After months of growing geopolitical tensions, the US and China have finally found something to agree on: the need to confront the climate crisis. In fact, two days of meetings last week in Shanghai between US Special Presidential Envoy for Climate John Kerry and his counterpart, Special Climate Envoy Xie Zhenhua have culminated in the release of a joint statement. This breakthrough comes just days before top officials from around the world convene virtually for the Biden Administration's Leaders Summit on Climate, a gathering intended to show that the US can — and will — lead again on climate.

"Leading again," means working in partnership with other countries and this statement makes it clear that despite intense disagreement on a broad array of issues, the US and China can still recognize when they share interests and even find some common ground. It opens by affirming that both countries are "committed to cooperating with each other and with other countries to tackle the climate crisis, which must be addressed with the seriousness and urgency that it demands." This is a positive step forward.

Notably, the statement also helps bridge the US-China divide by calling out what the two countries achieved working together in 2015: the Paris Agreement. It specifically acknowledges their shared "historic contribution" as well as their "leadership and collaboration." This more than a reminder of what was accomplished; it is the foundation for further coordination and cooperation.

While the statement is focused on the US-China relationship, it also serves to reset and reframe how both countries intend to achieve their climate goals moving forward. Rather than relying on bilateral mechanisms, they will also enhance their own action independently and through multilateral cooperation under the Paris Agreement. The US and China will "cooperate with each other and with other countries" to tackle climate change. There will be plenty of opportunities in the months ahead for this sort of cooperation, including the Convention on Biological Diversity (COP 15) in Kunming, China in October and the UN Climate Change Conference (COP26) in Glasgow.

The US-China statement also spells out several shared near-term actions to keep the global temperature rise below what's required under the Paris Agreement. These include: 1) developing respective long-term carbon neutral strategies; 2) advancing overseas investment and finance to support the transition to zero-carbon energy in developing countries, and 3) implementing the Kigali Amendment to reduce hydrofluorocarbons (HFCs). Again, these are positive developments.

Additionally, the statement lists a variety of “concrete actions in the 2020s on decarbonization” that the US and China will “continue to discuss,” including deploying renewable energy and decarbonizing the building and transportation sector. Yet there are only two specific actions identified on that list that expressly involve “cooperation” — reducing methane and other non-CO2 greenhouse gas emissions, and low carbon shipping and aviation.

While this statement and the opening of dialogue between the US and China are promising developments, it remains to be seen how such a joint commitment will enhance other parties’ ambition and efforts to meet the goals of the Paris agreement. It is also unclear how the commitments made in this statement will be interpreted — and realized — in the domestic policies of both countries. Questions also remain about how President Biden’s 2030 climate target will be implemented and how China’s Nationally Determined Contribution and its upcoming 14th Five-Year-Plan implementation at local level and different sectors will align with President Xi’s carbon neutrality pledge. Stay tuned.