

U.S.

China, India Complicate Biden's Climate Ambitions

Both countries have big and growing appetites for energy and rely heavily on coal

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Updated April 22, 2021 9:44 pm ET



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China and India, both with huge and growing appetites for energy, will play outsized roles in efforts to curb greenhouse gas emissions as the world seeks to come up with more ambitious targets on climate change.

The two countries are similar in many ways. They have massive populations topping 1.3 billion, and both are heavy users of coal, the worst fossil fuel in terms of carbon emissions. China alone consumed more than half of the world's coal in 2019, according to the International Energy Agency. India is currently a distant No. 2 with 11% of the global share, but its share is expected to rise to around 14% by 2030.

Both countries' leaders, who have signaled they don't want to be seen as acting at the behest of the U.S., argued at the virtual two-day climate summit hosted by the White House, which began Thursday, that their nations should shoulder different responsibilities than developed nations in the fight against climate change.

But there are also significant differences in their approaches. While India defines itself as a developing country with a longer timeline for reducing emissions and as a potential recipient of money and technology to help, China increasingly wants to position itself as a climate leader and a provider of technological and financial support.

"China and India are among the world's biggest emitters, so without them it will be impossible to achieve the Paris Agreement," said Byford Tsang, a London-based senior

policy adviser at E3G, a think tank that advocates for strategies to reduce carbon emissions.

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In China's case, he said, the question isn't whether the country can reach its own goals but whether it can do what is needed to keep the temperature rise at 1.5 degree Celsius, a goal set by the Paris Climate Agreement.

China will reduce coal consumption starting in 2026, Chinese President Xi Jinping said at the summit. He also reiterated his pledge from September that China would reach peak carbon emissions before 2030 and to achieve carbon neutrality—net-zero carbon-dioxide emissions—by 2060.

But he stopped short of promising a carbon-emissions cap, as some climate campaigners had hoped. Mr. Xi “obviously did not want to make any big announcement under U.S. pressure,” said Lauri Myllyvirta, lead analyst at the Center for Research on Energy and Clean Air.

Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi unveiled a new partnership with the U.S. to expand renewable energy. He didn't add another climate goal or upgrade India's existing ones. “We in India are doing our part,” said Mr. Modi.

Climate negotiators are seeking to set more aggressive climate targets to reach the goals agreed to in the Paris Agreement by building momentum ahead of a United Nations climate conference in Glasgow, Scotland, in November.

Developing countries want richer countries to make good on pledges from the Paris climate negotiations to mobilize \$100 billion a year in public and private financing to aid the effort. Top Indian officials made financial support among their top requests to John Kerry, the Biden administration's climate envoy, when he visited this month.

India has already reduced its carbon intensity—or how much carbon dioxide is emitted per unit of gross domestic product—by 26% versus 2005 levels, India's environment

minister, Prakash Javadekar, said at an April speech sponsored by the French Embassy in India. “We all have to act,” he said. “But those who have polluted have to act more.”

Under its current policies, India’s carbon emissions will rise 50% by 2040, the IEA forecasts. That is more than any other country for which the IEA did projections, and is enough to cancel out the forecast fall in emissions from all of Europe.

In 2019, China had 9.8 billion tons of carbon emissions. The country’s climate scientists expect emissions to plateau at 10.5 billion tons, based on China’s current policies.

Mr. Xi also said that China would “strictly control coal-fired power generation projects” as well as “strictly limit the increase in coal consumption” through 2025 before starting to reduce it over the following five years.

This leaves room for China to further increase coal consumption in the next four years. China proposed 73.5 gigawatts of new coal-fired power last year, more than five times as much as the rest of the world combined. In 2020, coal supplied nearly 57% of China’s energy, according to China’s statistics bureau.

But the picture may not be as bad as it seems on the surface. A number of the coal-fired power plants that China has approved may never get built because they aren’t economically viable or likely desired by Beijing, said Zhang Xiliang, the director of the Institute of Energy, Environment, and Economy at Tsinghua University.

Coal-fired power plants already sit idle on average half the time over a year, according to statistics released by the China Electricity Council.

Mr. Kerry said in an interview last week that China’s timetable for reducing emissions was too slow.

Mr. Xi argued in his speech Thursday that China’s commitment to becoming carbon neutral from peak emissions was over a much shorter timespan than that of many developed countries and that it required extraordinary efforts from China.

Beijing accepted a number of proposals made by China’s leading climate experts in an October report, including reducing its carbon-emissions intensity more than 65% by 2030, compared with the 2005 level. But Mr. Xi’s announcement fell short of their recommendation to start cutting coal consumption before 2025.

Inertia in the current economic system and resistance from vested interests could make a quick shift toward emissions reduction difficult, China's experts said in the report.

India, too, needs to figure out how to slow and eventually halt its demand for new coal power, said Rahul Tongia, an energy analyst at the Indian think tank Centre for Social and Economic Progress, and adviser to the Indian government on the future of coal. Similar to China, the shift away from coal is complicated by politics and economics, since India's coal-mining industry supports employment and effectively subsidizes much of its citizens' rail-transport costs. At the moment, 48% of India's energy is supplied by coal, Mr. Tongia said.

India has already greenlighted around 100 gigawatts of new coal-fired power plants, although fewer than two-thirds are under construction and some may never get off the ground, analysts say, since they increasingly have to compete with cheaper solar.

Mr. Modi also repeated India's target to build 450 gigawatts of renewable energy capacity by 2030—around 60% of its power-generation capacity. The government is also encouraging companies to push into electric vehicles and battery production.

China, too, plans to increase its solar and wind power to over 1,200 gigawatts by 2030, more than double the amount presently in place.

Mr. Xi also stressed on Thursday that China had helped developing countries build capacity against climate change. A joint statement by Mr. Kerry and his Chinese counterpart, Xie Zhenhua, after the two met for talks last week, for the first time didn't contain the phrase "common but differentiated responsibilities," a reference to China's status as a developing country.

"For China, it's important to emphasize the difference between developing and developed countries," said climate researcher Mr. Myllyvirta, and to cast itself as a defender of the former.



China consumed more than half the world's coal in 2019, according to the International Energy Agency.

PHOTO: COSTFOTO/BARCROFT MEDIA/GETTY IMAGES

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Corrections & Amplifications

China will reduce coal consumption starting in 2026, Chinese President Xi Jinping said at the summit. An earlier version of the article incorrectly said China sought to phase down coal consumption starting in 2025. (Corrected on April 22.)

Appeared in the April 23, 2021, print edition as 'China, India Vow to Help, on Own Terms.'

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