



Smoke plumes billow from chimneys at a coal-fired power plant in Shanxi province, China. Photograph: Andy Wong/AP

## **China**

# China continues coal spree despite climate goals

**World's biggest carbon emitter approving equivalent of two new coal plants a week, analysis shows**

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China is approving new coal power projects at the equivalent of two plants every week, a rate energy watchdogs say is unsustainable if the country hopes to achieve its energy targets.

The government has pledged to peak emissions by 2030 and reach net zero by 2060, and in 2021 the president, Xi Jinping, pledged to stop building coal powered plants.

But after regional power crunches in 2022, China started a spree of approving new projects and restarting suspended ones. In 2022 the government approved

a record-breaking 86 gigawatts (GW) of new coal-fired power capacity. One gigawatt is the equivalent of a large coal power plant.

**This run of approvals is continuing**, potentially on track to break last year's record, **according to analysis** by the Global Energy Monitor (GEM) and the Centre for Research on Energy and Clean Air, published on Tuesday.

It said in the first half of 2023, authorities granted approvals for 52GW of new coal power, began construction on 37GW of new coal power, announced 41GW-worth of new projects, and revived 8GW of previously shelved projects. It said about half of the plants permitted in 2022 had started construction by summer.

The analysts said: “Unless permitting is stopped immediately, China won't be able to reduce coal-fired power capacity during the 15th five-year plan (2026–30) without subsequent cancellations of already permitted projects or massive early retirement of existing plants.”

Analysts have observed **big advances in the renewable energy sector** in China, which the government intends to make a mainstay of power supply, with coal in a supporting role.

China is the world's largest producer of renewable energy, including wind, solar and hydroelectricity. But previous analyses have found **infrastructure to store and distribute has not kept pace**.

Shortfalls in interconnectivity between regional grids, and issues with power supply for some areas mean energy driven by fossil fuels remains crucial in some areas for supporting grid stability or integrating variable renewable energy sources. However, the report says many or most of the approvals being rushed through are not in areas with those issues.

“Sixty per cent of new coal power projects are in grid regions where there is already an excess of coal-fired power capacity,” the report says. “The provinces adding large amounts of new coal-fired power are getting most of their added power generation from coal, contradicting the framing of coal power as a ‘supporting’ source for clean energy.”

Cory Combs, an analyst at Trivium China, said authorities appeared to be prioritising uninterrupted demand and short-term economic recovery.

“There is more development than there is need for development,” he said. “When we look at it from an energy security perspective, [provincial level governments] they are putting an extremely high premium on short-term energy security. I don’t mean systemic issues, [I mean] even making sure there’s not even a two-hour power shortage. That’s taken over everything else, including the financials, but certainly decarbonisation.”

China is the **world’s biggest carbon emitter**, contributing almost a third of the world’s greenhouse gases in 2020. UN figures show that in terms of population size and number of environmental disasters, it is also extremely vulnerable to the impacts of the climate crisis. In its 14th five-year-plan, which ends in 2025, China’s government committed to reducing the latter by 65%, and raised the share of renewable fuels in primary energy consumption from 20% to 25%.

Analysts have pointed to the power of the Chinese government to demand big change – another report out this week shows that Beijing’s “war on pollution” has had a significant impact, driving a decrease in global average pollution.

While China’s air pollution is still six times higher than World Health Organization guidelines, it has reduced toxic air by 42.3% since 2013, which is forecast to result in an extra 2.2 years on the average life expectancy of a Chinese resident if the results are sustained.

Combs said he was “really concerned” about the long-term impacts of the coal plant approvals apparently being made for short-term gain. Xi has promised to reduce coal consumption by the 2026-30 period, and Combs said China’s leadership was still standing by its targets, but this activity would put huge pressure on the later years of the window.

“Xi’s credibility is largely tied to the 2030 goal. But some of the year-to-year thing I don’t take much stock in. They are overridden by other interests.”

*Additional research by Tau Yang*