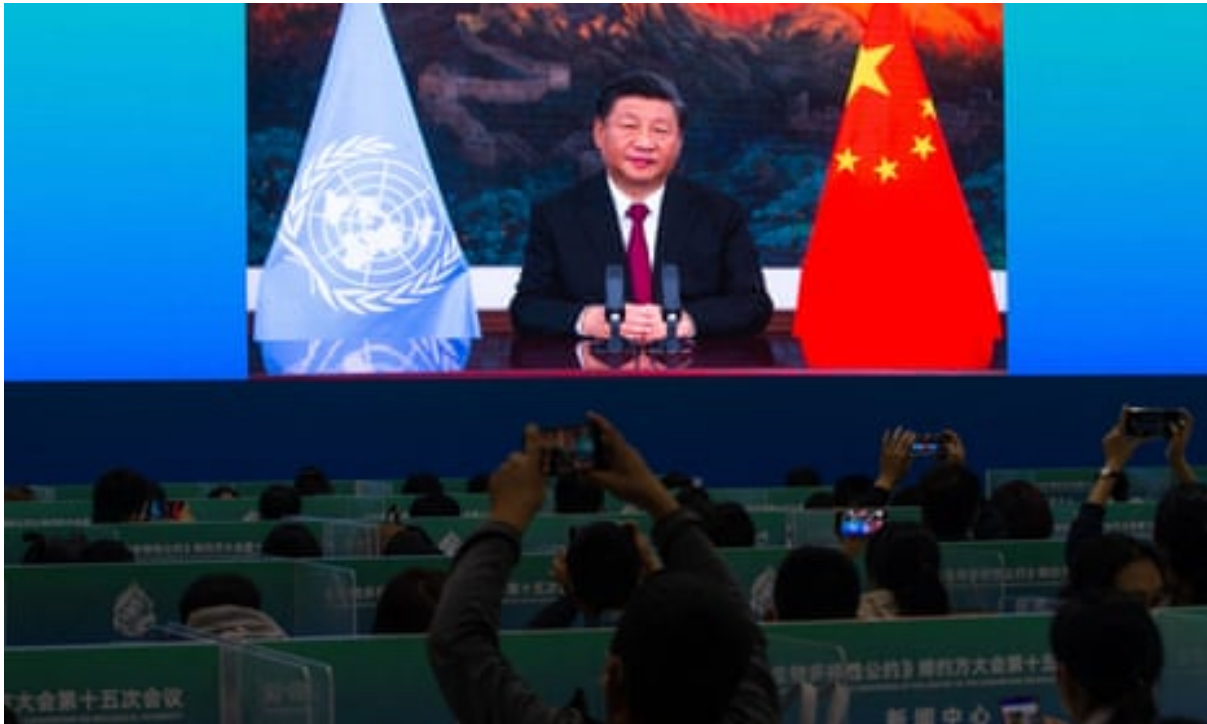


Cop15: ‘World leaders might have to invite themselves’ to summit

In its role as president, China has sent invitations only to ministers and NGO heads, raising fears it is downplaying the crucial talks



President Xi Jinping speaks at the Cop15 media centre in Kunming in October 2021. The UN biodiversity conference has been moved to Montreal after Covid-related delays. Photograph: AFP/Getty Images

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China has not invited world leaders to a major nature summit being held this year, raising concerns Beijing is downplaying the crucial Cop15 meeting in order not to embarrass **Xi Jinping**.

In December, governments will finalise a UN agreement to halt the destruction of the natural world at a summit organised by China but hosted in Canada. Because of Beijing’s zero-Covid policy and after several delays, Cop15 was **moved to Montreal**, the seat of the UN convention on biological diversity. It was meant to take place in Kunming, Yunnan province, in 2020.

The move has meant that China and **Canada**, who have a tense diplomatic relationship, must work together to organise the conference with the UN. In late September, the Chinese government sent out invitations to Cop15 in its role as president of the meeting, but addressed them only to ministers and NGO heads.

This raises the prospect of no world leaders attending the talks, where **targets on biodiversity for the next decade** will be created.

Xi, the Chinese president, is not expected to be at the summit and there are fears that organisers are trying to downplay the importance of Cop15 to avoid highlighting his lack of attendance. Several world leaders are understood to have privately expressed a desire to attend.

“The consequences of just sending invitations to ministers and not to the world leaders is that that the presidency has somehow decided to give to this Cop less relevance than it should have,” said Oscar Soria, campaign director of the activism site Avaaz. “China has denuded its global leadership. Leaders have to show to the world that the highest level of international politics care about ecological collapse.”

The Canadian prime minister, Justin Trudeau, who – alongside others including President Emmanuel Macron of France and Ursula von der Leyen, president of the European Commission – has been an active voice in highlighting the importance of achieving a Paris-style agreement for nature, may still invite presidents and prime ministers to a side event. However, such a move raises the prospect of a clash with China.

Although UN environment negotiations are largely technical, the presence of world leaders, campaigners and celebrities helps raise the profile of the final agreement. **About 90 heads of state** are expected to attend the climate Cop27 in Egypt next month, while the climate Cop26 in Glasgow was attended by Hollywood stars such as Leonardo DiCaprio, and the chief executives of multinational companies.

“World leaders might have to invite themselves if they want to go to Cop15,” one source told the Guardian.

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Elizabeth Maruma Mrema, executive secretary of the UN Convention on Biological Diversity, **told Climate Home News** that “pressure from many quarters was building on Canada and China to invite world leaders”.

Last week, informal discussions between 25 countries took place in Montreal as part of an effort to simplify the final draft text ahead of Cop15, which negotiators say is currently too long and complicated. Divisions over targets on money, protected areas, biological piracy and the implementation of the agreements remain the main sticking points.

Countries in the global north generally want to see ambitious targets in the final agreement, with many pushing to protect 30% of land and sea, but the global south, including many biodiversity hotspots, want more money and guarantees about the commercialisation of their resources.

At the UN general assembly last month, Germany announced it was doubling its financial contribution for nature and increasing international biodiversity funding to €1.5bn (£1.3bn) a year as part of its commitment to increase its climate finance to €6bn by the middle of this decade. Other rich nations are yet to announce more financial commitments.

In an effort to break the deadlock on funding, a new 10-point plan, led by the UK and endorsed by the EU, Colombia, Norway and Canada, was unveiled at a UN general assembly side event in New York last month. It commits rich countries to increasing funding for nature and dedicates a portion of climate finance for biodiversity. All signatories must also commit to reforming environmentally harmful subsidies.