



WHAT DOES CHINA WANT FROM COP28?

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A review of China's trajectory of climate policies over the past three years is essential to understanding China's position at COP28. First, the dual carbon pledge made by President Xi Jinping in September 2020 marked a major milestone in China's climate policy. Subsequent developments, at both the domestic and international levels, demonstrated the dynamism of China's climate politics. These policies also highlight the challenges and opportunities Beijing faces in the lead-up to COP28. These developments also happen to be underappreciated, as they occurred when COVID-19 travel restrictions disrupted in-person exchanges.

DOMESTIC CLIMATE POLITICS

On September 22, 2020, President Xi Jinping spoke at the UN General Assembly (UNGA), announcing the so-called dual carbon targets – namely, China will peak CO₂ emissions before 2030 and achieve carbon neutrality before 2060. The 2030 peaking target represents a small step forward from China's previous commitment to peak emissions “around” 2030. The 2060 target is a more significant promise as it requires the world's largest emitter to slash its emissions to almost zero in less than four decades.

The dual carbon announcement generated immediate momentum in domestic and international climate politics. The pledge is worth noting for three reasons. First, it defied long-standing expectations. China

was still dealing with the early stage of the COVID-19 pandemic and the associated economic uncertainties at the time of the announcement. Many observers believed China would reserve such a move for a future U.S.-China grand bargain if a Democrat won the November 2020 U.S. presidential election. Second, China had been reluctant to sign up for long-term emissions control commitments. In 2015, it was one of the fiercest opponents to the Paris Agreement temperature control targets and long-term emissions control measures. Xi's announcement offered an about-face, putting China ahead of more industrialized countries in signing up for a long-term target and creating momentum among those countries to match China's pledge. China's East Asian neighbors, Japan and South Korea, scrambled to announce similar commitments only weeks after Xi's UNGA speech. Third, China has a track record of delivering on its climate targets, in particular the ones to which it commits internationally. Achieving the 2060 goal will require a huge transformation of the Chinese economy and society. The resolve for drastic emissions reduction caught many as a positive surprise.

What came next was a boom in action, setting a high-water mark for Beijing's ambition in recent years. In December 2020, President Xi doubled down on his dual carbon pledge by updating China's Nationally Determined Contribution (NDC). This includes a modest

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enhancement of all four headline targets and an additional target of installing more than 1200 GW of solar and wind projects by 2030. From late 2020 to the first half of 2021, the Chinese bureaucratic system was mobilized to deliver Xi's vision. Two critical actors were identified to enhance near-term action – provinces and key emitting industries such as electricity, steel, cement, and transportation. The absence of a meaningful contribution from provinces and industries has long hindered climate progress. As part of the dual carbon campaign, these actors were given a clear task – develop emissions-peaking plans for the central government's review. The expectation was explicit: peaking timelines would be included in these plans, and a race to the top dynamic could help many of these players peak ahead of the national timeline.

All these efforts were backed up and coordinated by a newly established Leading Small Group on Dual Carbon Targets, which had its first meeting in May 2021. Leading Small Group is a commonly used mechanism of the Chinese Communist Party to coordinate and decide on political matters. Dedicating one to the dual carbon targets elevates the climate agenda to one of the top priorities of the Chinese political system. It grants the issue regular high-level attention and gives the execution of emissions reduction policies a political boost.

Meanwhile, at the international level, conditions were largely conducive to China's domestic campaign. At the minimum, the U.S. election outcome, the prospect of climate engagement being an icebreaking issue between the United States and China under the Biden administration, and the milestone COP26 in Glasgow did not obstruct China's action.

However, headwinds started to gather

around mid-2021. After the March National People's Congress, the National Development and Reform Commission (NDRC), China's powerful economic ministry, took the leading role in executing the dual carbon program. The pace for action took a notable turn. Troubles in the real estate sector, an important driver of the economy, and power cuts across several provinces diverted political attention away from climate change. The anticipated provincial and sectorial peaking plans were either delayed or released with vague or weak timelines. This renders what could have been a valuable policy instrument mostly rhetoric. The subsequent "1+N" policy package, with one overarching guiding document and several sectorial plans, also lacked substantive targets. As the Chinese bureaucratic system struggled with a more challenging economic and diplomatic environment, these weakened plans indicated a de facto de-prioritization of the climate agenda from the top. The dual carbon momentum peaked in mid-2021 before China's actual emissions could peak.

The political U-turn was cemented in 2022 by the Russia-Ukraine crisis as well as China's zero COVID policy and the associated economic slowdown. The cutoff of Russian gas to Europe fueled Chinese anxiety over global energy market fluctuations. The zero COVID policy, in its most extreme forms in 2022, brought the country under regular mass testing and draconian lockdowns, leaving limited space for other social and economic agendas. Politically, these developments, together with China's weakened economic prospect and the increasing hostility between Beijing and the West, added to the desire for national security. In the field of energy policy, this sentiment propelled a major pivot to coal, a fuel China could safely supply domestically. Despite a saturated electricity market,

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poor investment return, and readily available alternatives to meet energy demands, coal plant approvals started to accelerate. Based on a [study](#) by the Centre for Research on Energy and Clean Air (CREA), 152 GW of coal power projects had been permitted in 2022. This means China is greenlighting coal projects at a much faster pace within the current five-year plan period (2021–2025) compared to the two previous five-year periods. As a result of increasing coal consumption, China's emissions until the end of the second quarter in 2023 have rebounded above the record levels seen in 2021.

On the positive side, China's wind, solar, and electric vehicle (EV) sectors also saw rapid growth over the past three years. According to a projection by the Global Energy Monitor (GEM), a whopping 750 GW of solar and wind projects are likely to be completed by 2025. Adding to the more than 500 GW of wind and solar capacity China already has, the country may well achieve its 2030 target of 1200 GW of wind and solar projects five years in advance. In 2023, close to one in three passenger vehicles sold in China has been electric. The growth of EV exports from China has reversed the country's long-standing auto sector trade deficit. While these developments will help China reduce its emissions and help the world bring down the cost of clean technologies, they are driven primarily by China's industrial policies, which are aimed at enhancing the competitiveness of Chinese companies in strategic sectors through favorable state-backed policies, less so as an outcome of the country's regulations to reduce emissions.

Finally, China is beginning to confront the imperative of climate impacts. In July 2021, China's central province Henan experienced heavy rainfall and floods, causing close to 400 deaths and the evacuation of 815,000 people. Some weather stations registered

daily precipitation normally only seen for the entire year. In August 2023, heavy rainfall struck Beijing and Hebei. Floods created major damages on roads, bridges, and other infrastructure in Beijing's western suburbs, bringing climate risks even closer to the center of Chinese politics. There is still a long way to go for the Chinese public and policy-makers to connect the dots between severe weather events and climate action. Recent climate impacts also have not led to any immediate policy changes. Still, increasing climate disasters have posed a new climate reality to the country. As traditional drivers of China's climate ambition run out of steam, adapting to climate impacts represents one of the rare areas where further domestic action will benefit China's own interest.

CHINA'S CLIMATE DIPLOMACY

Despite geopolitical tension, China's climate engagement with the world saw meaningful dialogues and demonstrable progress in 2021. Climate change served as an icebreaker between the United States and China during the first year of the Biden administration. Despite their contentious bilateral relationship and COVID-related travel challenges, U.S. climate envoy John Kerry traveled to China twice: first in April to Shanghai, which delivered the U.S.-China Joint Statement Addressing the Climate Crisis, and second in August to Tianjin, which paved the way for another joint declaration both countries later released at COP26 in Glasgow. China's President Xi Jinping also participated in the virtual Leaders Summit on Climate convened by U.S. President Joe Biden in April and indicated that China will join the Kigali Amendment to the Montreal Protocol, which calls for the phasedown of hydrofluorocarbons (HFCs), a group of powerful greenhouse gases, strengthen the control of non-CO₂ greenhouse gases, and

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strictly control coal power projects and coal consumption. In September, at the UNGA, Xi further announced that China, as the largest supporter of overseas coal power plants, will impose a moratorium on such projects. Additional progress was made at COP26, where countries managed to get China onboard with stronger language on the 1.5C temperature goal and with phasing down unabated coal power. Overall, 2021 was a fruitful year for China's contribution to global climate action. Higher ambition was possible when the right conditions aligned. International engagement reinforced China's domestic developments and played a catalyzing role in furthering China's ambition.

Progress was stalled in 2022 as geopolitics got in the way. In the first half of the year, the effort to implement the joint U.S.-China declaration made in Glasgow, including the establishment of a joint working group, saw little progress. U.S. House Speaker Nancy Pelosi's Taiwan visit in August brought further disruption. As part of the retaliatory measures, Beijing suspended bilateral climate talks with the United States. Chinese officials also strengthened their rejection of separating the climate agenda from the broader bilateral relationship. Starting from late 2021, official documents also began to use the word "struggle" ("斗争") for the first time when referring to international climate engagement and putting it ahead of "cooperation" ("合作"). This indicates a notable hardening of the Chinese view when it relates to global climate politics. The presidential summit between Biden and Xi on the sidelines of the G20 Bali conference brought some relief. Based on what the two leaders agreed, U.S. climate envoy John Kerry and his Chinese counterpart Xie Zhenhua were able to talk at COP27. Unlike COP26 though, the two sides did not reach a joint statement

after intensive consultations throughout the course of the COP meeting.

This year, 2023, saw a détente in China's climate engagement with the West, but the geopoliticization of climate change carried a long-lasting impact. In-person exchanges were able to resume as China reopened its border. A series of Beijing visits took place by climate envoys and senior representatives from European countries, the COP28 host the United Arab Emirate (UAE), a few developing countries, and the heads of international organizations. In July, John Kerry made his long-awaited trip to Beijing. The visit featured substantive discussions with Xie Zhenhua. Kerry also conducted high-level dialogues with Chinese Premier Li Qiang, Vice President Han Zheng, and top diplomat Wang Yi. All these visits played a helpful role in restarting dialogues after China's COVID isolation and the U.S.-China climate talks suspension. But they are a far cry from the productive year of 2021. Timed carefully during Kerry's trip, President Xi in a public speech declared unequivocally that China would decide its climate discourse on its own terms and would not be pressed by others. China's representatives in global climate talks also took a combative approach. China was accused of employing "wrecking tactics" at preparatory talks in the lead-up to the G20 leaders summit. This reflects the hardening of China's climate diplomacy and the alignment between its climate strategy and the country's broader foreign policy agenda. The key question now is whether on-going U.S.-China climate talks and COP28 help trigger stronger Chinese desire for cooperation or represent a new step toward the deepening of geopolitics-induced frictions.

Another recent development is that trade tensions are starting to shape China's

The trade-climate connection highlights one of the most important questions in climate diplomacy – what is the right balance between cajolery and persuasion on the one hand and pressure and punishment on the other?

climate diplomacy. This is the result of a string of measures – the U.S. trade barriers on Chinese clean energy products, the EU Carbon Border Adjustment Mechanism (CBAM), an instrument that will impose carbon costs on industrial exports to the European market, the most recent EU probe of Chinese electric vehicles – that are perceived by China as unilateralism and protectionism. This development is worth noting for two reasons. First, it will contribute to the combative tone China will take at COP28. China may also want to formally register its concerns as part of the COP28 outcome. Second, the philosophy behind the current trade-climate interplay, as China sees it, goes fundamentally against how climate progress receives political legitimacy within the Chinese system. In economic terms, China believes in the opportunities offered by its clean energy industry. In diplomatic terms, China sees climate change as a cooperative issue that helps calm tension in geopolitics. Recent trade measures challenge these beliefs. As a result, China is prepared to not just “cooperate” but also “struggle” with other countries. Most fundamentally, the trade-climate connection highlights one of the most important questions in climate diplomacy – what is the right balance between cajolery and persuasion on the one hand and pressure and punishment on the other?

Overall, the dual carbon announcement injects short-term momentum into China’s climate politics. However, major domestic and global developments between mid-2021 and the upcoming COP28 quickly deviated China’s discourse from the high note set in 2020. This is the challenge COP28 needs to deal with. That said, climate progress is still possible when the right domestic and international conditions are available. International engagement can trigger welcoming Chinese

action if it reinforces domestic developments and is deployed in the right way. Preventing a further hardening of Chinese views is therefore not just important but also feasible. Recovering China’s climate momentum will take time and effort. This should be an urgent priority for domestic and international stakeholders. In this context, COP28 and diplomatic engagements in the run up to it should also be seen as critical steps to revamp China’s climate ambition.

CHINA AND COP28

China’s approach at COP28 will be informed by a few key considerations that will explain why Beijing takes a particular stance on COP28 sticking points. Understanding them is key to bridging the gap between China and other countries in the COP28 end game.

First, the Chinese delegation will conduct its work in line with the country’s broader foreign policy shift as well as recent domestic developments. This could mean a more combative tone on sensitive issues such as fossil fuel phaseout. Working-level Chinese negotiators are constrained by a narrow mandate and need to be accountable to their domestic audience. As a result, sticking to instructions, as opposed to innovation, flexibility, and solution seeking, is prized. China and its international partners should actively explore innovative settings to make finding common ground easier. Putting the perceived harsh Chinese rhetoric aside, Beijing has a track record of following the majority view and is reluctant to block consensus.

Second, climate action still enjoys a special role in China’s strategic calculation. It is an area where progress is not only possible but arguably most likely compared to other geopolitical issues. This is backed up by a long list of climate commitments China made over the

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past decade or so, many of which had positive impacts on global climate efforts. As with other countries, the Chinese desire to act on climate change ebbs and flows with domestic and international developments. However, recent developments, including the rescue of U.S.-China dialogues from the climate suspension, have demonstrated the resilience of this desire. It is rooted in a regime that increasingly sees environmental sustainability as part of its legitimacy. Putting aside the level of its climate ambition, the Chinese sense of accountability to both domestic and global stakeholders should not be dismissed.

Third, and in line with the previous point, China is mindful of how it is perceived by the Global South and climate-vulnerable countries. Its claimed developing country status combined with its weight as the world's leading emitter present a dilemma. China's solidarity with the developing world will not be seen as credible if it does not act in a way that corresponds to its ever-growing global environmental footprint. This sets the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) negotiations apart from places like the G20. The presence of vulnerable countries should help depoliticize the talks in the UAE and help China join in consensus.

Fourth, China sees a long-standing imbalance between ambition and implementation in global climate talks. To dismiss Chinese concerns as only a tactic to avoid raising ambition would be wrong. From the early years of the Paris Agreement, China has seen a vacuum behind many countries' emissions reduction and financial commitments. Headline targets have been enhanced over time but not necessarily backed up by action and policies. This approach contrasts with the one Chinese decision-makers take; they tend to under-promise and over-deliver.

While the difference may be explained by dissimilar political styles, it has created a sense of grievance when China is pressured by others citing their ambitious targets, sometimes only at face value.

COP28 negotiators will find traces of these considerations in China's interventions. Specifically, on energy transition, China argues the COP decision should respect different national circumstances and ensure a secure, orderly, and just transition. As the world's leading power on renewable energy, Beijing could show flexibility on a global renewable energy goal with quantitative and qualitative elements. It also believes the key is more than setting a goal: it must include fulfilling it. China's NDC target of installing 1200 GW of wind and solar projects by 2030 will most likely be overachieved. Chinese negotiators will be much more reluctant to entertain strong measures to phase out fossil fuel, in particular, coal.

China is also skeptical that industrialized countries can achieve their own phaseout goals and sees the discussion shifting the burden to large emerging economies. In a public speech in September 2023, Xie Zhenhua claimed fossil fuel phaseout is "unrealistic" and not in line with the decision reached in Glasgow at COP26. The issue will be one of the most contested at COP28. While crafting the language to accommodate divergent national positions, negotiators should consider how the COP debate triggers meaningful reactions at the national level, in particular, China's ongoing coal plant expansion.

On Global Stocktake (GST), a key mechanism in the Paris Agreement to accelerate climate action, China wants a facilitative and solution-oriented process and is sensitive to finger pointing. In Chinese official jargon, the GST should "convey positive energy."

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This is both a tactical consideration to avoid scrutiny on China's emissions and a genuine desire derived from the reality of domestic politics – a perceived hostile international environment may fuel domestic backlashes on the climate agenda. The Chinese delegation will also be guarded against any attempt to deviate from the “nationally determined” nature of future NDCs. As a result, debates can be expected on the level of prescription related to the forward-looking part of the GST decision. In UNFCCC preparatory talks in June, China also insisted on a section dedicated to “international cooperation” in the draft GST text. This section is where Beijing wants to debate unilateralism and trade barriers and voice its concern on how these measures harm Chinese commercial interests and delay global decarbonization.

Whether China decides to release the long overdue National Methane Action Plan is an indicator of the country's political will at COP28. To develop such a plan before COP27 was a promise made in the U.S.-China joint declaration at COP26. Since then, poor baseline data, interministerial disagreements, and perhaps most importantly the deteriorating U.S.-China climate relationship have kept the plan delayed for now.

On finance, adaptation, and loss and damage, China will speak in solidarity with developing countries. It supports the agreement on a global adaptation goals and sees the establishment of early warning systems in vulnerable countries as a concrete step toward climate resilience. China will also demand developed countries demonstrate progress in their US\$100 billion commitment. Settling this issue is key for progress on subsequent finance discussions, including the new collective quantified goal (NCQG), a key finance decision the UNFCCC will take in 2024. China's climate finance recipient and contrib-

utor status will be a contentious issue in that discussion. Reaffirming China's commitment not to compete with other developing countries in UN climate finance and to enhance its south-south support would be positive steps for Beijing to take in the interim.

On the nature-climate linkage, China's role as the president of the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD) at COP15 should offer continued good will and leadership. China takes strong ownership in the post-2020 Global Biodiversity Framework (GBF) reached at COP15 and is eager for all countries to implement it. Beijing has recently updated its own National Biodiversity Strategy and Action Plan (NBSAP), a key policy instrument to fulfill the GBF. At COP28, China will be supportive of calls for GBF implementation and strong biodiversity finance commitments. This area should serve as a reminder that China tends to take a more proactive stance when it sees itself in the leadership position.

Finally, COP28 will be the first UN climate summit convened after China lifted its zero COVID policy (COP27 participants from China still had to face several days of hotel quarantine upon return and the risk of being stranded abroad if they caught COVID). This means the UAE climate conference will have large-scale Chinese participation at both the governmental and nongovernmental levels. As in-person exchanges between Chinese and global climate communities still have not recovered to pre-COVID levels, COP28 provides an ideal platform for reengagement.

U.S.-CHINA CLIMATE ENGAGEMENT

There are six observations on the U.S.-China climate relationship that might be useful in understanding the dynamic between Washington and Beijing during the last quarter of 2023, including at Asia-Pacific

Unlike most other issues, climate is an area where the two countries truly cannot decouple – the American effort to drastically reduce its emissions will be in vain if China carries on with its current emissions pathway, and vice versa.

Economic Cooperation (APEC) summit and COP28.

First, U.S.-China climate engagement has been stress tested and has demonstrated its resilience. The suspension of climate talks in 2022 was the lowest point in official climate exchanges and arguably the most serious challenge this relationship has ever faced. But the rather fast resumption of talks in late 2022 sets climate apart from many other bilateral issues that find it hard to reverse course once they enter a downward spiral. Residual willingness still exists in both China and the United States to keep the effect of bilateral politics on climate as minimal as possible. The muscle memory from the Obama-Xi period, when the climate agenda served bilateral strategic interests, is still there. Unlike most other issues, climate is an area where the two countries truly cannot decouple – the American effort to drastically reduce its emissions will be in vain if China carries on with its current emissions pathway, and vice versa. That being said, the two sides need to refrain from pushing the relationship to another breaking point. As the past three years have clearly shown, climate engagement is not immune from the bilateral relationship, and it tends to ebb and flow with it. The shared recognition by both countries that this relationship controls the future of our planet is not just rhetoric but literally true.

Second, avoiding inflated expectations is key for sustainable progress. It is useful to categorize U.S.-China climate negotiations into three sets of issues – national, bilateral, and multilateral. The first category refers to domestic actions that each country may be willing to take as a direct result of persuasion by the other side. The second category refers to issues the two sides are willing to work on together. The third refers to their joint vision on rules that will be decided at

multilateral platforms such as the COP.

The belief that the United States can push China around (or vice versa) on any of these three categories is misguided. Even if China is ready to show goodwill, it will be much more reluctant to do so with the United States because of the optics. Unreasonable expectations will therefore damage bilateral climate dialogues. Meanwhile, it is useful to bear in mind that the room for flexibility increases slightly as we move from national to bilateral to multilateral issues. However, even for multilateral issues, the level of convergence between Washington and Beijing is much more limited now than in 2015, when the two countries agreed on a series of bilateral deals that were subsequently cut and pasted into the Paris Agreement. If anything comes out of U.S.-China climate talks before COP28, negotiators should expect it to be “floor setting,” not “tone setting.”

Third, engagement and communication are what is most needed. A vibrant discussion took place in the early days of the Biden administration on the best approach to deal with the China climate portfolio. A long list of key words was contemplated, ranging from “cooperation” to “competition” to “confrontation.” This debate reflects the complexity and dynamism of the U.S.-China climate relationship. The truth is no single word can capture this multifaceted interaction. However, both governments need to be clear about this: engagement and communication matter the most. They should be employed if Washington and Beijing are truly committed to fighting climate change. This should hardly be news to anyone. After all, to solve challenges, countries must talk to each other. But the value of engagement has been somewhat obstructed by the voices for cooperation, which is increasingly limited by bilateral politics on the one side and the more

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hawkish view of competition or even disengagement, which dismisses the value of communication on the other side. Furthermore, the three-year COVID separation between China and the rest of the world, coupled with the deterioration of the bilateral relationship with the United States, made engagement practically more challenging and politically less desirable. All these trends make preserving climate engagement more important than ever before. Both the United States and China need to realize that speaking to each other prevents misunderstandings and helps keep the climate issue on the radar. That by itself will not solve the climate crisis, but without it the crisis will never be solved.

Fourth, individuals matter but they will not last forever. The climate relationship between the United States and China has greatly benefited from the presence of their climate envoys – John Kerry and Xie Zhenhua – both extremely committed to climate action and willing and able to mobilize their respective systems for positive change. This is an exceptional condition most other bilateral issues do not enjoy. It is not an exaggeration to say that if not for Kerry and Xie, the bilateral climate relationship would be worse than it is now. Still, both Kerry and Xie are increasingly constrained by their domestic politics and the deterioration of the overall bilateral relationship. Their political tenures may also come to an end soon. Preparing for a post-Kerry and Xie world is therefore a pressing challenge for both countries.

Fifth, a wide range of actors are involved in this relationship. They need to be further activated. The diversity of stakeholders and their level of interactions are a key feature of the U.S.-China climate relationship. This broad set of contacts is also what keeps this relationship resilient. Over the past decades,

scientists, researchers, the private sector, NGOs, and subnational actors in both the United States and China have helped enhance the understanding between the two countries. These actors have also played a critical role in facilitating or driving policy changes. However, their role is increasingly constrained by recent developments in both countries. In-person exchanges resumed in 2023, but they are far from getting back to pre-COVID levels. Both governments should work to enhance the legitimacy and create the enabling conditions for these stakeholders to interact. This should be a relatively easy but impactful point of convergence between Washington and Beijing in their climate talks.

Sixth, the bilateral engagement toward the end of 2023 will shape key climate decisions in 2024. Anchored by the APEC summit hosted by the United States in November, the last quarter of 2023 will be consequential for the U.S.-China relationship. Whether President Xi decides to participate in APEC and to have a presidential summit with President Biden will have significant implications on U.S.-China climate engagement. In an optimistic scenario, a Biden-Xi meeting could trigger important national action and enable a joint climate outcome around either APEC or COP28. This, together with China's performance at COP28 could inject much needed momentum into China's climate discourse in 2024 – a year with critical climate decisions such as the preparation of the new 2035 emissions reduction targets and China's role as a climate financial contributor. These high-stake decisions will benefit from continued U.S.-China climate dialogues in 2024.

CONCLUSION

There is a narrow window ahead to revive China's climate momentum through international engagement. In the last quarter of

China's climate ambition will be shaped by its relationship with the West, but it also enjoys a level of fragile independence from geopolitical development.

2023, COP28 and U.S.-China climate talks will receive high-level political attention in China and are therefore key opportunities for climate progress. Leveraged well, these events could serve as platforms for Chinese leaders to recommit to climate action, putting the agenda back on the political radar. International engagement remains a valuable way to achieve this prioritization – it is independent of domestic factors, most of which are unlikely to improve soon. The suspension and later resumption of U.S.-China climate talks demonstrate that China's view is not set in stone but shaped by a complex set of factors, including what is happening internationally, and the outlook for China's climate action could improve. Ahead of COP28, a cooperative tone from the top toward other key countries – in particular, the United States – as well as new signals on the dual carbon pledge could help domestic actors turn the current low climate momentum around.

China's climate ambition will be shaped by its relationship with the West, but it also enjoys a level of fragile independence from geopolitical developments. Like it or not, climate action, as a global commons issue, demands a constructive international environment. In China's view, insulating climate change from geopolitics is unrealistic. But as demonstrated in this paper, geopolitics is not the sole determinant of China's decisions. Progressive action was possible even when China's relationship with the West was contested. The real challenge is to build up climate change's independence from political turbulence, so that it remains a top priority. Reinforcing China's global responsibility, its self-interest in tackling the climate crisis, and the alignment between climate action

and its domestic priorities will help.

It is important to differentiate between China's rhetoric and its real intentions in international negotiations. Negotiation tactics, domestic politics, and limited direct engagement, among other factors, will make understanding China's intentions harder than before. The discrepancy between what is in the public domain and China's real intentions could go both ways. As the recent G20 summit showed, China could display very tough rhetoric only to allow a solid outcome. Conversely, as the dual carbon announcement demonstrated, Beijing could set an initial high note only to let it be diminished by domestic and international forces soon after. The only way to decipher China's real intention is to be as empirical and evidence based as possible – a methodology that is becoming harder but must be employed for accurate assessments.

China's 2035 NDC preparation will be one of the most important policy processes shaping the global climate future. China will start the preparation of its 2035 NDC soon after COP28. Given China's share in global emissions and its outsized role in energy infrastructure development, its targets will carry significant weight. China's 2035 NDC will also contain notable features. Since China has pledged to peak its emissions before 2030, its 2035 target must be one with an absolute emissions reduction – the type of target China has been reluctant to commit to but must embrace now by default. Yet international engagement is much more limited now than 10 years ago, when countries developed their initial NDCs. There is an urgent need to revamp an international strategy on NDCs – a conversation that should be started on the sidelines of COP28.