

China Will Act to Reestablish its International Climate Leadership

Kate Logan

What We're Watching

China has refrained from major new climate commitments in recent years, but a confluence of factors could prompt the country to actively position itself as a global leader on climate action in 2024. Doing so would respond to growing demands of the international community while also enabling China to advance its national interests.

The Context

Global progress on confronting climate change hinges on China, which accounts for around a third of global emissions. The last time China made headline commitments on climate was in 2020, when President Xi Jinping announced China's "dual carbon" targets to peak carbon emissions before 2030 and achieve carbon neutrality before 2060. Xi also said China would stop building new coal-fired power plants abroad in 2021. As China's economic picture began to worsen amid the pandemic, however, Beijing retreated from overt pledges as it sought to maintain flexibility in the face of concerns about energy security and its domestic economy. Yet, the country's emissions are now likely to peak well ahead of schedule, and clean energy has become a new engine for economic growth.

Two key interests could thus propel China to more actively substantiate its international climate leadership in 2024. The first is China's desire to shape expectations for expected climate targets — namely, on climate finance in 2024 and domestic emissions reductions in 2025. A high-profile U.S.-China climate statement in November 2023 clarified positions ahead of COP28 in Dubai the following month, but also exhibited key gaps on China's level of ambition for post-2030 emissions cuts and whether China should be obligated to financially support developing countries to meet their climate goals. China could take action to preemptively set expectations for upcoming targets and address outstanding questions around its climate action. As China's dual carbon targets show, it is willing to be a pioneer on the global stage when doing so can also help protect its core interests.

The second is China's international reputation. Concerns about China's massive pipeline of new coal power plants slated for construction are reaching an inflection point, including from climate-vulnerable developing countries that China wants to keep in its geopolitical orbit. Many of these same countries also struggle to access climate finance due to debt distress caused in part by Chinese lending. China's vocal emphasis on South-South climate cooperation at COP28 may foreshadow greater action by China to respond to these and other reputational pressures. Even recent language from China's typically hard-nosed top diplomat Wang Yi acknowledged that climate cooperation meets the "urgent needs and universal expectations of the international community."



What to Expect in 2024

- With tensions between climate progress and economic and energy security likely to persist, Beijing may introduce measures to allay global concerns about its coal power buildout while maintaining its “ambition via implementation” approach. This could balance out China’s overreliance on coal to protect its energy sector against geopolitical and technical disruptions, while also shifting global climate-related pressure away from China.
- China could also offer a more concrete plan for ramping up climate-related spending in developing countries, potentially in the form of a quantitative target for finance or clean energy capacity. Importantly, this could address domestic overcapacity in clean energy manufacturing by selling it in greater quantities abroad, especially to markets that concurrently advance Beijing’s security interests.