The biggest climate policy announcement of the week was not California Gov. Newsom’s Executive Order to ban the in-state sale of gas-powered passenger cars and trucks by 2035, although this move is a major advance for climate policy. Rather, the most important climate news was China’s announcement of an “aim” of achieving carbon neutrality by 2060 and to peak carbon emissions *before* 2030. Here is the passage on the environment from President Xi Jinping’s speech at the UN General Assembly this week (official China Ministry of Foreign Affairs translation):

> 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. Humankind can no longer afford to ignore the repeated warnings of Nature and go down the beaten path of extracting resources without investing in conservation, pursuing development at the expense of protection, and exploiting resources without restoration.
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> The Paris Agreement on climate change charts the course for the world to transition to green and low-carbon development. It outlines the minimum steps to be taken to protect the Earth, our shared homeland, and all countries must take decisive steps to honor this Agreement. China will scale up its Intended Nationally Determined Contributions by adopting more vigorous policies and measures. **We aim to have CO2 emissions peak before 2030 and achieve carbon neutrality before 2060.**
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> We call on all countries to pursue innovative, coordinated, green and open development for all, seize the historic opportunities presented by the new round of scientific and technological revolution and industrial transformation, achieve a green recovery of the world economy in the post-COVID era and thus create a powerful force driving sustainable development.

China thus joins the EU and South Korea in announcing new carbon neutrality targets this year. Those pledges add to the at least 73 nations, 14 regions, 398 cities, 786 businesses and 16 investors that the UNFCCC said at its 2019 climate talks are “working towards achieving net-zero CO2 emissions by 2050.” Missing from this group are the U.S., India, Russia, Japan and other major emitters.

It’s hard to know what to make of this announcement. It is perhaps difficult to even call this a “pledge” just yet. In Chinese, Xi said that China would “diligently seek” (□□□□) to achieve carbon neutrality by 2060. Most importantly, we have no details yet on how this will be implemented.

Nonetheless, this is good news. Xi’s announcement suggests that official targets to implement this goal are coming. Based on recent experience, we know that hard environmental targets announced by China’s leaders have driven extensive policy making and ramp ups in enforcement that, at least in the air pollution context, have shown demonstrable improvements.

I have been working this summer on a paper for the University of Pennsylvania’s Project on the Future of U.S.-China Relations making the case that renewed U.S.-China climate change cooperation should revolve around a joint commitment to achieve carbon neutrality by 2045. I make the case here as well. Until this past week, the best hope for this was Joe Biden’s platform pledge to seek U.S. carbon neutrality by 2050. Nearly everyone I spoke to in the course of writing that piece suggested that a Chinese carbon neutrality goal was a pipe dream. But China has now without a doubt taken the initiative.

As we all know, the proof will be in the pudding. How will China actually implement this? How will leaders define “neutrality”? What role will offsets and sinks play? How verifiable are the stated results?

In the near term, we need to look for what China announces between now and March 2021 as to the elements of its 14th five-year plan. Will there be a carbon cap? Will limits on coal-fired power capacity be tightened or loosened? Will coal plants continue to be permitted and built? What moves will be made to accelerate the deployment and adoption of renewable energy, electric cars and trucks, green building technologies, and the other building blocks of a carbon-free future? Will the rules of China’s national carbon trading market (which now appear mainly to promote greater efficiency of coal-fired power) be adjusted to create powerful incentives to phase out coal and other fossil fuels? Will grid rules be amended to reduce the massive support currently given to unprofitable coal plants? Will other fossil fuel subsidies be eliminated?

These are just a few of the questions that come to mind. Many more will need to be asked and answered. But for now it seems enough to point to some good news on the climate front. China’s announcement also allows us to envision the possibilities

for greater China and California cooperation. California with its 2045 carbon neutrality goal and China with its new 2060 goal. With a goal set, both jurisdictions can get down to the hard work of getting from here to there. Our recent report on Coordinated Governance of Air & Climate Pollutants: Lessons from the California Experience – done in collaboration with Chinese regulators and researchers – is an example of the type of collaboration possible.

Imagine what could be done if the U.S. federal government followed-up with a national carbon neutrality goal as well.