

OPINION

# China's supposed leadership on climate change: Action vs. obstruction in an authoritarian state

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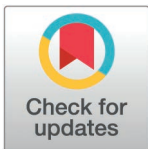
## Editor's Note

All opinions expressed in this article are those of the author and do not represent the views, positions, or endorsements of PLOS regarding the topics discussed.

The Working Group on Climate Obstruction in Authoritarian and Non-Democratic States of the Climate Social Science Network met in October 2024. Many of the presentations focused on Russia, an authoritarian petrostate that has worked hard over decades to obstruct action on climate change. Given Russia's size and role as a major producer, user and exporter of fossil fuels, its importance is indeed substantial. It has also used its diplomatic muscle to undermine international negotiations, in collaboration with fellow petrostates [1]. But Russia's significance in the climate crisis pales alongside that of China. As a centralized, communist party-state, China at least matches Russia in exemplifying authoritarian rule. All major policies of the party-state, including those related to climate change, are top down. The leadership of the Chinese Communist Party is omnipotent, with authoritarian governance becoming more entrenched since the advent of Xi Jinping as paramount leader in 2012. While Russia's carbon dioxide (CO<sub>2</sub>) emissions are about 5 percent of the global total, China's amount to 34 percent—almost three times those of the United States and five times those of the European Union [2]. As China goes, so goes the world.

## The yin-yang of climate “leadership” and obstruction

While few would dispute that China is an authoritarian state, there may be less agreement on whether China is clearly, like Russia, a climate obstructionist. Climate obstruction can be defined as “intentional actions and efforts to slow or block policies on climate change that are commensurate with the current scientific consensus of what is necessary to avoid dangerous anthropogenic interference with the climate system,” [3] the latter being the stated objective of the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC). China's actions, not least its enormous GHG pollution, clearly run counter to scientists' increasingly desperate calls for major and rapid cuts in emissions. Nevertheless, China sees itself as a leader in climate negotiations that helps broker international agreements and advocate for developing



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countries [4]. Most Chinese would probably agree with this portrayal, and Westerners often point to China's overwhelming frontrunner status in deploying alternative-energy infrastructure, notably solar and wind, as evidence of its leadership on climate change [5].

However, this supposed leadership may not be all that it appears to be. The "leader" is doing far less than it could to limit, let alone cut, its own CO<sub>2</sub> emissions, and it has a history of obstructing more robust global action to mitigate global emissions causing climate change. For example, at the 2009 Copenhagen climate summit its negotiators were instrumental in preventing agreement on limiting global heating to 1.5°C and on setting quantifiable GHG emissions targets [6]. More recently it used "wrecking tactics" to prevent agreement on GHG emissions and other aspects of climate change at the 2023 G20 summit [7]. This makes sense because China's outsized emissions mean that there is no practical way to reduce sufficiently the worldwide GHG pollution causing global heating without drastically reducing GHGs from within China itself. Doing so would constrain its economic growth, which is central to maintaining the party-state's legitimacy.

Another case of apparent obstruction is China's persistent insistence that it is a "developing" country and thus not legally responsible for taking action on climate change [8]. While it may have made some sense to call China a developing country when the UNFCCC was agreed in 1992, continuing to group it with Cambodia and Madagascar more than three decades later is absurd. China's middle class is larger than the population of North America and Western Europe put together, to say nothing of millions of Chinese millionaires [9]. What is more, China's per capita emissions are very high by global standards and well above most Western European countries, and it will soon overtake the United States in historical emissions [10]. Consequently, poor countries, including highly vulnerable small-island states, are rightly critical of China's behavior and need it to do more to cut emissions and provide aid to help them cope with loss and damage.

To limit global heating, it essential that countries quickly transition away from the burning of fossil fuels. China's ultimate means of climate obstruction is its enormous CO<sub>2</sub> emissions, which undermine the efforts of more ambitious countries and give relief to laggard states that have no desire to reduce their emissions. Despite promises to cut back on coal development, China is mining more coal, constructing new coal-fired plants and building yet more of them abroad [11]. In 2024 alone, China started construction on 94.5 gigawatts of coal capacity, more than 13 times the rest of the world combined [12]. This defies the objectives of the UNFCCC and is inconsistent with President Xi's promise that China's CO<sub>2</sub> emissions will peak by 2030 and be neutralized by 2060 [13]. China's emissions would have to fall by 60 percent just to equal already-dangerous US emissions when the UNFCCC was signed [14].

China's behavior shows that climate obstruction can exist alongside climate action, exposing the lack of dedication to the latter. China's nominally climate-friendly policies, exemplified by solar farms and electric cars, distract attention away from the lack of essential near-term cuts in GHG pollution. If the fossil fuel industry's support for carbon sequestration and other forms of geo-engineering is a smokescreen to

divert attention from its continuing role in causing the climate crisis, could China's alternative-energy development be serving as a smokescreen for the largest global polluter's continued coal development and other policies that exacerbate climate change? Given the existential nature of the climate crisis, perpetuating—even merely accepting—the status quo is arguably a powerful form of climate obstruction.

### Climate-related policies: myth vs. reality

Anyone trying to explain China's climate-related policies encounters two myths, one official and the other analytical. The official myth is that China is making bold and steady progress toward solving the climate crisis, and doing so out of a desire to lead the world toward “ecological civilization” [15]. But China's rising GHG emissions, even its continued coal development alone, suggest otherwise. The analytical myth is that China's yin-yang of policies—impressive action to develop, deploy and export alternative-energy technologies, on one hand, and continued development of carbon-intensive energy sources, on the other—result from struggles among competing priorities and agencies. There is some truth to this myth at the level of implementation: even in authoritarian regimes, actors and interests compete. In today's China, however, they never openly defy directives of the top leadership. Instead, they compete to show fealty, helping to explain both rapidly expanding solar farms and record-breaking coal- production.

The best explanations for China's contradictory climate-related policies are the simplest. They begin with the foundational priority of authoritarian regimes: to remain in power in perpetuity. Policies are guided by this priority. From this perspective, China's party-state is not significantly motivated by a desire to mitigate the causes of climate change or to limit adverse impacts in other countries. Instead, motivations for alternative-energy development are the same as those for coal development: to perpetuate the party-state's viability. Climate-related policies do this by providing stable, all-season electricity supplies to industries and cities; garnering economic benefits from the export of solar panels, electric cars and the like; and reducing reliance on energy imports while diversifying and dispersing the domestic energy supply. The latter will be viewed by China's leadership and military as crucial for national security. Having a diversified and dispersed domestic energy supply—coal, hydro, solar and wind—means that any attempt by other countries to disable energy infrastructure or cut off energy imports to China during conflict will be nugatory.

Refining our understanding of authoritarianism and obstruction in China's yin-yang of climate-related policies will require answering many questions. For example, how do we account for a country that is taking far more action than any other to develop carbon-free energy while simultaneously polluting more than the European Union, the United States and India combined? When is a climate-related policy a case of climate obstruction—gaslighting that obscures more ominous actions? How do we prove a negative, i.e., that climate-related policies are not about climate change but about the regime's desire for perpetual power? How do scholars answer these and other questions when gathering relevant data may risk arrest?

China is out front on alternative energy. That is a kind of climate leadership, even if it is not motivated by the climate crisis. However, by continuing to pollute the atmosphere on a scale never seen in human history, by failing to endorse more progressive proposals to reduce global GHG emissions, and by insisting that it is a developing country and thus not obligated to aid suffering poor countries, China is the largest obstacle (the second Trump administration notwithstanding) to global efforts to mitigate the climate crisis. Explanations for this can be found in the overriding instinct of any authoritarian regime to do what it believes is in the interest of retaining its authority.

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