



US-China Climate Deal: Less Than Meets the Eye by
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The US-China climate change deal unveiled by President Barack Obama and China's President Xi Jinping this week in Beijing has been heralded as a historic breakthrough in the effort to reduce climate change. But is it?

On close inspection, it is less than meets the eye, but nonetheless, significant. It is less an agreement than two parallel pledges. Obama pledged to reduce US emissions of greenhouse gases by 26-28 percent below its levels of 2005, and to achieve that reduction over the next eleven years – by 2025. Xi committed China to peak and cap its own emissions “around 2030” and to increase the share of non-fossil fuels in its primary energy consumption to 20 percent by 2030.

But this is not a binding agreement and includes no benchmarks to measure progress or penalties to encourage it. Moreover, it is not apparent that the United States would need to change its current trajectory in reducing greenhouse gas emissions to meet its stated target. China has invested billions of dollars in renewable technology, but is still 70-percent dependent on coal. How it will meet its commitment on emissions is not evident.

At present, China gets about 10 percent of its energy from non-fossil fuels, much of it hydropower and nuclear, and is on a path to increase both. Barring technology breakthroughs that make wind and solar cheaper, hydro and nuclear are likely to comprise the bulk of non-fossil fuels by 2030. That means China's 20-percent target may be achievable.

Much of the optimism around the US-China agreement was based on the hope that it will inject much-needed momentum into global climate negotiations in Paris next year. To the extent that the US-China accord prompts action by China, it removes a major excuse by other countries against taking climate action.

But the likelihood that the incoming, Republican-led US Congress would ratify an international, binding climate agreement is pretty close to nonexistent.

Also, ambitious reductions in greenhouse gases are not highly likely among the twenty largest economies, which account for some 80 percent of greenhouse gas emissions. The

world remains dependent on coal, oil and gas – as it will be in 2030. Dramatic change will not come until clean coal technology develops – or until wind, solar or other non-carbon energy sources become cheaper.

All that said, the US-China initiative is significant in several respects. It puts more pressure on the world's major emitters of greenhouse gases, elevates the seriousness of efforts, and improves the chances of reaching a global accord.

At a practical level, some less-noticed elements of the US-China deal may lead toward major global emissions reductions. One area of US-China cooperation is carbon capture and storage technology, which is still at an early stage of development. If made more commercially viable, it would reduce the climate-change effects of using coal.

In addition, the US and China have formed a climate change working group to advance more efficient vehicles, smart energy grids and other forms of energy efficiency. Finally, although not mentioned in the US-China announcement, the US government and private sector are working with China to develop its enormous shale resources. Natural gas produces nearly 50 percent less in greenhouse gas emissions than does coal, and development of shale gas would let China move away from coal as a source of electric power.

So, on balance, perhaps the Beijing announcement was less of a big deal than portrayed, but perhaps more than cynics might admit.

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