

GUEST ESSAY

Don't Be So Quick to Doubt China's Climate Change Dedication

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By Angel Hsu

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“Disappointing.” “A shadow on the global climate effort.”

Even before the global climate summit in Glasgow got underway last week, environmental advocates were quick to point fingers at China's seemingly lackluster “new” climate pledge as a harbinger of a doomed outcome for the event.

Since China is the world's largest emitter of greenhouse gases, some climate watchers had hoped Beijing would make a big splash with its updated targets to fight climate change — like providing an earlier-than-2030 peak emissions year or a hard cap on coal consumption. But the pledge only consolidated the elements of what President Xi Jinping announced in his landmark carbon-neutrality promise last year and immediately following.

This also came after — having closed thousands of coal mines and announcing an end to coal financing abroad — recent electricity shortages sent China's leadership backsliding into boosting coal production.

Reducing its reliance on coal has been a cornerstone of China's climate policies. So it's unsurprising that critics jumped to question China's climate credibility. (News that Mr. Xi would not attend the Glasgow talks in person did not help.)

There's no question we are in a climate crisis, and every country should be held to account. However, we must have a more considered approach when judging China's actions before crying foul.

The leadership in Beijing almost certainly knows that issuing top-level orders to reopen coal mines on the eve of the most significant climate summit since the 2015 Paris talks, is, to put it lightly, less than ideal. But what might come across as climate contradictions may actually be evidence of China's very real and ongoing commitment. They demonstrate the enormous challenges that a country so reliant on fossil fuels to power its economy faces in going green and Beijing's blueprint for moving forward.

Energy experts have likened shifting away from a fossil-fuel economy, as China has pledged to do by 2060, to turning a giant ship: It must overcome significant inertia before generating sufficient momentum in the other direction. And China's ship is still turning.

Since Beijing began in earnest to tackle its climate emissions just over a decade ago, it has slowly been weaning itself off coal — going from more than 70 percent of its total energy consumption in 2009 to around 57 percent in 2020.

This shift has created challenges of its own: unanticipated spikes in energy demand and shortfalls in renewable electricity production, leading to electricity shortages in more than half of China's provinces. In response, China's top leaders ordered ramped-up coal production — but that should not be taken as an indication that they are renegeing wholeheartedly on their climate commitments.

The energy crisis has highlighted how competing local priorities — like plans for economic development — have often taken precedence over climate and energy goals. Beijing's recent orders show it wants to fix that. You just have to read them closely.

Coal production increases appear to be an attempt by the leaders to facilitate a safe and just energy transition — without leaving their citizens out in the cold this winter — that aligns lower-level authorities with a top-level plan.

A thorough reading of China's State Council's six orders issued on Oct. 8 reveals that beyond the immediate coal production increase, the government cites the crisis as a reason to speed up its transition to a green economy to better weather spikes in energy demand and achieve energy security.

That effectively means accelerating away from coal. The orders urge doubling down on large-scale renewable energy investments and to "contain" the development of projects associated with both high energy consumption and high emissions.

(This response is in sharp contrast to Republican officials in Texas, who blamed renewable energy for the state's power outages when extreme winter storms caused widespread electricity blackouts this year.)

The immediate move will certainly increase China's carbon pollution and threaten global emission reduction goals. (Coal consumption will rise by 6 percent compared to last year. Even small percentages have enormous consequences for the global climate.) But it's clear Beijing is not simply abandoning the path toward carbon neutrality; it is paying a painful short-term price for the fact that so much of its electricity still comes from coal-fired sources.

One could read the recent flurry of directives itself as an indication of China's commitment to pulling its weight in the global effort to mitigate climate change. After decades of criticism for opacity in its climate data and statistics — from me and others — the fact that China's leadership is being forthright about its energy shortage and policy response is an important sign of transparency and progress.

This openness comes not through multilateral negotiations but from the conviction that stemming the warming of the planet and the fouling of the air is crucial to Chinese well-being.

I know this because I've studied Beijing's environmental and climate policy for nearly two decades, working closely with Chinese counterparts. I was at the 2009 Copenhagen climate talks when many blamed China for the failure to secure a legally binding deal.

Since then, I have witnessed China make significant efforts to rehabilitate its image from Copenhagen wrecker to a responsible player doing its part on climate change. While China's motivations are, of course, primarily driven by self-interest, the leadership wants, and deserves, recognition for its climate efforts so far — like developing clean energy technologies.

The latest developments, of course, mean that China's pledge to peak emissions before 2030 and achieve carbon neutrality by 2060 will be more challenging. But "challenging" is not the same as "impossible."

Beijing has met or has come close to meeting every major energy and environmental target it has set. (Though Beijing has been criticized for not setting sufficiently ambitious targets.) Data shows China is on a path to exceed its 2030 carbon intensity reduction goals, confirmed by independent, satellite analyses of China's air pollution reductions. And China has ratified and adopted its international commitments into law.

That's not to say that China has a perfect climate record. And while not unexpected — since Beijing historically hasn't been one to jump on bandwagons — China's failure to join more than 40 other countries last week in pledging to phase out domestic coal does not set a great example. (The U.S. and India also abstained.) Nor does it answer the persistent questions about when Beijing will eliminate coal.

In recent days, President Biden was among those expressing disappointment over China's lack of commitment to climate change. Saying "they walked away," he questioned how China could then "claim to have any leadership mantle."

In my experience, even Chinese climate negotiators hesitate to call their country a climate leader, always saying it is still learning. The recent struggles to decarbonize are evidence of that — not of the country's waning dedication to mitigating the climate crisis.

It's important to give the ship time to turn.

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