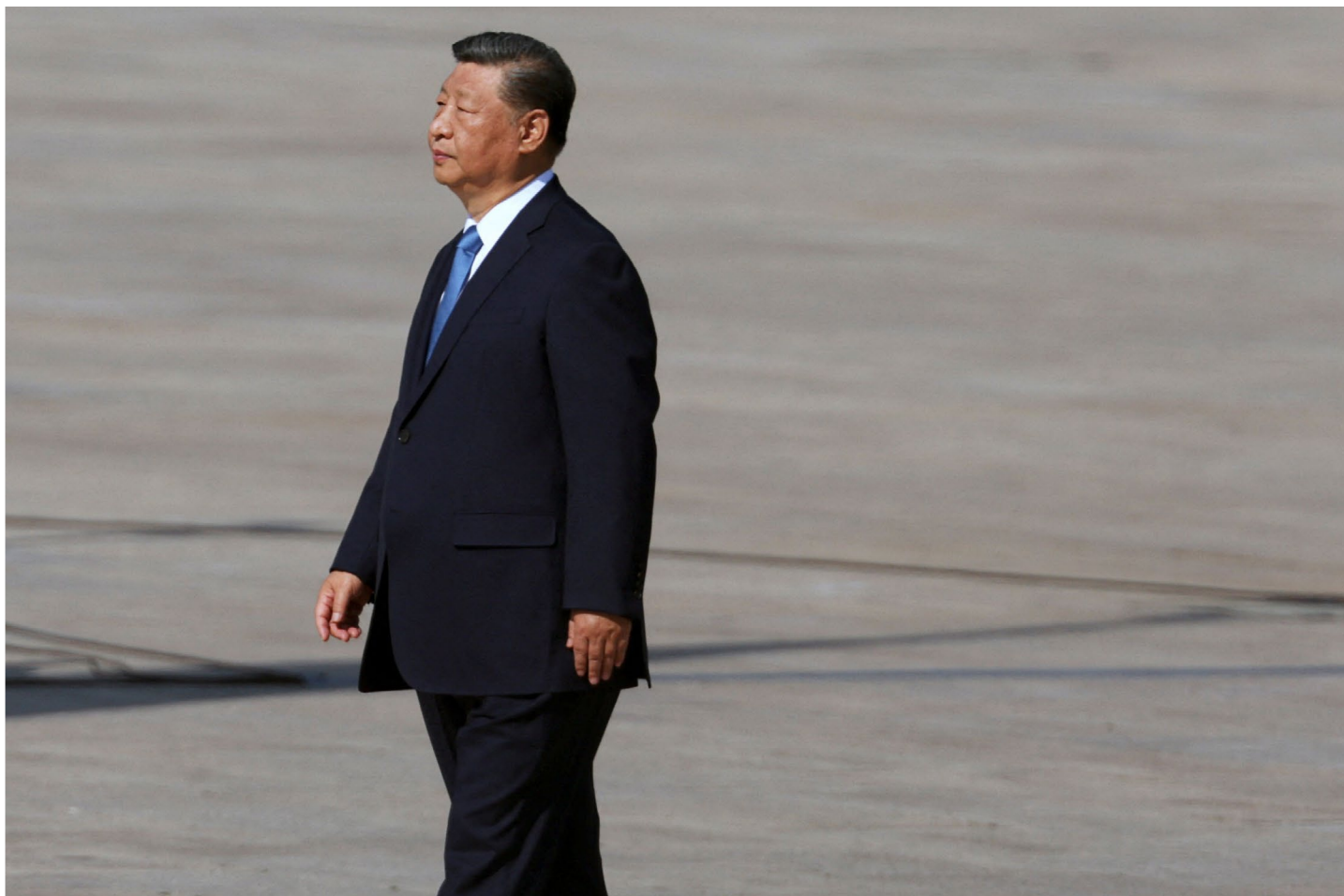




China Pushes Forward Climate Policy Steadily

Daoping Wang and Peipei Chen

Brief summary

- Although it functions as a rhetorical excuse for watering down ambitious climate targets in Europe and the US, China has in recent years seen quite a tangible acceleration of climate action.
- It has slowed the growth of CO₂ emissions, significantly expanded clean energy, and for the first time embedded carbon peaking and neutrality into the 14th Five-Year Plan. China's climate strategy has shifted from loose energy-saving measures to the integrated "1+N" framework.

- The recently released third Nationally Determined Contribution under the Paris Agreement sets out detailed sectoral and annual targets. So far, strong central government leadership, policy continuity, technical support from research institutions, and international pressure have reinforced the steady strengthening of climate policy.
- However, balancing economic growth with decarbonization, ensuring grid stability, and managing risks from intensifying extreme weather will be critical to meeting long-term climate commitments.

Climate policy evolution: From loose measures to integrated approach

China's climate policy has been significantly influenced by substantial international pressure, especially in the early phase of its development. A pivotal moment for China's climate policies occurred in 2007, when the National Development and Reform Commission released the National Climate Change Programme.

This was China's first official document explicitly addressing climate change, recognizing it as a national concern, and elevating greenhouse gas (GHG) mitigation alongside energy efficiency and economic restructuring as key objectives. Notably, this policy shift came after China had become the world's top carbon emitter in 2005, a status that subsequently subjected it to considerable global pressure. Another major turning point came in September 2020, when China committed to peaking CO₂ emissions before 2030 and achieving carbon neutrality before 2060. This commitment was made at a time when China accounted for over one-third of global CO₂ emissions. These key policy shifts, occurring as China's emissions rose and its international profile grew, underscore the influential role that international pressure continues to play in influencing China's climate policies.

Over the last two decades, China's climate policies have evolved from loosely coordinated energy-saving measures towards a more integrated, systematic approach, aligning domestic development priorities with global climate commitments. This progression is evident in its Nationally Determined Contributions (NDC). Since submitting its first NDC in 2015, China has demonstrated a clear trajectory of increased ambition. The second NDC reflected this heightened commitment, closely aligning with the nation's "dual carbon" strategy—peaking carbon dioxide emissions before 2030 and achieving carbon neutrality before 2060.

This shift marked a significant increase in ambition compared to the first NDC, moving from carbon intensity goals towards absolute emission peaking and a neutrality commitment, accompanied by more ambitious targets for non-fossil energy share, carbon intensity reduction, and forest carbon stock.

Building on this foundation, the third NDC, released in September 2025, marks further progress. It is characterized by more explicit and granular

objectives concerning aggregate emissions, emission intensity, sectoral inclusion, and temporal frameworks, such as establishing more stringent carbon intensity reduction targets and incorporating medium and long-term developmental aspirations exemplified by the 2035 targets.

The integrated and systematic nature of China's climate policy is exemplified by the "1+N" framework. Here, the "1" signifies the overarching strategic document, the "Action Plan for Carbon Peaking by 2030," while the "N" denotes a collection of supporting sectoral and industry-specific plans, spanning areas such as energy, industry, construction, transportation, technological innovation, carbon sinks, fiscal and financial policies, and public engagement.

The formulation and implementation of the "1+N" system mandate coordinated efforts from all pertinent governmental departments to achieve policy coherence. Several guiding principles support this framework: nationwide coordination, conservation as a priority, a dual-engine strategy emphasizing technological and institutional innovation, promoting seamless domestic and international communication, and prioritizing risk prevention.

Policy consistency and a clear course despite global turbulence

Until now, China has achieved significant advancements: it has controlled the growth rate of its carbon dioxide emissions, steadily increased the importance of clean energy within its energy system, and continued to advance its economic low-carbon transition.

One striking feature of China's climate policy is its strong governmental leadership coupled allowing for apparent policy continuity, rooted in the country's unitary political system, where policy formulation is in the hand of the central government.

An example of this leadership was China's 2020 announcement committing to peak CO₂ emissions before 2030 and achieve carbon neutrality before 2060. This commitment was subsequently formalized in the 2021 update of China's Nationally Determined Contribution and operationalized through the "1+N" policy system—a framework pairing a central guiding document with numerous sectoral and regional implementation plans. As

noted, the “1+N” system has since become the backbone of China’s long-term climate governance.

Furthermore, the 14th Five-Year Plan (2021–2025) firmly embedded climate policy into the nation’s development strategy, notably becoming the first such plan to feature a dedicated section on carbon peaking and neutrality. It emphasized a “dual carbon” framework, aiming to balance emission reductions with economic stability and social development.

This overarching strategy was then detailed in key policy documents like the Working Guidance for Carbon Dioxide Peaking and Carbon Neutrality and the Action Plan for Carbon Peaking Before 2030, which outlined sector-specific roadmaps and implementation mechanisms.

China’s governmental institutions play a crucial role in fostering policy continuity. The evolution of responsibility for the Nationally Determined Contributions illustrates this dynamic. Until 2018, the National Development and Reform Commission (NDRC) led climate policy efforts, including the drafting of the first NDC. Since 2018, this responsibility has resided with the Ministry of Ecology and Environment (MEE), reflecting a strategic shift towards prioritizing environmental governance over purely economic planning. The MEE now plays a central role in drafting and updating the NDCs, managing the national greenhouse gas inventory, coordinating Biennial Transparency Reports and national communications to the UNFCCC, and overseeing the national carbon market. Furthermore, the MEE’s leadership, often embodied by a senior official, is bolstered by a collaborative network of departments, each contributing specialized expertise to the climate effort.

China’s dedication to climate action appears to be unaffected by fluctuations in the international arena. Even against the backdrop of the US withdrawing from the Paris Agreement, China continued to enhance its global climate contributions. The country actively utilized its progress in clean energy technologies, notably in wind, solar, and electric vehicles, deploying these advancements through export and technology transfer initiatives to support global green transitions.

Expert and popular support for climate action

PRC’s policy consistency is further reinforced by public support, marked by a strong societal consensus on climate change and minimal organized opposition. National surveys, including those conducted by the China Climate Communication Project Centre in 2012 (over 4000 adults) and its 2017 follow-up, illustrate this.

These polls revealed that scepticism and denialism were not widespread among Chinese citizens, who largely acknowledge climate change’s reality and support government action to address it. Notably, no prominent Chinese organizations are listed among recognized global warming sceptic groups. Consequently, the development of China’s climate policy has proceeded largely without significant opposition from anti-climate actors, a relative lack of prominent opposition likely facilitating the government’s efforts in promoting these policies.

Another critical factor behind China’s consistency in climate policy is the significant role played by research institutions and domestic think tanks. A prime example is their influence on shaping the NDCs. For the first NDC in 2015, developed under the NDRC, their valuable input was gathered through coordinated meetings and workshops. The formulation of the second NDC in 2021, led by the MEE, marked a significant evolution. This involved establishing a more institutionalized technical support team, shifting to closed-door expert workshops instead of public consultations, and placing greater reliance on combined modeling approaches, while continuing collaboration with energy system modeling teams. For the third NDC, China further broadened stakeholder engagement to include local governments, businesses, and NGOs, and drew substantially upon diverse research from scientific institutions, industry associations, and university scholars, reflecting a more inclusive and evidence-based approach. This progressive evolution underscores the critical importance of incentivizing research scholars; their expertise is essential for shaping effective climate policies and ensuring their successful implementation in China.

Outlook: Challenges in an uncertain future

Looking ahead, China’s path to carbon neutrality remains fraught with challenges, deeply rooted in its specific national context. Critically, the overarching challenge transcends the current economic climate;

it lies in the intricate balancing act of fostering economic growth while simultaneously achieving carbon neutrality. These intertwined pressures highlight the profound complexity and urgency of China's decarbonization efforts, demanding innovative solutions and strategic coordination across all sectors.

A key issue within China's energy system is the mismatch between its abundant national resources and relatively low per capita availability. Compounding this, Chinese enterprises face stricter environmental and energy constraints, leading to higher costs and potential power instability.

The severe blackout on the Iberian Peninsula in April 2025—a major disruption in Spain, Portugal, and parts of France—serves as a stark reminder of how vulnerable power grids can be to various disruptions. This incident highlights the critical challenge China faces in balancing its energy transition with grid reliability.

Furthermore, China must pay greater attention to the escalating threat of extreme weather events. Driven by climate change, these events are intensifying globally, bringing more frequent floods, heavy rainfall, hailstorms, wildfires, and droughts. They disrupt supply chains, damage infrastructure, and result in significant economic, social, and cultural losses. In some regions, the slow recovery

of vulnerable sectors like transportation and power can severely disrupt businesses, leading to supply chain interruptions and substantial cascading economic losses. These impacts pose particular challenges for the insurance sector, especially regarding low-probability, high-impact events like the 2024 floods in Spain and the 2022 floods in Pakistan, which test the resilience of current business models. As a nation frequently affected by natural disasters, China underscores the critical need for developing more sustainable and resilient insurance business models to better manage the escalating risks posed by such events.

Further reading

Ji Haisheng, Xu Wei (2025). [China beefs up climate response with new 2035 targets.](#)

Lauri Myllyvirta (2024). [China's 2035 targets can be a climate breakthrough.](#)

International Energy Agency (2021). [An energy sector roadmap to carbon neutrality in China.](#)

Dr. Daoping Wang is a Lecturer at King's College London (KCL). He researches on the interaction of natural and human systems, with a particular focus on climate change adaptation, risk propagation in socioeconomic networks, and the use of AI-based and economic-modeling techniques to assess climate risks and resilience.

Dr. Peipei Chen is a Research Associate at the Energy Policy Research Group (EPRG), Judge Business School, University of Cambridge. Her research focuses on low-carbon technology deployment, industrial decarbonisation pathways, and the social impacts of climate and energy transition policies.

Photo credit: Florence Lo/REUTERS/NTB

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Rosenkrantz' gate 22
PB 7024 Pilestredet park 18, N-0176 Oslo, Norway
post@nupi.no | nupi.no

