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The Direction of US-China Climate Cooperation in the Era of "Global Boiling"

Yumi Iijima (Research Fellow, The Japan Institute of International Affairs)

The era of "global boiling"

In the summer of 2023, the world was hit by severe heat waves and high temperatures, and the global average temperature in July was reportedly the highest-ever in recorded history. On July 27, UN Secretary-General Juan Manuel Guterres held a press conference in which he stated that "the era of global warming is over and the era of global boiling has arrived¹," and appealed to the world for dramatic and urgent measures². He also called for more ambitious emission reduction targets – especially for the G20 countries, which account for about 80% of the world's greenhouse gas emissions – and called for adaptation measures and increased climate finance.

The second half of 2023 will see the Africa Climate Summit, the G20 Summit, the UN Climate Ambition Summit, the APEC Leaders' Summit, and the 28th Conference of the Parties (COP28) to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change, all of which will feature high-level political discussions related to climate change as awareness of the urgent need to address climate change increases. COP28, to be held in Dubai, United Arab Emirates (UAE) from November 30 to December 12, 2023, will be the first Global Stocktake (GST) compilation to assess progress in addressing climate change worldwide based on the Paris Agreement reached in 2015. A strong message may be sent out urging countries to strengthen their climate actions and significantly increase their emission reduction targets to continue pursuing the climate goal of limiting global average temperature increase to within 1.5 degrees Celsius of pre-industrial levels. It is also expected that a fund dedicated to "loss and

damage" (L&D), agreement on the establishment of which was reached at COP 27 in 2022, will be set up to assist developing countries particularly vulnerable to the adverse effects of climate change. With developed countries failing to fulfill their previous commitment to provide \$100 billion per year to help developing countries combat climate change, a key focus will be on how the international community can achieve enhanced climate finance as the new fund becomes operational.

Resumption of US-China climate dialogue

From the perspective of combating global climate change, the resumption of US-China climate dialogue in July 2023 is for the moment good news for the international community, as it is expected to increase the political momentum toward COP28 and strengthen the commitment of the United States and China, which together account for about 40% of global greenhouse gas emissions.

US-China environmental cooperation has a long history, especially through high-level climate dialogues in the energy and climate domains during the Obama administration. US-China climate cooperation has not only advanced the climate change measures of the two governments but has also facilitated joint research by US and Chinese research institutions and cooperation and exchange between non-state actors. In addition, the alignment of the United States and China, the two largest emitters and two largest economies, on climate change measures will have an important effect in promoting global climate change measures. For example, the two countries, which had long held different positions in international climate change negotiations, reached agreement through a series of bilateral climate dialogues in search of a compromise, which ultimately facilitated multilateral international negotiations and led to the passage of the Paris Agreement in 2015 and its early entry into force the following year. Moreover, progress in US-China climate cooperation also facilitated international agreements in related areas, such as ozone layer protection and emission reductions in international aviation.

However, since the breakdown of climate dialogue during the Trump administration, President Biden, just like his predecessor, has been focused on climate change measures, but the main axis of US-China relations has shifted to strategic competition, so climate cooperation, which was sometimes seen as a safe zone in US-China relations, has taken on a different aspect. The issue of climate change is no longer a purely cooperative area and is being eroded by the race for technological hegemony and economic security. While the US-China confrontation has deepened, the Biden administration (especially John Kerry, presidential envoy for climate issues) has persuaded the Chinese to treat climate change as an independent, nonpolitical issue, but Beijing has resisted separating climate change from the many contentious issues between the US and China. This kind of attitude probably reflects disappointment on the part of the Chinese side, which had hoped for a major shift in the US's policy toward China with the Biden administration's maintenance of a confrontational stance on trade and other issues. In September 2021, Foreign Minister Wang Yi said during an online meeting with Special Envoy John Kerry, who was visiting Tianjin, China, that "The US side hopes that the climate change cooperation will become an 'oasis' in China-US relations, but if the 'oasis' is surrounded by 'deserts',

the 'oasis' will sooner or later be sanded away", and "it is impossible to separate US-China climate cooperation from the overall environment of US-China relations" and expressed his intention to seek improvements in overall US-China relations³.

Then, in August 2022, China declared eight countermeasures against the US following a visit to Taiwan by US House Speaker Nancy Pelosi, one of which was to cancel climate change talks⁴. As a result, the first official meeting of the US-China Working Group on Climate Change, scheduled to be held in September of the same year, was cancelled⁵. The working group was expected to be a substantive step forward in cooperation based on the April 2021 US-China Joint Statement Addressing the Climate Crisis and the US-China Joint Glasgow Declaration on Enhancing Climate Action in the 2020s released during COP26 in November of the same year⁶, so this cancellation was met with disappointment among the climate community. After China's suspension of climate change talks, the US passed the Inflation Control Act, which is thought to include the largest climate change measures in history, and US and Chinese government officials argued on Twitter (now X) over each other's climate change responses⁷.

After a year-long hiatus in the climate dialogue, Kerry paid a visit to China in mid-July 2023. Prior to his visit, he said that the main goal of his trip to China was to "establish some stability," and the State Department's official statement indicated a modest objective: "to engage with the PRC on addressing the climate crisis, including with respect to increasing implementation and ambition and promoting a successful COP28."⁸ Kerry was in China from July 16-19 and held a series of discussions with the Chinese climate change team, including China's Special Envoy for Climate Change Affairs Xie Zhenhua at the Beijing Hotel; he also met with Premier Li Qiang, Politburo member Wang Yi, and Vice President Han Zheng. The US Special Envoy and his counterpart Special Envoy Xie Zhenhua are believed to have held informal talks during COP27 and online discussions based on the agreement at the US-China summit at the November 2022 G20 Summit. Now they have officially resumed face-to-face US-China climate dialogue. Although there was no official press conference after the discussions, Xie appeared smiling in front of the media after a five-hour discussion on the 18th, stating they would continue discussions on the 19th. Compared to earlier visits by Secretary of State Anthony Blinken, Treasury Secretary Janet Yellen and Kerry had more substantive and detailed discussions with the Chinese side. However, after approximately 12 hours of talks, no joint statement was released, and the main achievement was the confirmation of continued dialogue.

Upon concluding his visit to China, Kerry revealed in a press conference that he plans to hold intensive discussions on climate change with China in the coming weeks⁹. Indeed, about a week after his visit, it was announced that Xie had an online meeting with his US counterpart, showing that the dialogue is ongoing¹⁰.

The outcome of Kerry's visit may be seen as a restart to deepen dialogues in specific areas with China for stabilizing US-China relations and advancing climate cooperation. At the very least, the

intention to continue climate negotiations has been confirmed on the Chinese side, and substantive results are expected from intensive discussions. However, while China agreed to resume climate talks, it did not fully agree to treat the climate change issue independently from US-China political tensions. Wang Yi, who met with Kerry, reiterated that US-China climate cooperation cannot be separated from the overall US-China relationship. On the other hand, President Xi Jinping, at a national ecological and environmental protection conference held around the same time, stated that China's climate goals are unshakable (presumably a message to domestic bureaucrats and local governments), but that the approach, pace, and intensity should be determined by China itself and not be influenced by others¹¹. This suggests China is not ready to make concessions under unilateral pressure from the US and insists on discussions on an equal footing.

US and Chinese envoys to promote climate dialogue

It is undeniable that both Presidents Biden and Xi prioritize climate change more than their predecessors. However, it remains to be seen how far the two countries can advance concrete climate cooperation in the future. Developments in US-China tensions and the domestic circumstances in both countries are expected to greatly influence this progress. One of the reasons for the optimism surrounding the US-China climate talks was the positive impact that negotiators from both sides could bring.

Shortly after his election in November 2020, President Biden appointed former Secretary of State John Kerry as his special presidential envoy for climate. Kerry tweeted, "America will soon have a government that treats the climate crisis as an urgent national security threat¹²." On his inauguration day in January 2021, President Biden signed an executive order rejoining the Paris Agreement. In response to the proactive stance of the Biden administration, the Chinese government appointed Xie, who had been semi-retired, as its special envoy for climate change in February of the same year¹³. Xie had led China's climate negotiation delegation for over a decade before stepping down in 2019. He had mentioned in media interviews after his retirement that he wanted to spend more time with his family. The decision to bring Xie out of retirement was seen as a signal of China's eagerness and hope for cooperation with the US. Both the US and Chinese special envoys are influential figures in the climate field and have built personal trust over 20+ years. There was growing optimism that US-China climate cooperation like that during the Obama administration might be realized.

Since taking office, the Biden administration has attempted to demonstrate international leadership on climate change by holding the Leaders' Summit on Climate and intensifying engagement with China at both multilateral and bilateral levels. Meanwhile, Beijing also sought to improve its international image and expand its influence through climate diplomacy. From a climate leadership perspective, there exists competition between the US and China. During the Trump administration, when the US federal government was absent from international climate initiatives, the Xi administration, which likely prided itself on defending the effective implementation of the Paris Agreement and seeking climate

leadership with Europe, showed signs of challenging President Biden but agreed on bilateral climate cooperation.

Supported by both leaders, Kerry visited China twice in 2021 and held discussions and, as mentioned earlier, two joint statements were released. Special envoys Kerry and Xie had 31 online dialogues and four lengthy face-to-face consultations during their first year in office. However, despite having suitable personnel to discuss climate change, political conflicts hindered cooperation. Xie, who had played a role in advancing US-China climate cooperation, faces health concerns that cast doubt on his future role, and there have been reports of Kerry expressing an intention to resign. Neither has clarified his position post-COP28. Going forward, the veteran climate diplomats from the US and China might aim to achieve results as the culmination of their careers. However, the international community might also witness the limits of a US-China climate cooperation model that relies heavily on high-level personal relationships.

Circumstances in both the US and China regarding climate cooperation

Since Kerry's visit to China, intensive US-China climate negotiations have gotten underway, driven by the desire to realize a US-China summit in the US in November and the American side's urgent need to achieve tangible results in diplomacy and domestic policy as the 2024 presidential election approaches. China's involvement in international climate negotiations has always been treated as a precondition for America's involvement. However, the Biden administration, aiming to demonstrate climate leadership and making climate change measures a key policy, wishes to obtain significant concessions from China to convince Congress and facilitate the implementation of domestic climate policy. The US wants China to intensify cooperation on issues such as reducing methane emissions, transitioning from coal, and adopting renewable energy. Furthermore, although China is the world's leading emitter and has historically maintained its status as a developing nation using the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change's principle of "common but differentiated responsibilities" (CBDR) as a shield, the US wants China to take actions beyond this status and commit to financial contributions for developing countries. Additionally, by negotiating with China, the US hopes to ease tensions with developing and emerging nations and pave the way for international collaboration towards COP28.

The tone of the Biden administration's remarks has softened on the resumption of high-level US-China dialogue, emphasizing the need for dialogue with China. However, the hardline stance towards China in the US Congress is strengthening, and it can be said that there is no established domestic political foundation supporting deeper US-China climate cooperation. In a subcommittee hearing of the House Foreign Affairs Committee before his China visit¹⁴, Kerry faced criticism from representatives and was accused of being too soft on China. Some Republican members even voiced opposition to "decoupling" the issue of climate change from US-China relations.

On the other hand, China surely understands the logic of US domestic politics and will not make concessions just for the sake of aiding the US president and his team. They will want equivalent concessions from the US side. Given the upcoming US presidential election in 2024, China may question the continuity of US climate diplomacy and environmental policies and evaluate whether the US can truly honor its climate commitments and promises to China. Notably, China insists that recent visits by US government officials indicate American conciliation, and China's envoy Xie Zhenhua in April 2023 invited Kerry to visit China during an US-hosted online forum¹⁵, hinting at China's strong desire to resume climate dialogues.

Chinese experts believe that, while there are doubts about the compatibility between trade barriers on Chinese-made solar panels and the progress of climate cooperation, they expect technological collaboration with the US to be crucial for achieving climate goals. Recalling the success of the Paris Agreement, the Chinese government sees benefits in coordinating with the US to shape the tone of international negotiations, preventing the establishment of international systems that are excessively disadvantageous for China¹⁶.

However, it is not only that the US is urging China to make a greater commitment; China is also actively expanding its own climate diplomacy in multiple regions, viewing climate change measures as a vital element in strengthening relations with countries in Europe and elsewhere. While facing increasing international pressure to take on more significant responsibility, China is providing support for developing countries outside the UN climate framework, especially intensifying relations with countries where climate change measures are a high priority.

On the other hand, the reason China cannot easily adjust its climate targets to meet international expectations is due to increasingly complex domestic circumstances. While President Xi Jinping's emphasis on climate change measures and the government's commitment to achieving its declared climate targets remain unchanged, China continues to expand renewable energy capacity and investment. However, the power shortages that occurred in 2021 and 2022 have prompted the country to urgently strengthen its energy security response. Consequently, there has been simultaneous progress made in building new coal-fired power plants and expanding coal usage. The post-pandemic economic recovery is not going as expected, and carbon-intensive economic stimuli may be adopted despite conflicting with climate goals. As mentioned by President Xi Jinping, there's a desire to prioritize domestic conditions when determining how to achieve or raise climate targets.

Conclusion

With competition rather than cooperation defining the US-China relationship, and with both sides looking to extract concessions from the other, it is unclear whether US-China climate cooperation will make progress. For example, it seems almost impossible for the US to ease trade-related restrictions on China or for China to make significant concessions on coal use, and it would be difficult at this point to extract concessions on bringing forward China's long-term climate goals (especially its carbon neutrality goal). One of the items that the US and China are most likely to discuss is the expansion of

renewable energy, and it is possible that some progress will be made on methane, for which an agreement was reached in 2021, with the Chinese side presenting a reduction plan. In addition, the US and China probably share the desire to complete some preliminary bilateral coordination in advance of COP28 for the sake of their respective interests. It is hoped that these discussions will take climate cooperation ideas that are particularly easy to discuss as a starting point, and that some kind of outcome will emerge by COP28.

This is an English translation of a Japanese paper originally published on August 21, 2023.

¹ <https://press.un.org/en/2023/sgsm21893.doc.htm>

² This statement comes as the World Meteorological Organization (WMO) and the Copernicus Climate Change Service (C3S) announced that the global average temperature for July 2023 is expected to be the hottest month on record.

³ https://www.mfa.gov.cn/web/wjzbzhd/202109/t20210901_9137796.shtml

⁴ https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/zyxw/202208/t20220805_10735604.shtml

⁵ <https://www.climatechangenews.com/2022/08/08/us-china-climate-working-group-cancelled-after-pelosi-taiwan-visit/#:~:text=US%2DChina%20climate%20working%20group%20cancelled%20after%20Pelosi's%20Taiwan%20visit,-Published%20on%2008&text=China%20has%20cancelled%20a%20planned,representatives%20Nancy%20Pelosi%20visited%20Taiwan.>

⁶ Discussions were to begin on issues such as reducing methane emissions, clean electricity, circular economies, and cities' climate change policies.

⁷ <https://climatechangenews.com/2022/08/17/china-responds-coolly-to-us-climate-bill-rejecting-a-call-to-resume-cooperation/>

⁸ <https://www.state.gov/special-presidential-envoy-for-climate-kerrys-travel-to-the-peoples-republic-of-china/>

⁹ <https://www.state.gov/digital-press-briefing-with-john-f-kerry-special-presidential-envoy-for-climate/#content>

¹⁰ https://www.mfa.gov.cn/web/wjzbzhd/202109/t20210901_9137796.shtml

¹¹ <https://www.ccchina.org.cn/Detail.aspx?newsId=74458&TId=57>

¹² <https://twitter.com/JohnKerry/status/1330925522579312640>

¹³ <https://thediplomat.com/2021/02/china-brings-back-long-time-climate-czar/>

¹⁴ <https://foreignaffairs.house.gov/hearing/the-state-departments-climate-agenda-a-budget-overview-by-the-special-presidential-envoy-for-climate/>

¹⁵ Special Envoy Kerry revealed this in an interview with *Foreign Policy* magazine: (<https://foreignpolicy.com/live/john-kerry-on-the-climate-challenge/>) .

¹⁶ In the process of the international community working toward the establishment of a climate regime (Paris Agreement) involving all parties, including developing countries, China was wary of attempts by the United States to dilute the CBDR principle, but bilateral dialogue settled the conflict over CBDR, and the CBDR phrase "in light of the different circumstances of each country" as agreed by both countries is now clearly stated in the Paris Agreement.