



Credit: The White House

When Presidents Trump and Xi meet this week in Beijing, climate and environment will not be on the agenda. That absence is striking, because the U.S. and China are now moving in radically different directions on climate, energy, and environmental protection.

The US is in an extraordinarily anti-environmental moment. It has exited both the Paris Agreement and the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change. The Trump EPA now talks mostly about “deregulation” and has taken a litany of actions to weaken environmental rules, including issuing a rule to rescind the endangerment finding at the core of EPA’s legal authority to regulate greenhouse gases under the Clean Air Act. Since the beginning of 2025, the Trump administration has taken a series of executive, regulatory, and budget actions to slow or constrain renewable energy development. Congress has nullified California’s “waiver” under the Clean Air Act that allowed it to adopt a 2035 100% EV car sales target, require growing shares of zero-emission truck sales, and limit NOx pollution from heavy-duty vehicles. The administration’s “energy dominance” strategy focuses almost entirely on fossil fuels. These are only a few examples from the most aggressively anti-environmental presidency in recent memory.

China, by contrast, remains formally committed to its Paris targets of peaking emissions before 2030 and carbon neutrality by 2060 – the “dual carbon” goals. In a relatively short span of time, it has become the global leader in clean-energy and electric-vehicle manufacturing and deployment. China [accounted](#) for more than half of the global increase in wind and solar generation in 2024, and clean generation met most of China’s electricity demand growth that year. Chinese firms produce the bulk of the world’s solar PV panels and a dominant share of wind-turbine components. In 2025, clean-energy [installed capacity](#) exceeded fossil-fuel power capacity for the first time. Chinese companies produce and sell well over half of the world’s [electric passenger cars](#).

Of course, the countries start from very different baselines. The U.S. has made extraordinary progress on tackling many environmental issues over the last several decades, even if that progress is now under attack. China, meanwhile, remains the world’s largest emitter of greenhouse gases and many other pollutants. For those of us who believe the U.S. must still do far more on climate and the environment, this American turn against environmental policy is deeply troubling.

The sharp divergence in the two countries’ energy strategies has led some [observers](#) to characterize the U.S. as the world’s most powerful petrostate and China as its leading “[electrostate](#).” The contrast is not just in rhetoric or industrial policy, but in the nuts and bolts of governance.

One recent development in China neatly illustrates how Beijing is trying to steer its bureaucracy toward emissions reductions and electrification. On Earth Day, as the Trump administration continued [dismantling](#) elements of the U.S. environmental regulatory regime, China’s top Party and state organs issued a new national framework for evaluating government officials on their progress toward the dual-carbon goals.

Officially titled the “Comprehensive Evaluation and Assessment Measures for Carbon Peaking and Carbon Neutrality,” these rules govern how provincial-level Party and government leaders are evaluated. In China’s centralized system, cadre evaluations are a primary way the Party steers the work of the provincial Party secretaries and governors. These are the KPIs that shape career prospects of subnational leaders.

I wrote one of the earliest academic [articles](#) about China’s turn to “hard” environmental targets in its 11th five-year plan (2006-10) and the introduction of

binding energy- and pollution-control targets. Local regulators I interviewed at the time told me how they initially ignored these new targets because “environmental targets had never been important before.” That changed when senior officials in Beijing began to signal that missing them could damage local officials’ promotion prospects. In my research I documented how early implementation was flawed, culminating in a madcap rush to meet targets in 2010 that produced widespread cheating and “goal displacement.” Local governments shut off power to public services – my aunt received a text message in her southern city announcing that all elevator use below a certain floor would be suspended for several weeks – and firms turned to dirtier off-grid diesel generators to game the statistics. These are the kinds of behaviors one sees anytime there are hard targets, weak monitoring, and difficulty in meeting the goals – whether it be a mayor’s crime-reduction targets, test-score benchmarks under the No Child Left Behind Act, or Chinese environmental indicators.

Over the last three Five-Year Plan cycles – a standard way to understand and organize Chinese governance – China has repeatedly expanded and refined its energy and environmental targets. Those targets have become more central to Beijing’s strategy to advance green industrial policy, shift China toward “higher-quality” growth, enhance energy security, reduce pollution, and burnish China’s global reputation. In addition to early pollution control and energy efficiency targets China has added targets for carbon intensity, share of non-fossil energy, and ecological conservation.

The new cadre evaluation system knits these pieces together into what officials describe as a “5+9” target framework (see chart below). There are five *binding* targets and nine *supporting* targets. A province will be rated “unqualified” if it fails any one binding target or any three or more supporting targets.

The binding targets cover the major metrics of China’s energy and climate transition: total carbon emissions, carbon intensity, total coal consumption, total oil consumption, and the share of non-fossil energy in total energy consumption. The supporting targets include energy intensity, the share of clean energy electricity in incremental power consumption, sector-specific energy and carbon intensity indicators (for industry, buildings, transport, public institutions), performance under the national emissions trading system, and growth in forest stock.

A perennial question with targets is whether performance ends up being meaningful or merely symbolic. We will need to watch how this system is implemented and how

strictly it is enforced. Analyst [Lauri Myllyvirta](#) has noted, for example, that China effectively “met” its 2020-25 carbon intensity target in part by revising how the indicator was calculated, rather than by delivering the level of emissions reductions implied by earlier data. That kind of methodological “fix” is a form of gaming we should be looking out for.

Going forward, we will need to hold two thoughts in our heads at once. While Trump and Xi are in Beijing not talking about climate change, Americans should recognize the growing divide between how our two national governments think about clean energy, transportation, and climate policy. The U.S. is currently pursuing a strategy that rejects most serious climate action. China, by contrast, is pursuing a [low carbon strategy](#) that is also paying dividends in economic development and in deepening its geopolitical ties across the globe. At the same time, we must continue to scrutinize how China is actually performing on climate action – for purposes of accountability, for understanding our shared progress on climate change, and for recognizing the ways in which targets and methodologies can both advance and obscure that progress.

Indicator System for Comprehensive Evaluation and Assessment
of Carbon Peaking and Carbon Neutrality
碳达峰碳中和综合评价考核指标体系

	#	Indicator 指标	Responsible Department(s) 评价考核负责部门
Control Indicators 控制指标	1	Total Carbon Emissions 碳排放总量	NDRC; Ministry of Ecology and Environment 国家发展改革委; 生态环境部
	2	Reduction in Carbon Emissions Intensity 碳排放强度降低	NDRC; Ministry of Ecology and Environment 国家发展改革委; 生态环境部
	3	Total Coal Consumption 煤炭消费总量	NDRC; National Energy Administration; Ministry of Ecology and Environment 国家发展改革委; 国家能源局; 生态环境部
	4	Total Oil Consumption 石油消费总量	NDRC; National Energy Administration 国家发展改革委; 国家能源局
	5	Share of Non-Fossil Energy in Total Energy Consumption 非化石能源消费占比	National Energy Administration; NDRC 国家能源局; 国家发展改革委
Supporting Indicators 支撑指标	6	Reduction in Energy Consumption per Unit of Regional GDP 单位地区生产总值能源消耗降低	NDRC 国家发展改革委
	7	Share of New Clean-Energy Electricity in Annual Incremental Electricity Consumption 年度新增用电量中新增清洁能源电量占比	NDRC; National Energy Administration 国家发展改革委; 国家能源局
	8	Reduction in Energy Consumption and Carbon Emissions per Unit of Value-Added for Above-Designated-Size Industry 规模以上工业单位增加值能耗和碳排放降低	Ministry of Industry and Information Technology 工业和信息化部
	9	Implementation of Carbon Emissions Offsets and Energy-Saving / Carbon-Reduction Reviews for "Dual-High" Industrial Projects "两高"工业项目碳排放置换和节能降碳审查评价落实情况	NDRC; Ministry of Industry and Information Technology 国家发展改革委; 工业和信息化部
	10	Green and Low-Carbon Transformation of Urban and Rural Construction 城乡建设绿色低碳转型	Ministry of Housing and Urban-Rural Development 住房和城乡建设部
	11	Green and Low-Carbon Transformation of Transportation 交通运输绿色低碳转型	Ministry of Transport 交通运输部
	12	Reduction in Carbon Emissions Intensity of Public Institutions 公共机构碳排放强度降低	Government Offices Administration of the State Council 国管局
	13	Carbon Emissions Control Targets for Industries Covered by the National Carbon Emissions Trading Market 全国碳排放权交易市场覆盖行业的碳排放控制目标	Ministry of Ecology and Environment 生态环境部
	14	Growth in Forest Stock Volume 森林蓄积量增长	National Forestry and Grassland Administration; Ministry of Natural Resources 国家林草局; 自然资源部

Appendix to the "Comprehensive Evaluation and Assessment Measures for Carbon Peaking and Carbon Neutrality" (April 12, 2026)
《碳达峰碳中和综合评价考核办法》附件（2026年4月12日）