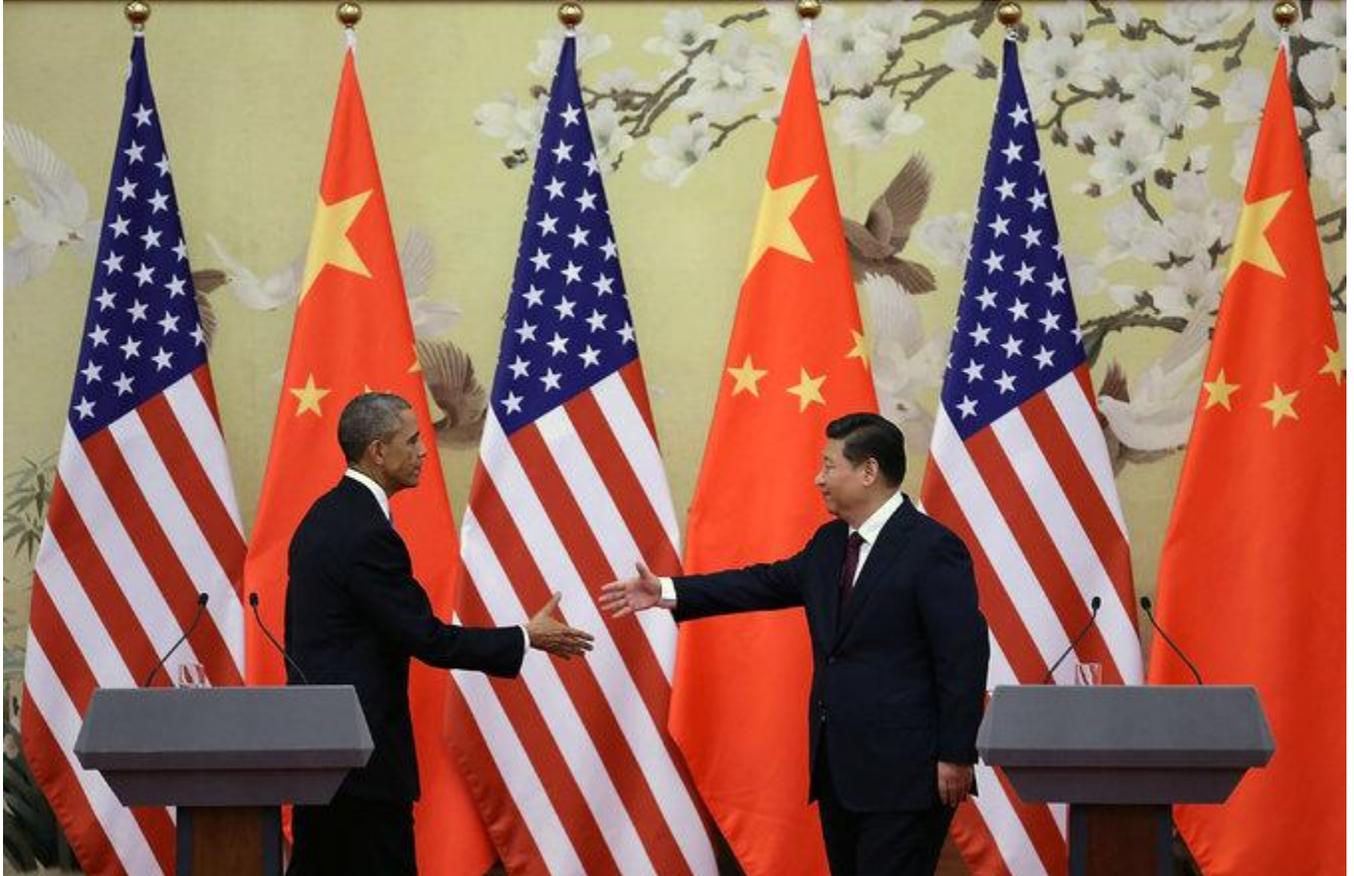


A Major Breakthrough on Climate Change

By [THE EDITORIAL BOARD](#), New York Times, NOV. 12, 2014

Photo



President Obama and President Xi Jinping of China on Wednesday at a joint news conference. Credit Feng Li/Getty Images

The deal jointly announced in Beijing by President Obama and China's president, Xi Jinping, to limit greenhouse gases well beyond their earlier pledges is both a major diplomatic breakthrough and — assuming both sides can carry out their promises — an enormously positive step in the uncertain battle against climate change.

The announcement provided the high point of a surprisingly productive trip that also resulted in steps to cut tariffs on information technology products, extend visas and strengthen military contacts to build trust and avoid confrontations in the South China Sea. But the two countries have major differences, including over cybersecurity and human rights.

The [climate accord](#) represents a startling turnaround after years of futile efforts to cooperate in a meaningful way on global warming. It sends two critically important messages, one to the world and the other to the United States Congress. China and the United States together account for about 45 percent of the world's greenhouse gas emissions. Their new commitments are thus almost certain to energize other countries to set more ambitious targets of their own before

negotiators meet to frame a new global agreement at the climate summit meeting in Paris in December 2015.

In the United States, the agreement cuts the ground from under people like Mitch McConnell, the next Senate majority leader, and others who have long argued that there is no point in taking aggressive steps against greenhouse gases as long as major developing countries refused to do likewise. This argument effectively undermined Senate support for ratification of the 1997 Kyoto Protocol. The climate deniers in Congress will find other reasons to oppose a strong climate strategy, and are doing so even now. But the “China” argument has effectively disappeared.

The most striking aspect of China’s commitment is its agreement to a hard cap on emissions. It pledged for the first time to have its emissions “peak” by 2030 and sooner if possible. Until now, China has spoken only about reducing carbon “intensity,” which really meant allowing emissions to rise but at a slower rate. In the race to head off the unacceptable consequences of climate change, the name of the game is to stop emissions from rising at some point and then bend the curve downward. China has now committed itself to that path.

China has also set itself the daunting but not unobtainable goal of increasing the share of non-fossil fuel energy to one-fifth of the country’s energy mix in the next 15 years. This, too, is no small deal. By one estimate, this would mean adding 800 to 1,000 gigawatts of nuclear, wind, solar and other zero-emission power generating capacity, roughly equivalent to China’s current coal-fired capacity.

The task Mr. Obama has set for the United States is also formidable, especially given the political obstacles. At the Copenhagen climate summit meeting in 2009, Mr. Obama pledged to reduce emissions in the United States by 17 percent below 2005 levels by 2020. America is thought to be more than halfway there now, in part because of greatly increased automobile efficiency, the switch to natural gas and the closing down of some old coal-fired power plants and a prolonged recession.

He now pledges an ambitious 26 percent cut below 2005 levels by 2025. This will mean, at an absolute minimum, following through on his proposals to limit emissions from new and existing coal-fired power plants — proposals that have already generated significant pushback. And it almost certainly will require cuts in emissions other than carbon dioxide, including methane leaks from the production and transmission of natural gas, as well as continued investment in alternative, non-fossil fuels. And as much of this as possible should be accomplished or set in motion before Mr. Obama leaves office.

For Mr. Obama, the meetings were a demonstration that the new Asia-focused policy he announced in three years ago can yield real substance. For Mr. Xi, they were a chance to show leadership and calm tensions with neighboring countries that have been alarmed by his aggressive, even dangerous regional policies. The United States and China remain serious competitors on many fronts, pushing rival free trade pacts and jousting for regional influence. But the leaders have shown that productive cooperation is possible; their task now is to keep it going.