

THE NEW ERA OF EXECUTIVE ACTION

REDUCING GLOBAL CARBON EMISSIONS THROUGH JOINT AGREEMENTS

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Background

Climate change is a challenge that will affect the politics and economics of the twenty-first century in profound ways. It is necessary for the United States, the world's largest per capita emitter of carbon emissions, to transition to low- and zero-carbon energy infrastructure. But it is just as important for the developing world, particularly India and China (the latter being the world's largest emitter absolute terms), to be successful in balancing economic growth with climate and environmental concerns.

The main multilateral process for global action against climate change is the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC). The initial treaty mandating emissions cuts by the developed world, the 1997 Kyoto Protocol, floundered, as the United States refused to ratify the treaty, citing the exclusion of developing world countries such as India and China. In 2009, the international community tried again in Copenhagen, but again an agreement could not be reached owing to disagreements between developed and developing world countries on legally binding emissions cuts.

Given this international context, and the Obama administration's desire nevertheless to come to achieve a robust international agreement that has every nation committing to at least some kind of action to fight climate change, the president has tried to build bilateral cooperation with major nations. The culmination of these efforts will serve as an adjunct to the UNFCCC, which will convene in Paris in 2015 to build a final agreement.

Action

During a November 11, 2014, summit between President Barack Obama and President Xi Jinping of China, the two leaders made the U.S.-China Joint Announcement on Climate Change and Clean Energy Cooperation.

This brief is part of The Century Foundation initiative, The New Era of Executive Action, which is available online at <https://tcf.org/atavist.com/executive-action>.

What It Does

The U.S.-China Joint Announcement attempts to advance momentum before the UNFCCC convening in Paris by bringing together pledges from the United States and China to take action on several climate change and clean energy priorities, both individually and on a bilateral basis. The president used the authority of his office, with the inherent power to enter into executive agreements with other nations that are not subject to the advice and consent of the U.S. Senate, to make the agreement, which is not a formal treaty and is not legally binding.

The announcement contains two main components. The first is a series of reciprocal pledges made by both the United States and China; the second is joint cooperation on specific projects to expand cooperation between the two countries. For the United States, it promises to reduce emissions 26–28 percent from 2005 levels by 2025. For China, it promises to “peak” its CO₂ emissions by 2030 and double the amount of non-fossil fuel electricity generation to 20 percent by the same year.

Additionally, the United States and China are committed to broadening the cooperation on clean energy that has been fostered already during much of the Obama administration’s tenure.

Status

Many of the projects related to the U.S.-China Joint Announcement are ongoing, and others, such as the plans for emissions reductions (for the United States) and a peak emissions year (China), will be formalized as part of each nation’s Intended Nationally Determined Contribution (INDC). These INDCs were due to be submitted to the UNFCCC during the spring of 2015 and will be bound together into an ambitious agreement at the Paris meeting.

The specific clean energy cooperation programs include:

- Extending the U.S.-China Clean Energy Research Center (CERC) mandate for five years (2016–2020), with renewed funding for efficient buildings, clean vehicles, and advanced coal technologies, as well as a new project on the important relationship between energy generation and water usage.
- Starting a major carbon capture and storage project in China, with a mix of funding from China, the United States, and the private sector.
- Renewing momentum from a previous U.S.-China agreement to phase down the production of hydrofluorocarbons, a potent greenhouse gas.

- Establishing a Climate-Smart/Low-Carbon Cities initiative under the U.S.-China Climate Change Working Group to expand on planning, policies, and use of technologies for sustainable, resilient, low-carbon growth, beginning with a summit meeting where representatives of cities from both countries can come together to share strategies.
- Planning a series of trade missions to discuss sustainable urbanization and technology transfer opportunities.
- Expanding bilateral cooperation on “smart grids” that work seamlessly with a variety of renewable energy sources.

Impact

While much of the specific target-dates are far into the future, the agreement is arguably having an impact now. China and the United States have been deploying more renewable energy year-on-year, and that trend is likely to continue, thanks to many of the provisions of this deal. The agreement has also raised optimism that Paris will be a success now that the United States and China are taking such a prominent leadership role. India—which, like China, had been reluctant to commit itself to specific actions to fight climate change—is now also sounding more cooperative.

Response

- *Grist's* Ben Adler called the agreement a “game-changer” and cited its potential to galvanize action around Paris by other countries. He defends the agreement against criticisms that say it lets China off the hook by not asking for emissions cuts sooner, acknowledging that the United States carries a burden of historic contribution to climate change and that the Chinese should have more leeway to prioritize economic growth.
- Simon Hansen, writing in *The Guardian*, says the climate agreement reverses a lot of the negative momentum that had come out of the 2009 Copenhagen negotiations. Hansen cited Chinese recognition that its pollution problem was a political liability domestically.
- *Washington Post's* Robert Samuelson was more skeptical of the agreement, saying that the specific targets under consideration were too ambitious to be realized in the offered time frame. He also emphasized that the agreement was non-binding and entirely voluntary—a future administration in either the United States or China could back out of the agreement without penalty.