

COVER STORY

CLEAR SKIES BY 2030

Cutting carbon emissions has emerged as a key area of Sino-U.S. cooperation **By Corrie Dosh**



The author is a contributing writer to *Beijing Review*, living in New York City

There are many topics on which China and the United States differ, but the need to reduce carbon emissions has become a shining example of bilateral cooperation and the future of the relationship between the world's two largest economies. U.S. President Barack Obama and Chinese President Xi Jinping on November 12 announced their strongest commitment yet on climate change—raising hopes that the foundation for a global accord on reducing greenhouse emissions can be built when representatives of more than 190 nations meet this month in Lima, Peru, at the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change.

While the U.S.-China deal is completely voluntary—no penalties exist for not meeting targets—supporters described it as a historic announcement. Over the next 15 years, China pledges to reach peak emissions of global greenhouse gases and to increase its reliance on non-fossil fuels to 20 percent of its total energy. The United States commits to reducing emissions by 26-28 percent from 2005 levels.

"There has been a lot of reaction, everything from 'this is a game changer' to 'this is business as usual' and a lot of speculation of whether this can really be pivotal in Lima," said Joanna Lewis, an associate professor in the Science, Technology and International Affairs

program at Georgetown University's Edmund A. Walsh School of Foreign Service during a November 24 teleconference sponsored by the National Committee on U.S.-China Relations.

While the challenges to implementing the climate change goals are significant, the "ambitious" announcement may motivate other nations to follow suit, Lewis said.

Alex Wang, an assistant professor at the UCLA School of Law, went a step beyond, calling the deal "monumental."

"It's a major step forward," Wang said. "In addition to the targets there have been follow-up announcements. The United States pledged \$3 billion to the Green Climate Fund and China announced an energy plan that talked about a coal consumption cap. So, those are important follow-up announcements."

Implementation is the hot button issue, he added. Many critics have said that China has many environmental laws on the books that are not enforced due to regional protectionism and the lack of data collection, but the latest commitments are different—they are part of a broader economic transformation away from heavy industry and toward cleaner, more efficient economic growth.

"Pressure has been intensifying over the last two years with the problems in air pollution," Wang said. "There are concerns of protectionism but the new economy has new interests. There is a lot of money to be made in the clean energy economy."

China is moving closer to implementing a carbon tax, he said, which would be important for implementation. It is unfeasible to require heavy industry to reduce emissions with a



cheap and easy supply of coal around them, especially when monitoring and enforcement is nearly impossible. Making energy efficiency cost effective is essential.

The United States has faced the same challenge, Wang said. Increasing investment in natural gas to make it an affordable, clean alternative to fossil fuels has damaged the coal lobby and helped reach emission targets.

The pledge creates a major incentive for technological solutions to create cleaner energy. Fossil fuels still provide roughly 80 percent of the world's energy and weaning countries off coal and oil could cause economic collapse. Enterprising innovators who are able to market cost-effective solutions to help governments



COOPERATION COMMITMENTS: Chinese President Xi Jinping and U.S. President Barack Obama attend a joint press conference following their agreement on a climate deal and other issues in talks in Beijing on November 12

up together, that's a big thing," Todd Stern, U.S. special envoy for climate change, told reporters at a forum held by the Center for American Progress.

The non-binding pledge may also be a model for a global agreement for next year's UN Climate Change Conference in Paris. The objective of the 2015 conference is to achieve, for the first time in over 20 years of UN negotiations, a binding and universal agreement on climate, from all the nations of the world.

"The vision of an international binding agreement is wrong. Countries need to see it's in their own interest and see [emission reduction] as positive," Wang said.

The agreement also makes China a major player in the global climate debate. With a commitment by the world's largest emitters, other countries have run out of excuses. Chinese and American emissions represent 42 percent of main greenhouse gas emissions, and smaller countries and developing economies have feared their emission cuts would be useless unless the major players take action.

"I'm very interested to see if this announcement has some reverberations. China is now in a position

where it is clearly the largest emitter. It will be interesting to see if it will influence Brazil, India and South Africa," Lewis said.

The United States, as well, has run out of excuses to take action.

"The argument that the United States cannot act because China won't act has finally begun to fade. A very understandable anxiety—that America cannot cut carbon emissions while our biggest competitor keeps burning dirty energy with no end in sight—can now be put to rest," wrote Fred Krupp, President of the Environmental Defense Fund, in the *Wall Street Journal*. ■

reach their climate change goals will have a big advantage.

A way forward

Environmental issues have been elevated in the context of the U.S.-China relationship over the past five years, Lewis said.

"It's surprising to think we could have an agreement like this since [China and the United States] seem to have such different positions," she said. "When you look at the bilateral relationship in the broader context, climate change has arisen as the issue where we have far more in common than not. Even though there are fundamental disagreements, we still have the same goal."

While cooperation on climate change is be-

coming a key foundation of the future between the great powers, significant political obstacles remain. The timing of the announcement and the fact that it is not an enforceable agreement are significant. It would be nearly impossible for Obama to pass a climate change treaty through a hostile Congress, but the high-level, highly public announcement of intentions creates a "momentum" for work that doesn't make headlines, Wang said. This model could be used in other areas of bilateral relations such as terrorism and trade.

"I think the notion that the United States and China—who have been these two big players on opposite sides of the fence and viewed as the biggest antagonists—were able to stand

FANG XINGLI