

# U.S. and China Discuss Enhancing Beijing's Climate Commitments

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Photo: U.S. Embassy in Seoul/Agence France-Presse/Getty Images



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The U.S. and China, the world's two biggest emitters of greenhouse gases, said they would work together to set more ambitious goals to tackle climate change, a rare statement of agreement at a time of heightened bilateral tensions.

John Kerry, the Biden administration's special envoy on climate change, said Sunday that his meetings with his counterparts in Shanghai were productive, adding that the two sides discussed the possibility of China "enhancing" the commitments that leader Xi Jinping made last September, to [reach peak carbon emissions](#) before 2030 and to achieve carbon neutrality—net-zero carbon-dioxide emissions—by 2060.

"This is the first time China has joined in saying it's a crisis," Mr. Kerry told reporters in Seoul, a day after wrapping up a four-day China tour to meet with climate officials. Mr. Kerry said that the Chinese delegation underscored that the climate issue must "be addressed with urgency. And they talked about 'enhancing.' So the language is strong."

The joint statement also said the U.S. and China would cooperate to provide investment and financing for developing countries to shift their economies toward lower emissions.

### John Kerry Says Climate Is a Free-Standing Issue Ahead of China Trip

U.S. special climate envoy John Kerry tells WSJ's Timothy Puko that the issue of climate is "not for trade" against other critical differences the U.S. currently has with China.

China's Ministry of Ecology and Environment said in a separate post Sunday on its official [WeChat](#) account that "China and the United States will strengthen cooperation and work together with other parties to address the climate crisis."

During his time in Shanghai, Mr. Kerry, the first senior Biden administration official to visit China, met face-to-face with counterpart Xie Zhenhua and talked to Vice Premier Han Zheng by video link, state news agency Xinhua reported. "We talked a lot about coal," Mr. Kerry said.

Mr. Kerry's Asia trip comes before President Biden hosts [a virtual climate summit](#) to mark Earth Day, having invited the leaders of 40 countries to join the April 22-23 event.

Mr. Xi hasn't formally confirmed his attendance, but people familiar with the matter said he would participate. Sunday's joint U.S.-China statement said only that both countries "look forward" to the summit.

'It is an encouraging step towards cooperation amid great geopolitical challenges.'

— Zou Ji, a former Paris climate agreement negotiator for China

If China makes a more robust pledge on climate, it may choose to do so before Mr. Biden's summit this week. Beginning Sunday, Chinese leaders will host their own international meeting, the Bo'ao Forum for Asia, on the southern island of Hainan.

Thom Woodroffe, an analyst at the New York-based Asia Society Policy Institute and a former diplomatic adviser on climate, called Bo'ao "the perfect forum" for China to make any new pledges at its own venue, rather than at one staged by the White House.

Another option would be for Messrs. Biden and Xi to issue a bilateral joint statement at the White House summit, depending on how closed-door negotiations go, says Zou Ji, a Paris Agreement negotiator for China and the current president of Beijing-based nonprofit Energy Foundation China. “It’s key to have some guarantee of stability in the bilateral relations and to keep too much of the geopolitical noise out of the climate track,” Mr. Zou said.

The international talks around coal and climate are part of a flurry of diplomacy ahead of the White House Earth Day summit. In addition to Mr. Kerry’s visit to China and South Korea, and the Bo’ao Forum, Japanese Prime Minister Yoshihide Suga just wrapped up a visit to Washington, where climate was discussed.

Mr. Kerry’s visit took place amid heightened tensions between the two countries and bilateral frictions over trade, technology and human rights. But the Biden administration has also said it wants to carve out space for cooperation with Beijing on climate change, nuclear proliferation and the global pandemic response.

With so many factors at play, people familiar with the talks say that many of Beijing’s ultimate commitments were still being calibrated and could change.

But Mr. Woodroffe said Beijing could pull the target date for peak emissions further forward from the current target of “before 2030,” or establish an absolute cap on emissions. China could also announce a ban on public financing of fossil-fuel projects overseas or set a limit on coal-fired power plant capacity, he said.

## The U.S. Rejoins the Paris Climate Accord: What’s Next

World leaders welcomed President Biden’s move to rejoin the Paris climate accord. As the president reverses many of his predecessor’s climate policies, here’s what it means for the global race to meet ambitious emissions targets.

The end of overseas coal financing is almost certainly decided, according to a person familiar with policy discussions in China. In recent months, Beijing has signaled an increased [willingness to tackle climate issues](#), with China’s main economic planning agency, the National Development and Reform Commission, now drafting a climate road map, according to people familiar with the process.

Mr. Xi also appeared to point to new commitments during a video summit on Friday with German Chancellor Angela Merkel and summit host French President Emmanuel Macron. The summit was announced just a day earlier as Mr. Kerry was sitting down for his first full day of meetings in Shanghai.

The presidential office in Paris, citing high global expectations for China's action on climate, said after the summit that, "by ending the financing of coal-fired power plants, China will make a decisive contribution" to the goal of carbon neutrality. It added that Mr. Xi had said China's local governments would also set more ambitious targets for peak emissions.

Germany's statement, meanwhile, said the two European leaders supported China's attempt at "adjusting short-term targets"—a reference to additional, more-ambitious climate goals than Beijing's current 2030 target.

A Chinese readout published by Xinhua didn't mention short-term target adjustments, though it said China would ratify an international agreement to reduce hydrofluorocarbons—potent greenhouse gases that are used in air conditioners and refrigerators. It repeated the pledge in its Sunday statement with the U.S.

China's decision to announce an additional climate commitment following Mr. Macron's summit and only later reaffirming it in the U.S. statement shows how Beijing is trying to strike a balance between the U.S. and Europe while asserting its own independence, said Li Shuo, global policy adviser at Greenpeace.

"It is an encouraging step towards cooperation amid great geopolitical challenges," Mr. Zou, the former Paris negotiator, said of the U.S.-China negotiations and joint statement.