China worldwide, the issue of climate change also represents a rare opportunity for "win-win" international collaboration.

In the era of digitalization and artificial intelligence, Beijing should resist the temptation of the "authority controls all" mentality embedded deeply in traditional Chinese culture. Without sufficient room left to civil society, an innovation-driven economic transformation in support of China's clean energy transition is unlikely to unfold any time soon. In particular, to promote meaningful international cooperation on climate change, China should seriously consider relaxing its overly stringent restrictions imposed on the ENGO community in recent years. Otherwise, it is difficult to envision how China's climate actions could be fully recognized and appreciated by other countries. Above all, state-sponsored propaganda is often perceived with deep suspicion, especially in the West; in this regard, an appropriately regulated and thriving ENGO community is much better positioned to bridge the perception gap between China and the international community.

Finally, it is in the interests of the rest of the world, and especially the EU, to urge the two most carbon-emitting nations to cooperate instead of undermining each other on climate issues. Otherwise, the planet cannot hope to meet the Paris Agreement goals.

Key Words
US/China relationship
Climate change
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