**China’s Pledge to Be Carbon Neutral by 2060, Explained**

**Sixth Tone**

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Chinese President Xi Jinping has vowed to adopt stricter policies that would allow China to reach its carbon emissions peak before 2030 and become carbon neutral by 2060 — a move he described as a “green recovery” of the world economy in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic.

“COVID-19 reminds us that humankind should launch a green revolution and move faster to create a green way of development and life, preserve the environment, and make Mother Earth a better place for all,” Xi said, addressing the virtual meeting of the United Nations General Assembly on Tuesday. “Humankind can no longer afford to ignore the repeated warnings of Nature.”

Environmentalists have welcomed China’s ambitious climate commitments as an important step toward reducing the country’s carbon footprint. Last year, the world’s second-largest economy was the top polluter, accounting for 28.8% of carbon dioxide emissions globally.

The announcement of the new targets comes as the country is facing unprecedented climate-related natural disasters, from historic floods in southern China to irregular typhoon patterns and massive coral bleaching.

“The recent frequent disasters reflect that the risk of climate change is all around us, and the cost is increasing,” Qi Shaozhou, director of the Climate Change and Energy Economics Study Center at Wuhan University, told Sixth Tone. “The COVID-19 pandemic has brought fatal costs. However, the public health crisis induced by climate change can be farther-reaching, requiring our best efforts to combat climate change.”

Against the backdrop of the new pledges, here are Sixth Tone’s answers to some of the most important questions about China’s climate commitments:

**How is this pledge different from China's previous targets?**

In 2015, the Paris Agreement required all parties in the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change to reach a global peak of greenhouse gas emissions “as soon as possible” and achieve “climate neutrality,” or net-zero emissions, in the second half of the century in order to limit global warming to well below 2 degrees Celsius.

Tuesday’s pledge — a response to the Paris Agreement’s request for parties to update their post-2020 climate actions, known as Nationally Determined Contributions, or NDC — is the first time China has aimed for carbon neutrality before 2060.

Xi’s pledge at the General Assembly also moves the target for China’s carbon emissions peak forward, from “around 2030” — the country’s previous commitment under the 2015 Paris Agreement — to “before 2030.”

Chai Qimin, director of strategy and planning at China’s National Center for Climate Change Strategy and International Cooperation, told Sixth Tone that “around 2030” can be considered 2035 at the latest, while “before 2030” requires meeting the target no later than 2029. He added that Xi’s pledge would also impact the country’s upcoming 14th five-year plan to further control greenhouse gas emissions in the transportation, energy, and chemical sectors.

Xie Zhenhua, president of the Institute of Climate Change and Sustainable Development at Tsinghua University, told Sixth Tone that Xi’s “bold target” may advance the schedule for global carbon neutrality by five to 10 years. He added that China’s fresh commitment to going carbon neutral before 2060 far exceeds the global target of 2065 to 2070 under the Paris Agreement.

**Is this really a “bold” target?**

A government-backed analysis suggests that China’s carbon emissions could peak around 2025 at the earliest, and experts say it’s likely that the country will achieve this goal before 2030 — which Xi said during his speech Tuesday. However, they also say reaching carbon neutrality by 2060 is still ambitious.

“To reach carbon neutrality by 2060 remains challenging, as China only has half the time to reach the goal (compared with Europe),” Chai said.

In November 2019, the European Commission pledged to make Europe climate neutral by 2050. While many European countries including Germany, the United Kingdom, and France reached their carbon emissions peaks between the 1970s and 1990s, and therefore have at least 60 years to reach their carbon neutral deadline, China plans to achieve the same feat in a much shorter period of time.

“Our process of modernization, industrialization, and urbanization has been rapidly compressed — and so has the process of de-carbonization,” Chai said. “The structural problems in the fields of industry, energy, transportation, and land use in our economic and social development are still prominent, and there may still be many challenges in the short term.”

**How will China meet its renewed climate goals?**

Currently, the pledge is just a symbol of commitment, and must be backed up by a detailed action plan, experts say.

“It’s very important how we act and take measures to meet these goals,” said Qi of Wuhan University. “If we just get stopped by the grand visions proclaimed by leaders without follow-up acts of policy, it will be meaningless.”

Qi said the European Green Deal — the European Commission’s flagship plan to combat climate change — can serve as a reference for China as the country devises its own policies.

A source close to the matter told Sixth Tone that a long-term plan with detailed practices for fighting climate change and achieving China’s lofty carbon goals is already being developed.

Li Shuo, senior climate and energy analyst at the environmental nonprofit Greenpeace East Asia, said China can’t achieve its carbon goals simply by planting more trees; instead, cutting emissions should be the top priority.

“Tuesday’s pledge is important in that it bridges politics and science,” Li told Sixth Tone. “However, current practices are not enough for China to achieve the goal (of net-zero emissions).”

“We still have 1,000 gigawatts of coal-powered projects to worry about,” he added. “We’re still continuing to build coal power plants. There’s no way to offset carbon emissions on such a large scale without cutting emissions.”

**What is China already doing to combat the climate crisis?**

According to the BP Statistical Review of World Energy 2019, while coal remained the dominant fuel in China, its share of total energy consumption in 2018 hit a historical low at 58%, down from 72% a decade ago.

In order for China to reduce its dependence on coal — a primary source for heating homes and powering factories — the country has introduced a raft of measures, including switching from coal to cleaner energy and capping coal-fired power projects.

Meanwhile, China has also maintained a leading position in clean energy investment: Its renewable energy consumption grew by 29% in 2018, accounting for 45% of renewable energy consumption growth worldwide. Renewable energy also constituted 27.9% of the country’s total electricity generated in 2019, just over a 1% increase from the previous year.

According to Qi, China should continue to invest in its carbon-trading scheme, which lets low-emitting companies sell emission units to higher-emitting companies, with an overall effect of incentivizing good environmental stewardship. China piloted a carbon-trading market in 2011 and rolled out the system nationwide in 2017 — though carbon trading has largely struggled to take off and lacks legal protections.

“In order to achieve the goal of carbon neutrality, the mechanism of supply and demand through carbon emission trading plays an important role in carbon pricing,” Qi said. “Carbon neutrality relies on market mechanisms, not feelings.”

**How are other countries contributing?**

While the United Kingdom and European Union aim to reach carbon neutrality by 2050, the United States has so far not set such a goal.

The United States is the world’s second-largest carbon emitter after China. However, the U.S. announced last year that it was withdrawing from the Paris Agreement “because of the unfair economic burden.”

On Tuesday, speaking at the General Assembly before Xi, U.S. President Donald Trump blasted China for being a major environmental polluter, saying the country’s carbon emissions are “rising fast.” However, experts say Trump himself has rolled back many green policies, jeopardizing the environmental health of the U.S. and potentially the world.