

Heating the Planet Through a New Cold War

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Introduction

It began with fire. It ended with ice. In between, there were the storms and floods. And the extremity of it all should have caught anyone's attention.

First, of course, there was that burning season that set staggering records across [California](#)— [four million acres](#) incinerated, double the previous high — Oregon, and Washington. Those devastating burns spread as far east as [Colorado](#) at a moment when the Southwest may well have entered a climate-change-induced “[megadrought](#).”

Then, of course, there was that Atlantic hurricane season: a record fifth-straight above-normal season with [30 named storms](#) stretching across two alphabets, 12 of which “landed” with often devastating effect in this country. Let's not forget those floods either, one of which set a [record](#) in Michigan.

And finally, of course, as 2021 began, the stunning winter storms with record cold and ice that essentially turned Texas into a [failed state](#). Millions of Texans were left without power or running water in freezing temperatures [evidently caused](#) at least in part because the Arctic is rapidly overheating, pushing frigid air southward in winter. Of course, the governor of Texas [promptly](#) went on Fox News to assure those iced-in millions that it was all the fault of alternative energy systems. (It [wasn't](#), not faintly.)

And keep in mind that such climate extremity is becoming the norm. After all, the last seven years have been the [hottest](#) in recorded history and 2020 [tied](#) for the warmest of them all.

Such records (a word that, when it comes to climate change, has to be used again and again) should be daunting enough to make one thing obvious, as [TomDispatch regular](#) Michael Klare, author of [All Hell Breaking Loose: The Pentagon's Perspective on Climate Change](#), points out today: the two greatest greenhouse gas emitters on planet Earth, the United States and China, desperately need to collaborate to bring climate change under control. It's so self-evident it should hardly need to be said and yet, eerily enough, as Klare has been [reporting](#), the U.S. and China seem ever more locked into a new, increasingly militarized, cold-war-style relationship, one that the Biden administration [seems](#) by no means prepared to avert. Under the circumstances, that's the definition of a catastrophe.

-Tom

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Biden, Climate Change, and China

A New Cold War = A Scalding Planet

by Michael T. Klare

Slowing the pace of climate change and getting “tough” on China, especially over its human-rights abuses and unfair trade practices, are among the top priorities President Biden has announced for his new administration. Evidently, he believes that he can tame a rising China with harsh pressure tactics, while still gaining its cooperation in areas of concern to Washington. As he [wrote](#) in *Foreign Affairs* during the presidential election campaign, “The most effective way to meet that challenge is to build a united front of U.S. allies and partners to confront China’s abusive behaviors and human rights violations, even as we seek to cooperate with Beijing on issues where our interests converge, such as climate change.” If, however, our new president truly believes that he can build an international coalition to gang up on China *and* secure Beijing’s cooperation on climate change, he’s seriously deluded. Indeed, though he could succeed in provoking a new cold war, he won’t prevent the planet from heating up unbearably in the process.

Biden is certainly aware of the dangers of global warming. In that same *Foreign Affairs* article, he labeled it nothing short of an “existential threat,” one that imperils the survival of human civilization. Acknowledging the importance of relying on scientific expertise (unlike our previous president who repeatedly invented his own version of scientific reality), Biden affirmed the conclusion of the U.N.’s Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) that warming must be [limited](#) to 1.5 degrees Celsius above pre-industrial levels or there will be hell to pay. He then pledged to “rejoin the Paris climate agreement on day one of a Biden administration,” which he [indeed did](#), and to “make massive, urgent investments at home that put the United States on track to have a clean energy economy with net-zero [greenhouse gas] emissions by 2050” — the target set by the IPCC.

Even such dramatic actions, he indicated, will not be sufficient. Other countries will have to join America in moving toward a global “net-zero” state in which any carbon emissions would be compensated for by equivalent carbon removals. “Because the United States creates only 15 percent of global emissions,” he wrote, “I will leverage our economic and moral authority to push the world to determined action, rallying nations to raise their ambitions and push progress further and faster.”

China, the world’s largest emitter of greenhouse gases right now (although the U.S. remains number one [historically](#)), would obviously be Washington’s natural partner in this effort. Here, though, Biden’s antagonistic stance toward that country is likely to prove a significant impediment. Rather than prioritize collaboration with China on climate action, he chose to castigate Beijing for its continued reliance on coal. The Biden climate plan, he wrote in *Foreign Affairs*, “includes insisting that China... stop subsidizing coal exports and outsourcing pollution to other countries by financing billions of dollars’ worth of dirty fossil-fuel energy projects through its Belt and Road Initiative.” Then he went further by portraying the future effort to achieve a green economy as a potentially competitive, not collaborative, struggle with China, saying,

“I will make investment in research and development a cornerstone of my presidency, so that the United States is leading the charge in innovation. There is no reason we should be falling behind China or anyone else when it comes to clean energy.”

Unfortunately, though he’s not wrong on China’s climate change challenges (similar, in many respects, to our own country’s), you can’t have it both ways. If climate change is an existential threat and international collaboration between the worst greenhouse gas emitters key to overcoming that peril, picking fights with China over its energy behavior is a self-defeating way to start. Whatever obstacles China does pose, its cooperation in achieving that 1.5-degree limit is critical. “If we don’t get this right, nothing else will matter,” Biden [said](#) of global efforts to deal with climate change. Sadly, his insistence on pummeling China on so many fronts (and [appointing China hawks](#) to his foreign policy team to do so) will ensure that he gets it wrong. The only way to avert catastrophic climate change is for the United States to avoid a new cold war with China by devising a cooperative set of plans with Beijing to speed the global transition to a green economy.

Why Cooperation Is Essential

With such cooperation in mind, let’s review the basics on how those two countries affect world energy consumption and global carbon emissions: the United States and China are the world’s two leading consumers of energy and its two main emitters of carbon dioxide, or CO₂, the leading greenhouse gas. As a result, they exert an outsized influence on the global climate equation. [According to](#) the International Energy Agency (IEA), China accounted for approximately 22% of world energy consumption in 2018; the U.S., 16%. And because both countries rely so heavily on fossil fuels for energy generation — China largely on coal, the U.S. more on oil and natural gas — their carbon-dioxide emissions account for an even larger share of the global total: China alone, nearly 29% in 2018; the U.S., 18%; and combined, an astonishing 46%.

It’s what will happen in the future, though, that really matters. If the world is to keep global temperatures from rising above that 1.5 degrees Celsius threshold, every major economy should soon be on a downward-trending trajectory in terms of both fossil-fuel consumption and CO₂ emissions (along with a compensating increase in renewable energy output). Horrifyingly enough, however, on their current trajectories, over the next two decades the combined fossil-fuel consumption and carbon emissions of China and the United States are still expected to rise, not fall, before stabilizing in the 2040s at a level far above net zero. [According to](#) the IEA, if the two countries stick to anything like their current courses, their combined fossil-fuel consumption would be approximately 17% higher in 2040 than in 2018, even if their CO₂ emissions would rise by “only” 3%. Any increase of that kind over the next two decades would spell one simple word for humanity: D-O-O-M.

True, both countries are expected to substantially increase their investment in renewable energy during the next 20 years, even as places like India are expected to account for an ever-increasing share of global energy use and CO₂ emissions. Still, as long as Beijing and Washington continue to lead the world in both categories, any effort to achieve net-zero and avert an almost unimaginable climate cataclysm will have to fall largely on their shoulders. This would, however, require a colossal reduction in fossil-fuel consumption and the ramping up of renewables on a scale unlike any engineering project this planet has ever seen.

The Institute of Climate Change and Sustainable Development at Tsinghua University, an

influential Chinese think tank, has calculated what might be involved in reshaping China's coal-dependent electrical power system to reach the goal of a 1.5-degree limit on global warming. Its researchers believe that, over the next three decades, this would [require adding](#) the equivalent of three times current global wind power capacity and four times that of solar power at the cost of approximately \$20 trillion.

A similar transformation will be required in the United States, although with some differences: while this country relies far less on coal than China to generate electricity, it relies more on natural gas (a less potent emitter of CO₂, but a fossil fuel nonetheless) and its electrical grid — as recent events in Texas have demonstrated — is woefully [unprepared](#) for climate change and will have to be substantially rebuilt at enormous cost.

And that represents only part of what needs to be done to avert planetary catastrophe. To eliminate carbon emissions from oil-powered vehicles, both countries will have to replace their entire fleets of cars, vans, trucks, and buses with electric-powered ones and develop alternative fuels for their trains, planes, and ships — an undertaking of equal magnitude and expense.

There are two ways all of this can be done: separately or together. Each country could devise its own blueprint for such a transition, developing its own green technologies and seeking financing wherever it could be found. As in the fight over fifth generation (5G) telecommunications, each could deny scientific knowledge and technical know-how to its rival and insist that allies buy only its equipment, whether or not it best suits their purposes — a stance [taken](#) by the Trump administration with respect to the Chinese company Huawei's 5G wireless technology. Alternatively, the U.S. and China could cooperate in developing green technologies, share information and know-how, and work together in disseminating them around the world.

On the question of which approach is more likely to achieve success, the answer is too obvious to belabor. Only those prepared to risk civilization's survival would choose the former — and yet that's the choice that both sides may indeed make.

Why a New Cold War Precludes Climate Salvation

Those in Washington who favor a tougher approach toward China and the bolstering of U.S. military forces in the Pacific [claim](#) that, under President Xi Jinping, the Chinese Communist regime has become more authoritarian at home and more aggressive abroad, endangering key U.S. allies in the Pacific and threatening our vital interests. Certainly, when it comes to the increasing repression of [Uighur Muslims](#) in Xinjiang Province or [pro-democracy activists](#) in Hong Kong, there can be little doubt of Beijing's perfidy, though on other issues, there's room for debate. On another subject, though, there really should be no room for debate at all: the impact of a new cold war between the planet's two great powers on the chances for a successful global response to a rapidly warming planet.

There are several obvious reasons for this. First, increased hostility will ensure a competitive rather than collaborative search for vital solutions, resulting in wasted resources, inadequate financing, duplicative research, and the stalled international dissemination of advanced green technologies. A hint of such a future lies in the [competitive](#) rather than collaborative development of vaccines for Covid-19 and their distressingly chaotic distribution to Africa and the rest of the developing world, ensuring that the pandemic will have a life into 2022 or 2023 with an ever-rising death toll.

Second, a new cold war will make international diplomacy more difficult when it comes to ensuring worldwide compliance with the Paris climate agreement. Consider it a key lesson for the future that [cooperation](#) between President Barack Obama and Xi Jinping made the agreement possible in the first place, creating pressure on reluctant but vital powers like India and Russia to join as well. Once President Trump pulled the U.S. out of the agreement, that space evaporated and global adherence withered. Only by recreating such a U.S.-China climate alliance will it be possible to corral other key players into full compliance. As [suggested recently](#) by Todd Stern, the lead American negotiator at the 2015 Paris climate summit, “There is simply no way to contain climate change worldwide without full-throttle engagement by both countries.”

A cold war environment would make such cooperation a fantasy.

Third, such an atmosphere would ensure a massive increase in military expenditures on both sides, sopping up funds needed for the transition to a green-energy economy. In addition, as the pace of militarization accelerated, fossil-fuel use would undoubtedly increase, as the governments of both countries favored the mass production of gas-guzzling tanks, bombers, and warships.

Finally, there is no reason to assume a cold war will always remain cold. The current standoff between the U.S. and China in the Pacific is different from the one that existed between the U.S. and the Soviet Union in Europe during the historic Cold War. There is no longer anything like an “Iron Curtain” to define the boundaries between the two sides or keep their military forces from colliding with each another. While the risk of war in Europe was ever-present back then, each side knew that such a boundary-crossing assault might trigger a nuclear exchange and so prove suicidal. Today, however, the air and naval forces of China and the U.S. are constantly [intermingling](#) in the East and South China Seas, making a clash or collision possible at any time. So far, cooler heads have prevailed, preventing such encounters from sparking armed violence, but as tensions mount, a hot war between the U.S. and China cannot be ruled out.

Because American forces are [poised](#) to strike at vital targets on the Chinese mainland, it’s impossible to preclude China’s use of nuclear weapons or, if preparations for such use are detected, a preemptive U.S. nuclear strike. Any full-scale thermonuclear conflagration resulting from that would probably cause a [nuclear winter](#) and the death of billions of people, making the climate-change peril moot. But even if nuclear weapons are not employed, a war between the two powers could result in immense destruction in China’s industrial heartland and to such key U.S. allies as Japan and South Korea. Fires ignited in the course of battle would, of course, add additional carbon to the atmosphere, while the subsequent breakdown in global economic activity would postpone by years any transition to a green economy.

An Alliance for Global Survival

If Joe Biden genuinely believes that climate change is an “existential threat” and that the United States “must lead the world,” it’s crucial that he stop the slide toward a new cold war with China and start working with Beijing to speed the transition to a green-energy economy focused on ensuring global compliance with the Paris climate agreement. This would not necessarily mean abandoning all efforts to pressure China on human rights and other contentious issues. It’s possible to pursue human rights, trade equity, and planetary survival at the same time. Indeed, as both countries come to share the urgency of addressing the

climate crisis, progress on other issues could become easier.

Assuming Biden truly means what he says about overcoming the climate threat and “getting it right,” here are some of the steps he could take to achieve meaningful progress:

- Schedule a “climate summit” with Xi Jinping as soon as possible to discuss joint efforts to overcome global warming, including the initiation of bilateral programs to speed advances in areas like the spread of electric vehicles, the improvement of battery-storage capabilities, the creation of enhanced methods of carbon sequestration, and the development of alternative aviation fuels.
- At the conclusion of the summit, joint working groups on these and other matters should be established, made up of senior figures from both sides. Research centers and universities in each country should be designated as lead actors in key areas, with arrangements made for cooperative partnerships and the sharing of climate-related technical data.
- At the same time, presidents Biden and Xi should announce the establishment of an “Alliance for Global Survival,” intended to mobilize international support for the Paris climate agreement and strict adherence to its tenets. As part of this effort, the two leaders should plan joint meetings with other world leaders to persuade them to replicate the measures that Biden and Xi have agreed to work on cooperatively. As needed, they could offer to provide financial aid and technical assistance to poorer states to launch the necessary energy transition.
- Presidents Biden and Xi should agree to reconvene annually to review progress in all these areas and designate surrogates to meet on a more regular basis. Both countries should publish an online “dashboard” exhibiting progress in every key area of climate mitigation.

So, Joe, if you really meant what you said about overcoming climate change, these are some of the things you should focus on to get it right. Choose this path and guarantee us all a fighting chance to avert civilizational collapse. Opt for the path of confrontation instead — the one your administration already appears headed down — and that hope is likely to disappear into an unbearable world of burning, flooding, famine, and extreme storms until the end of time. After all, without remarkable effort, a simple formula will rule all our lives: a new cold war = a scalding planet.

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