

➤ The U.S.-China Relationship and the Global Climate Response

Joanna Lewis, Provost Distinguished Associate Professor and Director, Science, Technology, and International Affairs Program, Georgetown University

We already see indications that climate change is contributing to a reordering of how the United States sees its own relationships with other major powers, and re-prioritizing where climate change falls within a broader set of foreign policy issues. For example, the first summit of world leaders convened by the Biden Administration was [focused exclusively on climate change](#). And [the first major visit](#) by a senior U.S. official from the Biden Administration to China was John Kerry, Biden's climate envoy, in order to meet with his counterpart ahead of the climate summit. The focus on climate has been perhaps somewhat surprising given the overwhelming global attention placed on the pandemic, but refreshing since climate had become such a neglected foreign policy issue under the Trump Administration.

This U.S. foreign policy re-prioritization towards climate sends important signals to other countries. We are at the start of the decisive decade for a global response to climate change. Failure to accelerate our low carbon transition this decade will rule out our ability to limit warming to under 2°C. With the [26th UN Climate Change Conference of the Parties \(COP 26\)](#) having been delayed a year, it is even more important that U.S. foreign policy can serve as a driving force behind countries' increasing their ambition through revised climate pledges that will increase near term mitigation. The momentum building globally around mid-century carbon neutrality ("net-zero") targets is also promising, but

achieving such targets will require far more ambitious action in the near term. For example, China's near-term climate and energy goals for 2025 and 2030 are currently [not sufficiently robust](#) to put the country on a path to achieve their own 2060 carbon neutrality goal. Furthermore, their 2060 goal may not be ambitious enough to achieve a global climate stabilization pathway that would limit global warming to 1.5°C. It is therefore significant that the United States and China [signed a joint statement on climate](#) that lays out a new agenda for bilateral engagement which includes revisiting these near-term goals and working towards a long-term carbon neutrality strategy that keep the "Paris Agreement-aligned temperature limit within reach." [The U.S. signed a similar joint statement with India](#), and we are likely to see more U.S.-led climate diplomacy both bilaterally and via the G7, G20 and other multilateral forums in the coming months.

As a result, climate diplomacy can play a crucial role in allowing for international engagement on a broader set of economic and security issues. In the case of bilateral relations with China, climate change is one area where U.S. stakeholders and officials alike can engage in constructive dialogue with their Chinese counterparts during this time of extreme tension in the U.S.-China relationship. But climate also allows for a broader set of discussions with our allies on a range of geopolitical issues that directly impact the climate response. This includes [trade barriers to renewable energy technologies that affect supply chains, the availability and](#)

environmental impacts of critical materials production, and the role the G7 and others play in the continued overseas finance of fossil fuel infrastructure. As a result, climate engagement going forward must be operationalized in a more comprehensive way to avoid conceding progress on the very economic and security issues that must be directly integrated with the global climate response.