

## **In advance of climate summit, tension among Biden aides on China policy**

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In the early summer, with less than five months to go before a critical United Nations climate conference in Scotland, John F. Kerry told President Biden that he wouldn't achieve his goal of tackling climate change, a key administration priority, unless the U.S.-China relationship improved.

Kerry, a former secretary of state and Biden's envoy for climate, had been traveling the globe trying to secure commitments on carbon-emission reductions among allies and adversaries in the hope of keeping global temperature increases at or below 1.5 degrees Celsius (2.7 Fahrenheit), a level that scientists say could stave off the worst effects of climate change.

But his discussions with Chinese counterpart Xie Zhenhua were lagging as Beijing insisted that cooperation on climate would not commence amid strained relations over human rights, Hong Kong, Taiwan, trade and a range of other issues.

Now, with less than a week before leaders of nearly 200 countries arrive in Glasgow for [the U.N. summit known as COP26](#), expectations for a major breakthrough are dim: Chinese President Xi Jinping will not attend in person, and Washington and Beijing face domestic political constraints on their international climate ambitions.

The desire to make progress on climate change has led to tensions among Biden's top aides over how to manage Washington's competing priorities with Beijing. Kerry has repeatedly pushed for direct diplomacy between Biden and Xi, believing that an improved bilateral relationship can produce better outcomes in Scotland. White House aides, including national security adviser Jake Sullivan, are more skeptical that the United States alone can coax China into reducing emissions. Just as Washington would be averse to overhauling its energy policies on the basis of foreign pressure, so too would Beijing.

"They're going to make their decisions based on their national interest," said a senior administration official, who, like others, spoke on the condition of anonymity to discuss sensitive matters.

*Are Biden and Xi forging a tentative U.S.-China detente? It's complicated.*

The standoff with China, the world's largest carbon emitter and home to half the world's coal-fired power plants, has presented a significant challenge for the Biden administration, which has identified both climate change as an "[existential threat](#)" and China as "[the biggest geopolitical test of the 21st century.](#)"

The United States is pressing China to set more ambitious commitments for when it will peak its carbon emissions and offer specifics about Xi's promise to stop financing coal-fired power plants abroad. Absent those actions, global temperature increases are expected to surpass 2 degrees Celsius (3.6 Fahrenheit) in the coming years, resulting in a rise of extreme weather events, hurricanes, droughts, forest fires, loss of biodiversity, and food and water scarcity.

As it presses its climate initiatives, the Biden administration is also demanding that [Beijing stop threatening Taiwan](#), cease [its crackdown on freedoms in Hong Kong](#), end its campaign of mass detention and sterilization of ethnic minorities in [Xinjiang](#), and address a range of other grievances related to trade and cybersecurity.

Managing these priorities is Sullivan, who has ruled out accommodating China to make gains on climate.

"We are not in the business of trading cooperation with China on climate change as a favor that Beijing is doing for the United States," Sullivan said at a security conference this spring, a message he [repeated](#) in a meeting with his Chinese counterpart in Zurich earlier this month.

The hard line has pleased the East Asia divisions at the State Department and Pentagon as well as China hawks on Capitol Hill who have cheered Biden's continuation of [Trump-era tariffs](#), imposition of new [sanctions on Beijing](#) and use of the word "[genocide](#)" to describe Beijing's actions in Xinjiang.

But the tensions between the two nations have worried liberal lawmakers and climate activists concerned that poor relations between the world's two biggest polluters will translate into an unproductive climate conference at a time of existential peril.

"U.S. collaboration with China on climate is fundamental due to China's major role in emitting carbon dioxide but also as a leading producer of the green

technologies required for decarbonization,” said a draft of a letter to Biden that Democratic Reps. Raúl Grijalva (Ariz.), chair of the Natural Resources Committee, and Judy Chu (Calif.), chair of the Congressional Asian Pacific American Caucus, are organizing. “Simply put, there is no conceivable way to address the climate crisis without substantially strengthening communication and collaboration between our nations.”

Climate watchers view the policies of Beijing and Washington as limited by domestic political constraints.

“Glasgow will be one of the most difficult COPs in history,” said Shuo Li, a senior global policy adviser at Greenpeace.

“I hope it doesn’t go as bad, but it already bears some resemblance to Copenhagen,” he said, referencing a 2009 climate conference [many view as a failure](#).

In Washington, the most potent aspect of Biden’s climate agenda, a \$150 billion program to replace the nation’s coal- and gas-fired power plants with solar, nuclear and wind energy, has been dropped due to opposition from Sen. Joe Manchin III, a coal-friendly Democrat from West Virginia. The program was designed to show foreign leaders that the United States is taking the steps necessary to meet its goals of cutting emissions by 50 percent from 2005 levels in the next four years.

In China, a [chronic electricity shortage](#) reverberating across factories and industries this month is raising doubts about whether it will be willing to take coal-fired plants offline as it tries to meet its massive energy needs.

The Biden administration rejects the notion that it’s traveling to Scotland empty-handed, noting its ambitious emissions target and pledge to double U.S. financial support for developing countries to adopt clean-energy technologies. But many world leaders may see those commitments as merely words on a page rather than concrete action.

A potential disappointment in Glasgow is something Kerry has tried desperately to avoid. Since early summer, he began advocating for a phone call between Biden and Xi in the hopes of finding common ground on climate ahead of COP26, viewing the tense relationship as a major problem.

Sullivan disagreed, sensing that such a call was premature, said senior administration officials.

Instead, contacts between the United States and China proceeded at a lower level through the summer, with Deputy Secretary of State Wendy Sherman [traveling](#) to Tianjin in July, and Kerry traveling to the same city to meet officials last month.

Before Sherman's visit, Chinese officials refused to confirm her counterpart would see her until just before Sherman's arrival in a move widely seen as disrespectful. The Chinese spent much of the meeting complaining bitterly about U.S. behavior, said officials familiar with the matter. On Kerry's visit, they again ruled out any progress on climate while the United States continued to criticize China on human rights and other issues.

The disappointing meetings ended up uniting Biden's team behind the need to connect the two presidents.

"The importance of a call between the leaders became clear after a number of meetings at the sub-leader level that were not constructive," said a second senior administration official. "There was unanimity in the administration at this point that we were not getting anywhere in the bilateral relationship at that level and we were concerned that Beijing was not being responsible in its management of the competition."

"Due to the centralization of power in Xi's hands, we assessed that we needed to engage at the top to move the ball forward," the official added.

So on Sept. 9, [the two presidents held a 90-minute call](#) in which Biden broached the idea of a meeting with Xi, said officials familiar with the discussion. Xi made clear that an in-person meeting was off the table, but U.S. and Chinese officials remained in touch. After Sullivan traveled to Zurich for a six-hour meeting with Chinese foreign policy adviser Yang Jiechi last month, the two presidents agreed to hold a virtual summit by year's end.

Officials insist Kerry and Sullivan are in line on an overall strategy and differences are mostly tactical.

"Kerry's job is to advocate for policies that will yield improvement on climate. He is seized with the mission," said Danny Russel, a former career diplomat who has worked with both Kerry and Sullivan. "It's a different set of variables for the

national security adviser. From Jake's perspective, there is a whole universe of factors to consider."

White House officials believe what will move China on climate is the sense that it is the diplomatic outlier as the United States encourages countries such as Indonesia, Australia and India to reduce emissions.

They do not believe "if we're nicer to China, they'll do more for us on climate or anything else," said the first senior administration official.

Advocates for Kerry say his actions have been in line with this viewpoint, first traveling to the capitals of U.S. allies and partners in Europe and elsewhere to drum up support for emissions reductions.

But Kerry's focus on climate coordination has made him a target of Republicans in Congress, who view him as a phantom presence behind any less-than-confrontational move with China the Biden administration makes.

"It's time to fire John Kerry," Republican Sen. Marco Rubio of Florida said in a news release last month.

Rubio and other Republicans accuse Kerry of single-handedly stalling the Uyghur Forced Labor Act, a bill designed to ban products made with forced labor in Xinjiang.

U.S. officials say the administration remains staunchly opposed to [forced labor](#), but there is concern across the executive branch that the bill could effectively ban all polysilicon from Xinjiang, the material inside most of the world's solar panels, a critical tool in transitioning away from a carbon economy.

"Our goal is to figure out how best to lift up workers' rights and meet our climate commitments," said the first senior administration official.

In meetings on Capitol Hill, Kerry's deputy, Jonathan Pershing, has told lawmakers that the U.S. government will need more time, five to 10 years, to move the global supply chain for solar panels away from Xinjiang, according to notes taken from a meeting with him and provided to The Washington Post. Pershing said the administration wants flexibility in the legislation to manage a transition.