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Reserved yet Influential: China's Role in COP30

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KEY TAKEAWAYS

-  After submitting its updated National Determined Contribution (NDC) with only modest improvements, China's role at recent COP30 was ambivalent: restrained in formal negotiations, yet highly active in the non-negotiation space.
-  China's active engagement in promoting the just transition mechanism at the COP was tempered by its strong reluctance to accept any commitments or references to a transition away from fossil-fuels and climate funding. According to its own reporting, China has made significant contributions to climate finance, though transparency remains limited.
-  In the non-negotiation space, China focused on showcasing its implementation efforts including its achievements within South–South cooperation, and its major advances in green technology – developments that non-Chinese visitors often used as grounds to portray China as a global climate leader. China, however, remained distinctly cautious and reportedly pushed back against being labeled a leader in climate policy.
-  China's civil sector contribution to COP was limited, with NGOs aligning closely with government priorities and exerting far less pressure on China's climate commitments than civil sectors elsewhere. The Chinese business sector, on the other hand, was highly active with many technology companies attending COP to promote their technological innovations.
-  While the EU continues to rely primarily on standards and regulatory approaches in its external climate policy and fails to engage more effectively with the priorities and perceptions of Global South partners, China's popularity appeared to increase with the Chinese pavilion being heavily visited throughout the conference. Furthermore, China's restrained pledges at COP such as in the topics of fossil fuel transition or contribution to financing did not seem to diminish its positive standing among Global South countries.

Keywords

Conference of the Parties (COP30)

Environmental Leadership

Green Technologies

Decarbonization

South-South Cooperation

Climate Funding

Unilateral Trade Measures (UTMs)



Introduction

The genesis of China's participation in global climate politics has undergone a drastic transformation over the past decades. While China rejected binding climate protection measures during the 2009 Copenhagen Climate Change Conference, it soon shifted its stance and is now increasingly regarded as a major contributor to global climate governance. ^[1] Throughout this evolution, China has consistently distinguished itself from the developed countries, which, due to historical circumstances, have produced far more greenhouse gas emissions.

China has long viewed and continues to view itself as a developing country, insisting on the principle of "common but differentiated responsibilities," introduced in the early 2000s. This principle argues that developing countries should be allowed to prioritize economic development over environmental protection. Since industrialized nations have been emitting greenhouse gases for a much longer period, they are expected to take the lead in climate protection efforts and support developing countries through technology transfer and environmental financing. ^[2]

As China came under growing international pressure due to its high emissions, it reinforced its stance by forming alliances with other countries: first within the Group of 77, later in the BASIC group (Brazil, South Africa, India, and China), and eventually in the coalition of Like-Minded Developing Countries. ^[3] Despite these strategic partnerships, China agreed at the 2013 climate negotiations in Warsaw (COP19) to the framework of Intended Nationally Determined Contributions (INDCs), thereby committing itself to nationally determined

measures for reducing emissions. In 2015, China set specific national targets through 2030, which were updated again in 2020. Recently, in early November 2025, China released its updated NDC outlining targets for 2035.

Notably, China has already surpassed two of its 2030 NDC goals. These include the expansion of wind and solar capacity, which reached 1,673 GW by June 2025 [4]—well above the 2030 target of 1,200 GW—and the increase in forest stock volume (an increase in plantation tree cover, which does not necessarily reflect sustainable forest growth [5]), originally set to grow by around 6 billion m³ from 2005 levels (to approximately 12.5 billion m³), but already exceeding 20 billion m³ in 2024. [6] China is also close to meeting its goal of raising the share of non-fossil fuels in primary energy consumption to “around 25%.” [7]

On the downside however, not only have studies in recent years questioned the actual emission footprint of green technology produced in the highly coal power dependent China [8], but they also raised concerns in Europe and other regions about China’s strategic interest in dominating emerging markets for “green technologies” [9] such as renewable energy, lithium-ion batteries, and electric vehicles. [10]

Nonetheless, China’s rapid development in technologies serving for climate adaption has led to increasingly optimistic perspectives and assumptions worldwide about whether China could become a global climate leader. Thus, this policy paper examines China’s role and behavior at the recently held and highly significant COP30 in order to elucidate China’s current position within broader global climate politics. For this purpose, we conducted a series of interviews between November 2025 and January 2026 with COP participants involved either in the negotiations or in the conference’s side events. The interviewees included representatives from NGOs, government officials at the local, national, and supranational levels, as well as members of research institutions. Regarding the nationalities of the interviewees, they included both Chinese and non-Chinese participants, as well as visitors from countries in the Global North and the Global South, in order to capture the broadest possible range of perspectives from all attendees. All interviews and data were anonymized.

Before COP30 – Limited ambition in China’s 2035 NDC

In the lead-up to COP30, countries released their new National Determined Contributions (NDC), outlining their climate ambitions for the coming decade. Soon after China published its NDC, initial analyses and reports described it as a “missed opportunity” to assume global climate leadership, noting that China is not filling the vacuum left by the United States. [11]

Key targets of China's 2035 National Determined Contributions (NDC)

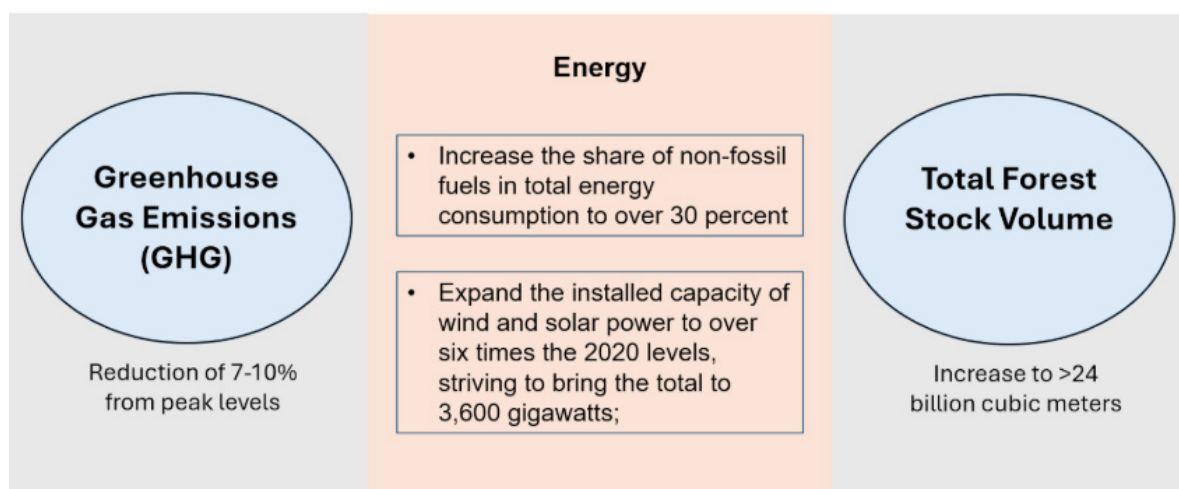


Fig.1: Own graph based on China's 2035 NDC [12]

China's 2035 NDC includes, for the first time, an absolute GHG emissions reduction target calling for a 7–10% decrease from peak levels by 2035. It also provides updated renewable energy goals, including a higher share of non-fossil fuels in total energy consumption and expanded installed capacity for wind and solar power, as well as a revised target for increasing forest stock volume. Although the targets in China's 2035 NDC represent a modest improvement, they fall far short of what would be required to meet the goals of the Paris Agreement, namely limiting global warming to at least 2°C, ideally to 1.5°C. Estimates suggest that China's new emissions reduction target of 7–10% by 2035 is not sufficient for the limitation of global warming to maximal 2°C, but instead would contribute to the world going on a trajectory of roughly 3°C warming by 2100, with catastrophic climate impacts. [13]

Furthermore, experts have raised doubts about the credibility and feasibility of the new NDC targets. For instance, the GHG emissions target contains a significant loophole, as it does not specify a peak-emissions year. Likewise, the impact of the renewable-energy targets is limited in the absence of a cap on fossil fuels – or even any reference to one. [14] Thus, as one energy expert noted, if China's emissions peak were to occur as late as 2040, the country could still technically meet the 7–10% reduction target for 2035, while still allowing emissions to rise up until 2040. [15]

Following the publication of the updated NDC, the two-day “high level segment” at which the leaders of all countries give speeches on their views and plans of climate change were marked by China emphasizing that it remains committed to climate actions including a green and low-carbon transition, yet lacking any reference to China's contribution to climate finance or its carbon intensity reduction progress. Instead, Vice Premier Ding Xuexiang stressed repeatedly that developed countries to which China still doesn't count itself should contribute most to emission reduction, finance commitments, as well as technology and capacity

building. Ultimately, he also criticized that the EU's and US' decoupling measures include restricting imports of "green products" such as solar panels and electric vehicles—actions that, from China's perspective, are inconsistent with the climate progress and leadership role the EU claims. [16] As in the case of India and the United States, China's head of government, Xi Jinping, was not present in the high-level meetings and negotiations drawing criticism in international media, given that these three countries are currently the world's largest environmental polluters. [17]

During COP30 – A Birthday without Presents

Despite COP30 marking both the 30th anniversary of the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) Conference of the Parties (COP) and the 10th anniversary of the adoption of the Paris Agreement, which aims to limit global warming to ideally 1.5°C and at most 2°C, the overall outcome was rather sobering and fell short of delivering more concrete commitments and actions.

The U.S. government's absence from COP30, combined with China's highly publicized leadership in green technologies such as renewable energy, had sparked speculation about whether China would assume a leadership role at the climate summit. [18] Contrary to these expectations, during COP30, several Chinese climate officials rejected this characterization [19], and the term "leader" was reportedly more used by non-Chinese representatives and visitors attending events at the Chinese pavilion. [20]

This aligns with the general trend of more international, often non-Chinese observers attributing certain achievements, optimistic projections, or claims of leadership to China, while China responds very cautiously or avoids confirming them. A recent example is the discussion about a potential early emissions peak of China. [21] While in late 2024 and early 2025 numerous international experts and think tanks speculated about China reaching its carbon-emissions peak and shared optimistic prognoses, China did not officially respond to those claims. [22] During COP30, China rather presented itself simply as a "committed actor and active contributor to green and low-carbon development". [23]

When looking at the two distinct spheres of activity at the COP – the Blue Zone for official delegations on the one hand, and the Green Zone, which is open to the public and focuses on dialogue among civil society, the private sector, and governments on sustainable solutions, on the other hand – China's presence, level of activity, and degree of ambition appeared distinct.

Reserved in Negotiations

In the negotiations at COP30, China offered little substantive input, let alone a leadership role. Observers noted that China, despite being the world's largest emitter, maintains a strong view that climate change is primarily a problem caused by developed countries, which should take the lead in addressing it. [24] Despite still being considered a developing country under the

UNFCCC, more and more countries have called for China to shoulder greater responsibility due to its growing economy and emissions. [25] At COP30, China primarily called for increased climate finance from developed countries as part of the Like-Minded Developing Countries (LMDC) group and advocated for its inclusion on the summit's agenda. In the second week, China put forward a proposal for a "practical roadmap" to guide developed countries in meeting the \$300 billion New Collective Quantified Goal (NCQG) climate-finance target. The demand ultimately resulted in the adoption of a "two-year work programme on climate finance," in which, however, developing countries are also required to contribute. [26]

Most notably, China didn't make any pledge to invest into Brazil's new forest fund, the Tropical Forest Forever Facility (TFFF). After news media had reported in summer of 2025 that China could be interested to contribute, China did not make any further clarification to why it did not invest. [27] Chinese reports state that, since 2016, China has provided and mobilized over \$24.5 billion to support climate projects in developing countries. However, these figures come without any explanation of how they were calculated or what the investments entailed, reflecting the broader lack of transparency surrounding Chinese-administered climate funds. [28]

Another major topic at COP30 was the issue of Unilateral Trade Measures (UTMs), which China openly opposed, describing them as a "new injustice". [29] UTMs include tariffs and similar instruments that impose costs on imports based on their embedded greenhouse-gas emissions. China was not alone in its stance; developing countries in particular have voiced their objections earlier in 2025. [30] While such measures are intended to create global incentives for low-emission production, many developing countries—including China—argue that they exacerbate inequality and hinder the export and global dissemination of green technologies, such as renewable-energy equipment and electric vehicles. [31]

Additionally, China strongly advocated at COP30 for the development of the Just Transition Mechanism, which is intended to provide technical assistance, foster international cooperation, and support partnerships to address implementation gaps. The newly established "Just Transition Work Programme" (JTWP) was hailed by many civil-society groups as a "victory," as it creates an institutional mechanism that can serve as a centralized hub for supporting just transitions worldwide. However, the drafting of the final text saw multiple disagreements of China with both developed countries and developing countries. [32]

Firstly, the G77/China called for discussing UTMs within the framework of the JTWP, a proposal supported by the Arab Group and Russia. [33] This was opposed by developed countries, particularly the EU, which argued that UTMs fall outside the scope of the JTWP discussions and proposed addressing export restrictions on raw materials essential for clean technology and energy. [34]

Secondly, regarding the issue of transitioning away from fossil fuels, there were disagreements over what should be included in the text. China opposed the inclusion of a paragraph that "recognized" the "risks arising from the extraction and processing of critical minerals". [35]

Notably, this put China at odds with several countries in the LMDCs and the Africa Group, who indicated that references to critical minerals were important to them. Ultimately, China prevailed in its position, and the final text approved in the closing plenary did not include any reference to critical minerals, transitioning away from fossil fuels, or trade measures. [36]

In general, China's contribution to fossil-fuel transition negotiations at COP30 was minimal. Although China faced significant pressure regarding its emissions-mitigation approach, it did not join the calls for developing a roadmap away from fossil fuels, which were ultimately driven mainly by Colombia and the Netherlands. [37] China also opposed efforts to place emphasis on the 1.5°C temperature limit, "requesting the entire Paris Agreement temperature goal...be mentioned". [38] In an interview, Chinese climate envoy Liu Zhenmin explained that the country considered a fossil-fuel roadmap "unfeasible" because, from China's perspective, the proponents of such a roadmap are too focused on rapidly phasing out fossil fuels without giving sufficient consideration to alternative energy sources. He expressed concerns that this would threaten energy security, economic growth, and social stability. [39]

However, China was keen in strengthening the view that it is China's clean-tech economy – rather than its climate diplomacy – that will be the real force shaping global climate action in the years ahead. [40] China showcased this largely through its activities in the non-negotiation space, which played an important role in highlighting its "doer" profile and its existing clean-tech achievements.

Highly Active and Influential in the Non-Negotiation Space

In the Blue Zone of the COP, designed for informal networking and where each country can set up a national pavilion to host a series of side events showcasing work being done in that country, promoting it as a destination for climate-related investment, and often including third-country experts for knowledge sharing, China was noticeably more active and ambitious, exerting greater influence here than in the formal negotiations at COP30. Several think tanks and research institutes had reported that a heightened attention had been given to the China Pavilion. [41]

Many of the 19 thematic side events, 14 featured activities, and 4 exhibitions revolved around the core theme of green technological innovation, showcasing developments in renewable energy – such as solar and wind power – as well as e-mobility and battery technologies. [42] Further side events organized by China covered topics such as the national carbon market, subnational climate action, and South-South cooperation, among others. Hosted by various government departments and research institutions, the events also featured participation from a wide range of Chinese companies – many coming from the energy and clean-tech sector encompassing State Grid and major state-owned oil firms, private solar, wind, and battery manufacturers. [43] In addition, Chinese automakers provided electric vehicles for use during the negotiations, and companies including Tencent, Three Gorges, Longi, and

CATL presented contributions to climate- and environment-related technology. [44] Subsequently, some media outlets criticized China for leveraging the conference as a business platform that serves its commercial interests. [45] Nevertheless, the implementation-focused events, which included numerous presentations of “best practices,” were highly appreciated by non-Chinese attendees and prompted many of them to attribute a leadership role to China. Reportedly, many delegates from Global South countries were interested in China’s provision of clean-energy technologies [46] and the practical experiences shared with regard to a rapid transition. [47]

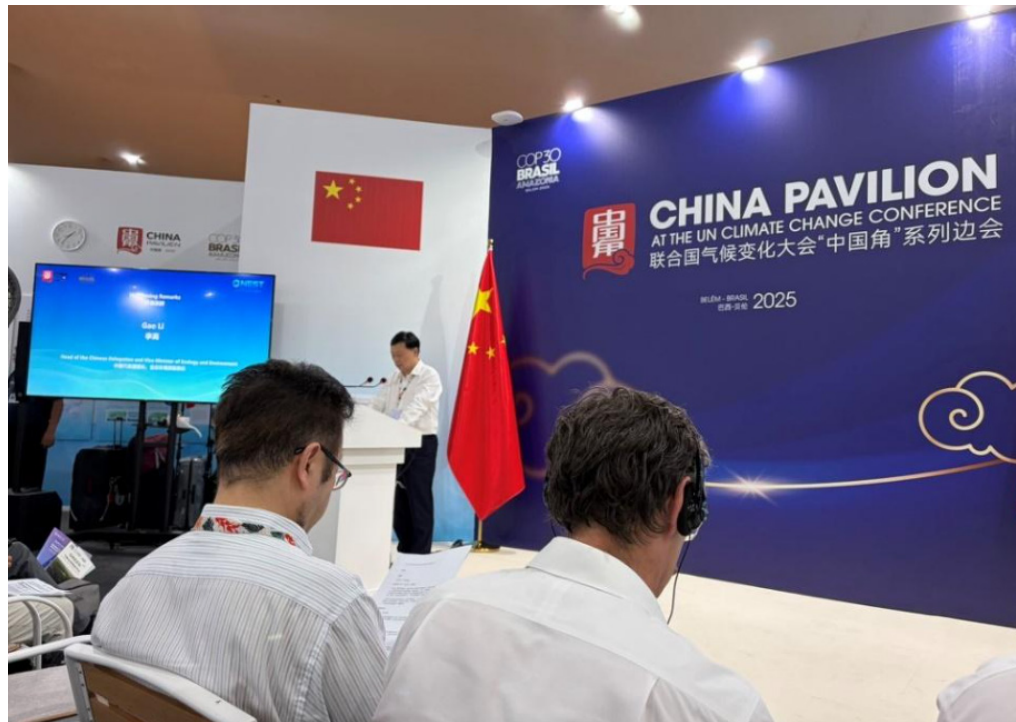


Fig.2: Side-event at the Chinese Pavilion (Photo taken by COP visitor)

South-South cooperation was given a prominent role at the Chinese pavilion. On the first day of COP30, the pavilion hosted a “high-level summit” on the topic, signaling China’s emphasis on listening to the needs of developing countries – a strength often highlighted in comparison to the EU. China also signed multiple climate agreements with other Global South countries and launched initiatives such as a clean-stove program with Kenya and Malawi. Visitors from Global South countries frequently attended the pavilion, with the South-South cooperation session being particularly well-attended. [48] In this way, China leveraged the COP to expand its global network, including the promotion of its green and renewable energy technologies and companies. [49]

Another key factor behind China’s high influence and popularity in the non-negotiation spaces of the COP was the design of its pavilion. Since its first launch in 2011, the Chinese pavilion has undergone a remarkable transformation from a simple, closed white space accessible only by appointment to a highly welcoming and attractive venue featuring networking areas,

a buffet, a stage, and numerous posters and displays. This evolution reflects the Chinese government's growing focus on non-negotiating arenas of the COP and its desire to present itself as a popular, engaging, and ambitious actor. By showcasing traditional cultural elements and souvenirs, the pavilion drew large crowds throughout the conference, with visitors lining up for snacks, souvenirs, and participatory photo and video opportunities, standing out in popularity compared with neighboring pavilions. [50]

Domestic participation and media coverage of COP30 in China

While civil society, particularly indigenous communities in South America, played a more active role at this year's COP than in previous years and received substantial media coverage in many countries, increasing control over the non-profit sector in China have significantly constrained NGO and environmental activism over recent years. China's limitation on civic self-organization has shaped China's contributions to global climate negotiations and within China's pavilion, environmental NGOs and institutions largely aligned with government positions, exerting far less pressure or critique than their counterparts in liberal countries.

A main difference in media coverage of the COP lies in Western media largely criticizing COP for limited results and their own countries' shortcomings, while Chinese media focused on positive outcomes, highlighting China's role and contributions, occasionally noting that developed countries – meaning "the West" – could have done more. [51] Moreover, reports particularly highlighted the COP's success in engaging all nations, especially those most affected, while emphasizing China's contributions and its commitment to 'strive to do better,' often paired with its standard political slogans. [52]



Fig.3: Screenshot of a Chinese news media article depicting visitors lining up for souvenirs at the Chinese Pavilion [53]

Domestically, COP and China's contributions to it were broadly covered by mainstream media, however most followed by energy researchers and professionals, who closely track China's environmental policy developments. However, the UN's strategy of appointing prominent figures as climate ambassadors – such as the young actor Ding Yuxi serving as a special UN media commissioner – also reached parts of the general public, who engaged with his speeches and COP-related content, often sharing it on Chinese social media. [54]

After COP30 – China Remains Popular

Despite China's limited engagement in areas such as mitigation, finance, and fossil fuel negotiations, its popularity within the global community – especially among developing countries – does not appear to have been shaken. This may be partly due to China's strong promotion and visibility, which reached a peak at COP30.

Furthermore, the trend of the EU's declining popularity and the Global South increasingly aligning with China continued, [55] despite China remaining largely silent on key issues such as fossil fuel caps and climate adaptation financing. Particularly, many Global South countries strongly requested climate adaptation funding, and China's continued reluctance to contribute to UN-administered funds or the Brazilian Tropical Forest Forever Facility Fund, could have potentially risked its popularity. [56] A possible factor for the unshaken popularity may be related to the US' retreat from the environmental arena, with China representing a strong and agile candidate who already showed increased performance in developing green technology products, thus serving as an exemplary contributor to climate action in the eyes of many developing countries. [57]

Thus, the popularity of China in the global climate action field seems to remain despite the overarching green paradox [58] of China leading the world in clean-tech manufacturing and electrification while still relying heavily on hard-to-abate industrial sectors and offering no firm commitments to near-term GHG emissions reductions or rapid decarbonization. [59]

Conclusion

Overall, this year's COP not only marked historic milestones such as the 30th anniversary of COP and the 10th anniversary of the Paris Agreement, but also represented a critical turning point, as the international community had been watching closely to see whether China would assume a new leadership role in global climate policy following the complete withdrawal of the United States. China's engagement at COP, however, was highly selective: it maintained a cautious stance in negotiations, offered no ambitious decarbonization pledges, and showed no change in climate finance contributions. Instead, its focus was firmly on green technology, bilateral agreements, advancing the concept of a just transition, and promoting green narratives already deeply embedded in China's domestic and global governance. Thus, despite growing international efforts to position China as a global climate leader, there is little evidence that China is actually assuming or actively pursuing this leadership role.

Most importantly, this year's COP has shown that the EU and China could complement each other well on adaptation and mitigation, especially if greater transparency were provided regarding Chinese climate funding and the actual emissions data associated with the production of Chinese green technologies.

COP30 once again highlighted China's continued pattern of engaging closely with developing and emerging countries, approaching them as partners on equal footing, particularly through bilateral meetings and agreements. China held more than 40 bilateral meetings during COP30, following months of high-level exchanges with Brazil and other emerging economies within the framework of South-South cooperation. [60] The conference therefore illustrated where China currently positions itself within global climate politics: not as a leader and with as few binding commitments as possible, but as an active and equal partner to Global South countries. It offers concrete projects related to green technologies, while remaining notably vague about its own green paradox [61], including the timeline for fossil fuel phaseout.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

-  *In response to China's rising popularity in emerging economies in Latin America, Africa, and Asia, the EU should seek to engage partner countries and emerging economies on an equal footing. Although the EU is internationally recognized as a strong standard setter, particularly in areas such as emissions trading, supply chain regulation, and sustainable finance taxonomies, these standards are often perceived by partner countries as overly demanding or even paternalistic. To become a more attractive partner, the EU should place greater emphasis on offering incentives and concrete opportunities that support the voluntary adoption of environmental and climate standards. This also requires a deeper understanding of the diverse needs and challenges across regions, including climate-vulnerable countries, energy-importing economies, and rapidly industrializing states. It also entails identifying the specific technologies and infrastructure these countries require and facilitating access to appropriate European solutions.*
-  *To understand the real-world impact of China's marketed "green" products, the EU should press China for greater transparency in areas such as climate adaptation fund management and supply chain emissions accounting. In this regard, the EU should also maintain a firm stance on climate-related UTMs such as the CBAM, as these instruments are essential for ensuring transparency and verifying actual emission reductions in imported products. However, given the investments in carbon trading systems (ETS) on both sides, more cooperation in this area could be looked for, too.*
-  *Given China's dominance in green technologies, the EU should identify areas for strategic cooperation and investment in segments of the supply chain, such as recycling where the EU's comparatively cleaner energy mix can help achieve lower emissions, creating mutual benefits in reducing the carbon footprint of green-technology production.*
-  *Since China's civil society is highly controlled, the EU should leverage its strategic advantage of a strong and diverse civil society working on climate and environment among others to promote joint civil-society initiatives between European actors and emerging countries of the Global South. Furthermore, the EU could make greater use of future COPs as platforms for more positive self-promotion, not least with regard to the global contributions made by its civil society.*

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[61] While China has massively expanded its domestic renewable energy capacity, it still shows no clear signs of a fossil fuel phase out, as major domestic hurdles such as an overly powerful coal sector among other factors continue to significantly hamper the country's energy transition.



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