

Country Is Playing Leading Role in the Debate Over Climate Change

Beijing is a solid supporter of the Paris agreement's principles.



Jinzhai county in Anhui province has eradicated poverty with the help of renewable energy, including solar power generation. CreditCreditTANG YANG / XINHUA

When the United States walked away from the Paris agreement on climate change in 2017, it left China as the most significant player in the debate.

The Paris agreement is an accord signed in 2015 within the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change that sets out a series of goals to deal with global greenhouse gas emissions mitigation and finance, starting in 2020.

The goals of the agreement were ambitious, but the text was vague in detail and left some nations wondering if the agreement had any real teeth or whether it favored rich countries.

The U.N. Climate Change Conference, which opened in Katowice, Poland, has the task of finalizing the implementation guidelines for the agreement, and China has been a solid supporter of the accord's principles.

Xie Zhenhua, the country's special representative on climate change affairs, has said it will continue to play a leading role in global efforts.

He made the remark on Sept. 14 at a news conference after the three-day Global Climate Action Summit in San Francisco in the U.S.

During the summit, 10 Chinese philanthropic organizations, foundations and research institutions launched the Global Climate Action Initiative with a view to giving full support to the Chinese government as it acts to honor a series of climate change commitments made by President Xi Jinping.

These commitments include making a national contribution to the global effort to curb climate change, promoting South-South cooperation on this, and building a "green" Belt and Road Initiative.

Chinese society and the international community have been urged to respond actively to climate change and take immediate action to encourage sustainable development in order to achieve a global ecological civilization.

Xie said, "China has overcome enormous difficulties and made enormous contributions (to global climate efforts)."

The country pledged to peak greenhouse gas emissions by around 2030; lower such emissions per unit of gross domestic product by 60 to 65 percent from the 2005 level; increase the share of nonfossil energy in total energy consumption to about 20 percent; and increase the forest stock volume by about 4.5 billion cubic meters from 2005 levels.

According to Xie, China has invested more than \$127 billion to develop renewable energy, ranking it first in the world in this respect for six consecutive years. Its renewable power installed capacity reached 650 million kilowatts in 2017, accounting for 30 percent of the global total, he said.

"China has made remarkable achievements in renewable energy development. Its new technologies and large-scale manufacturing have greatly reduced the cost, allowing renewable energy sources to compete with traditional energy sources," he added.

Heat wave alerts

China has acknowledged that its climate is changing rapidly.

In July, alerts were issued as a heat wave affected many areas. Scorching temperatures were recorded in Liaoning, Jilin and Hubei provinces, Chongqing and the Xinjiang Uygur and Inner Mongolia autonomous regions, Xinhua News Agency reported on July 31.

The China Meteorological Administration said July was hotter and wetter than usual. Shanghai had an 11-day heat wave that month, the longest recorded in the city in 145 years, Xinhua reported on July 29. A temperature of 40.9 C was recorded in the city on July 21, the highest since local meteorological records began.

For countries such as China, climate change has become a major challenge, especially in urban centers where air pollution has reached critical levels.

Nicolas Pechet, a partner at Solidiance, an Asia-focused corporate strategy consulting company in Shanghai, said, "China's central government leadership is keenly aware that poor environmental conditions can severely affect social stability and migration of the wealthiest citizens."

The country's economy has already entered the new normal, featuring more moderate economic growth, a greater focus on the quality of growth, and a move away from heavy manufacturing, Pechet said.

Its industrial sector has underpinned modern economic development, which accounts for more than 70 percent of the country's energy consumption.

The 13th Five-Year Plan (2016-20) specifies a 15 percent reduction in energy consumption intensity and an 18 percent drop in carbon dioxide emissions intensity, while boosting forest coverage to more than 23 percent of the total land area.



Green balconies have been introduced in a residential area of Chengdu, capital of Sichuan province. Credit ZHANG LANG / CHINA NEWS SERVICE

“If these targets are met, China will make significant progress toward its commitments under the Paris agreement on climate change to peak carbon dioxide emissions in 2030 or sooner,” Pechet said.

He was speaking shortly after the U.N. Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change delivered its direst warning yet on the future of the global climate.

In the panel’s report, released on Oct. 8, some of the world’s leading climate scientists warned there are only 12 years for global warming to be kept to a maximum of 1.5 C. Beyond this, even half a degree will significantly worsen the risks of drought, floods, extreme heat and poverty for hundreds of millions of people around the world, they said.

The authors of the landmark report said urgent and unprecedented changes are needed to reach the target, adding that this is affordable and feasible even though it lies at the more ambitious end of the Paris agreement that pledges to limit the global temperature rise to between 1.5 C and 2 C.

The Special Report on Global Warming of 1.5 C was approved by the panel at its meeting in Incheon, South Korea, in early October and was one of the major scientific papers being presented at the U.N. Climate Change Conference in Katowice from Dec. 2 to 14, where most governments are reviewing the Paris agreement.

Charles Bedford, regional managing director for Asia-Pacific with global environmental organization The Nature Conservancy, said, “The report is a wake-up call and a reminder for everyone on what is at stake if we stick to business as usual.” As a global leader in tackling climate change, the Chinese government has long been proactive and focused on its targets and commitments, with policies that the country has already moved forward on, he said.

Bedford added that China has for many years said it will remain focused on working toward its low-carbon development goals regardless of what other countries such as the United States decide to do.

The panel’s report followed the release on Oct. 1 of a study by the Chinese Academy of Sciences warning that economic losses caused by drought could cost China \$47 billion a year — more than double the current estimate — if global temperatures rise by 1.5 C above the preindustrial baseline.

Jiang Tong, lead author of the Chinese study and a researcher with the National Climate Center at the China Meteorological Administration in Beijing, said, “Drought losses have significantly increased in recent years across the globe.”

The Paris agreement proposes to keep the global mean temperature increase to well below 2 C above preindustrial levels, and to pursue efforts to limit warming to 1.5 C, to reduce the related risk and impacts.

Image



A photovoltaic power project has been set up in Chenta village, Huzhou, Zhejiang province. Credit: XU YU / XINHUA

One area the Chinese government has focused on has been the metals and mining sector, including steel mills, aluminum and copper smelters. In July, it published a three-year “blue sky defense” action plan aimed at improving the country’s air quality.

Liu Sifang, a senior consultant with global energy group Wood Mackenzie, said, “The government is attaching increasing importance to environmental protection.”

Inspection groups have been sent to different regions to ensure industries are meeting the requirements to reduce pollution, he said, adding, “More important, stricter regulations have been introduced.”

Liu said every major city in China has been assigned targets to reduce pollution — regardless of the source.

A group of leading scientists from China and the United Kingdom launched a groundbreaking report in London on Oct. 17 to show potential worst-case risks of climate change and to encourage politicians to increase mitigation efforts.

The 150-page report is the first to highlight some “disturbing scenarios” of the impact of climate change.

Ye Qi, director of the Brookings-Tsinghua Center for Public Policy at Tsinghua University, said the report is particularly significant “in bringing our attention to what kind of impact climate change will have on our cities, our economy, our lives and our society as a whole” so that people globally can better relate to the importance of mitigation work.

The scientists started to work on the report after an agreement between the Chinese and U.K. governments was signed during President Xi’s visit to the U.K. in 2015.

The report was due to be presented at the Katowice conference.

Remarkable growth

The potential impact on China includes a possible threefold rise in the number of heat waves by the end of the century, while glacier mass could be reduced by almost 70 percent, affecting water resource availability in parts of West China, the report said.

Bedford, from The Nature Conservancy, said China’s economic growth has been remarkable, but with this comes increased carbon dioxide emissions.

“Rising sea levels and more extreme weather events such as Typhoon Mangkhut also put its heavily populated coast at risk. And there’s public concern on broader environmental issues such as urban air, water quality and soil pollution,” he said.

Typhoon Mangkhut was an extremely powerful tropical cyclone that caused widespread damage in Guam, the Philippines and South China in mid-September.

Climate change will put pressure on water sources and increase the risk of droughts in China, which in turn will dramatically affect crops such as rice, Bedford said.

“Being the world’s largest rice producer and consumer, the country has already started to safeguard its food security,” he said.