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Leading from Behind the Scenes

The COP26 China story – a personal reflection

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Like some other China experts, I was astonished and impressed by China's commitment to stop all overseas coal power plant building. This promise was made by President Xi Jinping at the United Nations General Assembly in September, albeit in a half-sentence and without any further details.

Consequently, at COP26 in Glasgow I was hoping to hear China's concrete coal phase-out strategies, especially in light of its previously announced plans to add 60 gigawatts (GW) coal-fired capacity outside of China. Would China exercise climate protection leadership?

To my disappointment, this did not happen. Instead, China played a critical backstage role as Group of 77 (G-77) supporter while advancing its own agenda.

All the international community received from China during the important World Leaders Summit at the beginning of COP26 was a short, written [statement](#) from President Xi Jinping, saying that there would be a concrete roadmap to carbon peak and

neutrality in 2030 and 2060, respectively. No clear timelines were given. President Xi Jinping (like President Putin) did not show up in person. For this, both were criticized sharply by US President Biden. Except for China, nearly all participating governments set up country pavilions at COP26. There was a "China corporate pavilion" directly behind the South Korean pavilion, but it was often empty.

COP President Alok Sharma and lead negotiator Archie Young had to repeatedly face the question from journalists, "Where is China?" Their answer: The absence of the Chinese president did not mean a halt to negotiations, as Xie Zhenhua, China's lead negotiator, was on the ground at COP with his team.

On Day 2 of COP, Xie Zhenhua held a short press conference. He said President Xi was too occupied with domestic issues to come to Glasgow in person, but was taking COP26 very seriously. Xie then outlined the main issues that China and the G-77 would emphasize during COP: funds promised to developing countries and measuring "nationally determined contributions" or NDCs. During the press conference, however, Xie focused on funds for adaptation and mitigation – which turned out to be the core issue for the G-77 in Glasgow. He reiterated China's 2030 carbon peak and 2060 carbon neutrality goals and highlighted areas where China already claims the global lead, such as installation of electric car charging stations and installed capacity of renewables.

Xie also addressed criticism regarding China's plans to build new coal-fired power plants with a total capacity of 250 GW domestically, noting that some older coal-fired power plants have been decommissioned and that the new plants will use the latest low-carbon technology. Finally, he pointed out that China is not even among the top seven builders of new coal-fired plants. (In our view, this is nothing to be proud of. According to [urgewald data](#), Chinese companies are planning the most coal power plants and [China is still the No. 1 underwriter of coal plant developers](#).) Xie wrapped up by saying that gas and nuclear will be needed as bridge technologies for transition, an argument we have heard from industrialized countries. But China plans to phase out coal later and thus buy time for innovation and development.

On the evening of Nov. 10, two days before the summit's end, to everyone's surprise the US and China issued a [joint statement](#) about climate change cooperation. As the press release stated, this announcement had been in the works behind closed doors since January 2021. The statement was very much welcomed by the parties at COP, but it should be noted that it lacks any concrete, mandatory commitments.

In putting forward valid claims of many developing nations for more adaption, mitigation, and loss and damage, China lessened the pressure on its own emission reduction targets.

During the last two days of the negotiations, China acted mainly within the framework of the "G-77 plus China." The main points of dispute between this group and the OECD countries regarded concessions on fossil fuels and the crucial question: Who will pay the G-77 plus China the funds promised for adaptation to, mitigation of, and loss and damages from climate change? Twelve years ago at the Copenhagen COP, \$100 billion annually was promised for mitigation and transition. A Bangladesh government representative told me that any chance of realizing the discussed 100 percent renewable roadmap depends on payments by the global North.

In the last hours of the final day, China and 21 other countries asked to delete the whole section of the agreement dealing with mitigation. They said the request to reduce carbon emission would be a "narrative of the industrial countries." Bolivian Vice Foreign Minister Diego Pacheco Balanz even called it "carbon-colonialism." Responsibility would be rolled off to the poorer countries.

Mitigation was not dropped in the end. But China and the G-77 managed to push the topic of development higher up the agenda and reminded developed countries of their responsibility as historically the biggest emitters. Vice Minister of Ecology and Environment Zhao Yingmin was [quoted as saying](#) he hoped developed countries could "make further efforts to honor their commitments, enhancing support for developing countries, instead of merely urging other parties to raise their ambitions."

With regards to fossil fuels Glasgow made clear: The battle against coal might be over soon, but the one against oil and gas has only just begun. The first draft of the COP26 summit conclusions called upon parties to “accelerate the phasing-out of coal and subsidies for fossil fuels” – a historic move. However, on Nov. 13, with COP26 already in overtime and minutes away from ending, India, China and some other states gathered in secret consultations. India insisted on replacing “coal phase out” with “coal phase down” in the final text of the global agreement. In these final minutes, there must have been an intense drama. [Internal sources](#) report that the main driving force behind the switch to “phase down” was China. China and India are among the world’s biggest coal importers and consumers.

COP26 was a big disillusion. In putting forward valid claims of many developing nations for more adaption, mitigation, and loss and damage, China lessened the pressure on its own emission reduction targets. Next year’s COP27 will be hosted by Egypt, one of the G-77 members. We can expect the role of the “G-77 plus China” to be even more decisive.

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