

CHINA VOWS TO GO CARBON NEUTRAL BY 2060

Relevant for: Environment | Topic: Environmental Conservation, Sustainable Development, and EIA

Climate action: Xi Jinping's pre-recorded message playing at the UN General Assembly session on Tuesday. AP

The U.S. is guilty of "obstructing" the global fight against emissions, China said on Wednesday, as Beijing seized the climate agenda by vowing to go carbon neutral by 2060, a target welcomed by environmentalists despite its patchy detail.

The goals, which include a pledge to reach peak emissions in 2030, are the most concrete ones yet announced by China, which is the world's biggest polluter and accounts for a quarter of the planet's greenhouse gas emissions. They also open a new divergence in relations with the U.S., which are already pinched by squabbles over trade, tech, defence and human rights.

Speaking to the United Nations (UN) General Assembly, Chinese President Xi Jinping on Tuesday renewed his support for the Paris climate accord and called for a 'green focus' as the world recovers from the COVID-19 crisis.

Under President Donald Trump, the United States, the world's second-largest polluter, pulled out of the agreement, blaming China for the stalled momentum on tackling global emissions.

"This clearly ... seriously obstructs the progress of reducing global emissions," China's Foreign Ministry spokesman Wang Wenbin said in a statement on Wednesday. "What qualifications does such a country have to criticise China," he asked, citing U.S.'s hunger for plastics and its export of waste.

In his speech to the UN, Mr. Xi said China aims to have "CO2 emissions peak before 2030 and achieve carbon neutrality before 2060".

'Nuanced picture'

In addition to its embrace of global emissions-busting deals, China already feeds nearly 15% of its energy demands with non-fossil fuels, Mr. Wang added. China's "installation of renewable energy stands at 30% of the world total," he said.

But experts say the picture is more nuanced, with massive investments continuing at home and overseas in coal and other fossil fuels.

China currently has 135 gigawatts of coal-power capacity either permitted or under construction, according to Global Energy Monitor, a San Francisco-based environmental group. This equates to about half the total coal-power capacity in the United States.

Welcoming China's pledge, EU commission president Ursula von der Leyen tweeted "a lot of work remains to be done".

The 2060 objective is still a decade later than the date set by dozens of small states as well as European powers. But it was applauded by experts as a significant step to inject momentum into the Paris accords. Joeri Rogelj, a climate expert at Imperial College London's Grantham Institute, called Mr. Xi's pledge "unexpected and eye-opening".

Trump's criticism

Mr. Xi's tone at the UN contrasted sharply with that of Mr. Trump, who called the Paris accord unfair to the United States.

Mr. Trump said he is standing up for U.S. constituencies such as coal miners, and has loosened environmental rules, although individual States such as California have insisted on fighting climate change on their own.

“Those who attack America's exceptional environmental record while ignoring China's rampant pollution are not interested in the environment,” the U.S. President said in his UN speech shortly before Mr. Xi spoke.

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