

China releases methane plan as hopes rise for new climate agreement with US

Two countries may soon break ground on a new climate agreement ahead of a presidential meeting next week and the UN's climate conference, Cop28

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- China's methane reduction plan avoids making numerical targets, while the US and 150 other countries has committed to cutting methane emissions by 30% by 2030 Photograph: David Goldman/AP

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China has published a long-awaited methane reduction plan, in a sign that the country is moving closer towards a new climate agreement with the US.

Beijing first committed to reducing its methane output at Cop26 in Glasgow in 2021, as part of a joint agreement with the US. But for two years the reduction plan failed to materialise. Its publication on Tuesday, as the US and Chinese climate envoys wrapped up four days of talks in Sunnylands, California, signalled that the two countries may soon break ground on a new climate

agreement ahead of a presidential meeting next week and the UN's climate conference, COP28, at the end of this month.

Even the location of the meeting between Xie Zhenhua and John Kerry this week was viewed by some as auspicious. The luxurious estate is where Xi Jinping, China's leader, had his first presidential meeting with Barack Obama, in 2013.



China continues coal spree despite climate goals

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Xi and Joe Biden, the US president, are expected to meet at the Apec summit in San Francisco next week, with the Xie-Kerry meeting laying the groundwork for a potential climate agreement.

The Xi-Obama meeting led to a historic US-China **climate agreement** in 2014, in which China pledged to peak CO₂ emissions by 2030 (a target that it is expected to meet ahead of time). That in turn established the foundation for the Paris Agreement the following year, in which 196 countries agreed to limit the increase in the global average temperature to below 2C, compared with pre-industrial levels.



US Special Presidential Envoy for Climate John Kerry, centre, and Xie Zhenhua, China's special envoy for climate, right, attend a session on the Global Methane Pledge at the COP27 UN Climate Summit in 2022 Photograph: Nariman El-Mofty/AP

Now insiders are cautiously optimistic that a new US-China climate agreement could be on the horizon. It is a “golden opportunity”, said Li Shuo, the incoming director of the China Climate Hub at the Asia Policy Institute, adding that elections in the US and in Taiwan could distract both sides from climate discussions in 2024.

Both the US and China want to show that there are “some guardrails in the US-China relationship, with climate being one of the bright spots,” said Byford Tsang, senior policy adviser at E3G, a climate change thinktank.

At Cop26 in Glasgow, China and the US agreed to establish a working group on climate action. That plan was put on ice after **Nancy Pelosi's visit to Taiwan**, but recent US-China meetings appear to have put negotiations back on track. When Kerry visited Beijing in July, he described the meetings as “extremely warm and productive”.

Still, there are likely to be major sticking points in reaching any agreement, especially when it comes to specific commitments.

The methane reduction plan, for example, avoids making numerical targets. “China is very cautious in making international pledges,” said Tsang. Beijing “doesn't like when its hands are constrained on the international stage.”

The US, along with over 150 other countries, has committed to cutting methane emissions by 30% by 2030, but China has so far not joined any such pledge. “Methane is not a technical issue, it’s a political issue,” said Li, adding that progress on a plan reflected the state of US-China relations.

Another increasingly contentious point, the curbing of fossil fuel emissions, primarily through phasing out coal. China is the world’s biggest producer of greenhouse gases, nearly 90% of which comes from the energy sector. Over 60% of power generation comes from coal.

Phasing out coal is an essential part of China’s net zero by 2060 goal, but since power cuts and blackouts closed factories across China in 2021, the government has focused on energy security and coal phaseout is increasingly sensitive. Campaigners say the topic has become hard to discuss.

According to experts, China’s energy security problems could be solved by improvements to the country’s grid and reforms to the domestic energy market, rather than burning more coal.

Local governments in China approved 50.4 GW of new coal power in the first six months of this year, meaning that China is on track to approve a similar amount of coal to 2022, which was a record high since 2015.

That is despite the fact that in **a speech** in January last year, Xi called on China to gradually “reduce traditional energy sources while promoting reliable substitution of new [renewable] energy sources”, a slight departure from his previous emphasis on building new renewable capacity before dismantling coal infrastructure. But local incentives still support the permitting of new coal power plants, even if they don’t contribute to China’s energy needs.

Kerry and Xie are publicly at odds on the coal issue, with the US climate envoy calling for the issue to be the focus of COP28 negotiations, while his Chinese counterpart has said that phasing out fossil fuels completely is “unrealistic”. Still, analysts are hopeful there will soon be some kind of agreement, at least in principle, on new climate goals. With a presidential meeting on the horizon, both sides are aware that now may be the only moment in the next 12 months to break new ground.