

U.S.-China relations are perhaps at their lowest point in decades and there is no end in sight at the moment. Each week brings a barrage of new U.S. federal policy measures aimed at China. Against this backdrop, [ChinaFile](#) recently asked a group of China experts to opine on the prospects for U.S.-China relations in coming years. It's time to think about a more productive path forward.

Environmental cooperation will be a critical part of this process (as I write below). A broad range of U.S.-China environmental cooperation has continued at the sub-national level during the Trump era. A tremendous amount of this is going on in California and within the University of California system in particular. For example, at UCLA, we will release a 100+ page report at the end of the month on California's experience in coordinating the regulation of air pollution and climate change. We have worked productively with the Beijing Environmental Protection Bureau, Chinese researchers and policymakers on this project. And there are many other ongoing projects of this sort around the UC system and in other parts of the country that combine American and Chinese expertise in creative and useful ways. Beneath the increasingly incendiary headlines about U.S.-China conflict, serious people continue to work on important issues that matter to both countries and the world beyond.

I copy my ChinaFile post below in its entirety. The [other submissions](#) to the conversation (from Jerome Cohen, Andrew Nathan and others) are terrific, so you should take a look.

China-U.S. environmental cooperation will be a central part of any reconciliation between the two nations. For this to happen, many stars will need to align. Joe Biden would of course have to win the U.S. presidential election, as Trump has shown only opposition to environmental protection. Biden has announced a \$2 trillion [climate plan](#) that seeks to achieve a 100% clean energy economy and net-zero carbon emissions by 2050, a level of ambition that comports with IPCC recommendations. A program of this scale would set the stage for the sort of cooperative competition the U.S. and China exhibited in the run up to the 2015 Paris Agreement.

Imagine if the U.S. and China made a new joint announcement in advance of COP 26 in 2021—the US pledging net-zero emissions by 2050 and China promising the elimination of unabated coal use by the same year

(or something more ambitious). Most people seem to think that such a scenario is pie-in-the-sky. Indeed, in China, we see some worrisome trends. Chinese authorities have approved more [new coal](#) power projects within China in the first half of 2020 than in all of 2018 and 2019 combined.

But renewed climate ambition may yet still be possible on both sides of the Pacific. In the U.S., the framing of the Biden plan as one of massive support for the economy is critical. The plan will only succeed if it can generate economic growth that benefits a broad base of the citizenry. It will also be essential to support the parts of society most affected by the plan. Coal communities in West Virginia, Wyoming, Kentucky, Illinois, and Pennsylvania should get real support (not just “job training” that never quite pans out). Experience from countries, like Germany and the UK, that have already set more specific plans to phase out coal can point the way to a successful transition away from fossil fuels in the U.S.

In China, clean energy and electric transport are the spearheads of China’s “economic transformation” away from old-line industrial GDP growth. China now dominates global [solar and wind](#) energy generation and it is the largest market in the world for [electric vehicles](#). And, despite some backtracking, Chinese authorities have continued to push forward on environmental protection in a variety of areas – making serious progress on [air pollution](#) in major Chinese urban areas and improving the efficiency of [power plants](#) and [industry](#)

Would the competition from a revitalized U.S. clean energy program spur more Chinese action and cooperation? Maybe. Would Chinese decisionmakers be more persuaded by the expanded economic opportunities that would arise out of such a significant U.S. investment in low carbon? Perhaps. U.S. re-engagement could also alter the political economy dynamics of clean energy in China: strengthening the hand of low carbon “vested interests” against old-line fossil fuel interests or giving Chinese climate change policy advocates more leverage against political opponents.

Again, none of this is assured. But we will not solve global climate change without U.S. and Chinese action, so such engagement seems more than worth a try.

