

# China's top Cop26 delegate says it is taking 'real action' on climate targets

**Xie Zhenhua claims country has concrete plans rather than 'paying lip service' to commitments**



Floods after heavy rainfalls in Jiexiu, Jinzhong city, in China's northern Shanxi province in October. Photograph: AFP/Getty Images

## ***Fiona Harvey in Glasgow***

Wed 10 Nov 2021 06.00 GMT

China has detailed and concrete plans on how to meet its climate commitments, and is pushing those plans forward vigorously, unlike some countries that are “paying lip service” to their climate targets, the head of delegation for China at the **Cop26 climate talks** has said.

Xie Zhenhua, China's veteran chief official, said: “President Xi [Jinping] announced recently on many multilateral occasions China's specific targets and concrete policies, measures and actions. We have a policy framework to ensure that we can achieve our climate target.”

He added: “If we only make promises without taking real action then we are just simply paying lip service to make a show rather than taking real action.”

His words were a clear dig at developed countries which have set out targets without firm policies to back them up.

The issue of how far countries are following up their pledges of emissions cuts with concrete policies and action has become the key issue at the **Cop26 talks**. On Tuesday, the Climate Action Tracker (CAT) published an analysis **showing that the world was on track for a devastating 2.4C of heating**, far above the upper limit of 2C set out in the **Paris agreement**, and even further adrift of the safer 1.5C limit being targeted at Cop26.

The CAT analysis stood in stark contrast to optimistic estimates last week that current pledges would limit heating to 1.8C. Those pledges were based on long-term targets that countries have set out, for mid-century and beyond, while CAT based its forecast on pledges for this decade, which are crucial to holding the world within 1.5C.

When only targets with concrete policies and actions to back them up are taken into account, the forecast temperature increase from CAT rises to 2.7C, a level that would be catastrophic for the planet.

Xie Zhenhua's words were a clear dig at developed countries which have set targets without firm policies to deliver. Photograph: Xinhua/REX/Shutterstock

China has long prided itself on “under-promising and over-delivering”, by only making emissions pledges that are backed up with action. The country has said it will hit peak emissions by 2030, and reach net zero emissions by 2060, targets which have disappointed many other countries and experts, who believe the world's biggest emitter is capable of moving much faster.

In pointed remarks aimed at the US, whose **president Joe Biden slammed Xi** for not attending the Glasgow talks, Xie said: “It's unfair to point fingers at countries who haven't come. Because the final, the ultimate standard to extend the ambitions and efforts of certain countries is not by what promise they have made. It's by what action they have taken. Action becomes the key for our efforts of addressing climate change.”

In a rare and extensive interview with the Guardian, Xie implicitly chided the US president: “Climate change is already threatening the development of humanity. The situation is becoming more severe. We need to pull together and

help each other instead of pointing fingers at each other, because that is pointless and does not offer any help.”

Xie also signalled that China was reluctant to heed calls from many developing countries for governments to revise their national carbon-cutting targets. As the CAT analysis shows, countries’ current targets for 2030 – called nationally determined contributions (NDCs) – are far adrift of the 1.5C goal, and if they are not revised soon the 1.5C goal will be out of reach.

But under the Paris agreement, countries are only obliged to revise their NDCs every five years. Many countries want to force nations to revise them every year, if their plans are judged inadequate.

Xie signalled that China wanted to stick to the five-year timetable, but did not rule out a change, and expressed sympathy with the plight of the small island states which are pushing hardest for the more frequent timetable. He said: “This is a highly controversial issue in the ongoing negotiations. We fully understand the adverse impact of climate change on those small island countries. I’ve been to many small island countries before and have seen with my own eyes the impact of hurricanes and rising sea levels on them.”

He signalled that if there was a change, China could be exempted because of the detailed nature of its plans: “I think that whether the NDCs should be updated annually depends on what content is in it. Actually, I think stable and long-term NDCs is more helpful for countries to carry out action to achieve targets.”

He again made the point that some countries were making promises without clear plans. “We think that the most important thing for NDCs is actually to take real action to implement this step by step. Otherwise, the NDCs are only empty promises without substantial measures and actions.”

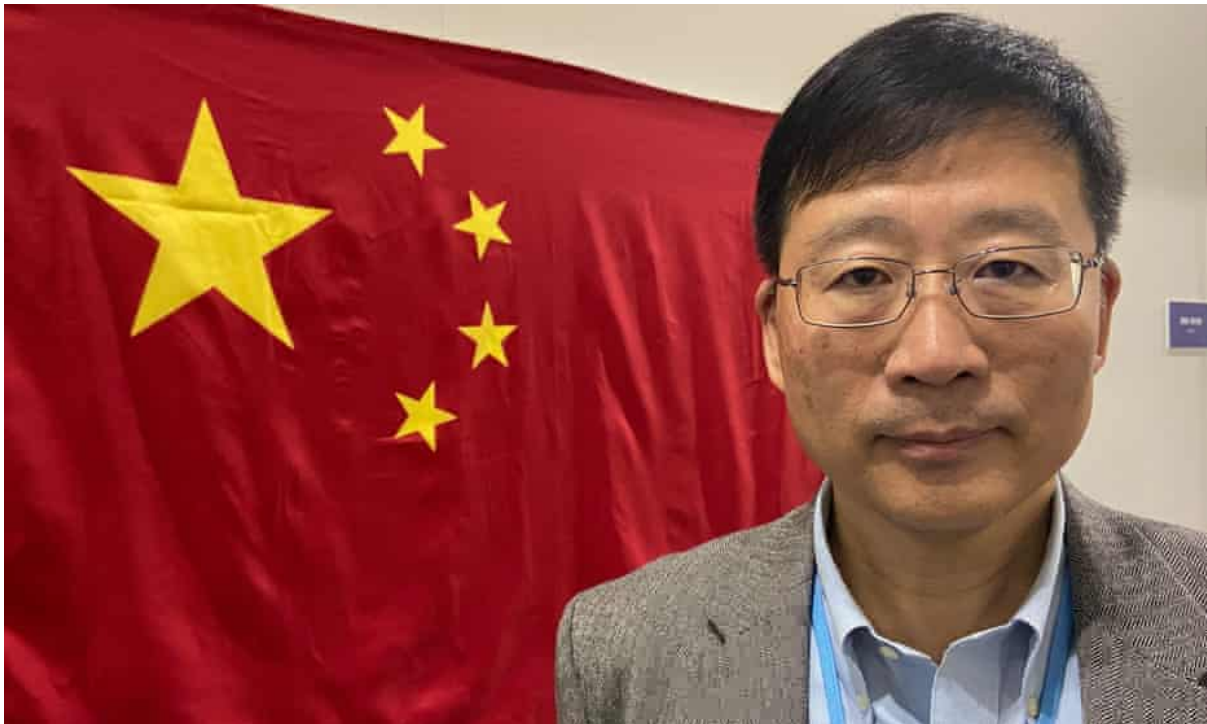
Xie added: “We think that as long as we can follow the principles and spirit of the Paris agreement it is possible for us to find a proper solution on [more frequent NDCs] at this Cop.”

Xie also criticised rich countries for failing to fulfil their pledges on providing the developing world with \$100bn (£74bn) a year in climate finance from 2020, to reduce emissions and adapt to the impacts of climate breakdown. He said: “It’s a pity that only \$80bn has been gathered and mobilised. We are still \$20bn

short from our target. We hope that at this Cop there can be a clear timetable and road map [to fulfilling the target].”

## China calls for concrete action not distant targets in last week of Cop26

Senior Beijing adviser also defends scale, depth and detail of country’s ‘unappreciated’ climate actions



‘Unfortunately, China cannot change the China narrative,’ Wang Yi said. Photograph: Jonathan Watts/The Guardian

### **Jonathan Watts**

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Chinese officials are sceptical of claims that **Cop26** commitments will keep global heating below 2C, and want other countries to focus on concrete actions rather than distant targets in the final week of the talks.

They feel that China, **the world’s biggest emitter**, is doing more than it is given credit for, including plans to peak coal consumption by 2025 and add more new wind and solar power capacity by 2030 than the entire installed electricity system of the US.

“There has been a lot of criticism of China’s attitude in the media, but many of them are based on incomprehension or misunderstanding,” said Wang Yi, a senior adviser to the Chinese delegation.

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During the first week of the UN climate talks in Glasgow, China has been portrayed at times as a reluctant laggard in the effort to keep global heating to 1.5C. The US president, Joe Biden, said it was a “big mistake” for his Chinese counterpart, Xi Jinping, not to show up. China’s climate plan disappointed many because it contained no fresh ambition, and the country was notably absent from alliances to reduce methane emissions and phase out coal.

But Wang, a key consultant on China’s decarbonisation strategy and five-year plan, said his country had delivered a policy framework and detailed roadmap to cut emissions, while other nations were congratulating themselves on vague long-term promises.

He is sceptical of a recent estimate by the International Energy Agency and others that the pledges made in Glasgow could constrain global heating to 1.8 or 1.9C. “Based on our research, I can’t see evidence that we can reach 1.9C,” he said. “But whether we are now on course for 1.9C or 2.7C, the main point is that we should focus on concrete action.”

Wang expressed frustration that the scale, depth and details of China’s climate actions were not appreciated. “Unfortunately, China cannot change the China narrative,” he said. “To reach our targets, we have outlined a change to our entire system, not just in the energy sector but across society and the economy. Nobody knows this.”

China has released five documents detailing plans to achieve its dual goals of peaking carbon emissions in 2030 and reaching net zero by 2060. “If you read those reports you can find all of our actions, but nobody reads everything,” he said.

As an example, he said the working guidance document on carbon peaking and neutrality outlined a strict control on the increase of coal consumption

during **the 14th five-year period** and then a gradual reduction during the following five years. “That means China will peak coal consumption around 2025, though that is not a line you will see in the document. You need to interpret it and nobody [outside China] can do that.”

Similarly, he said the government 1+N policy system provided a roadmap of 37 tasks that the country needed to take until 2060 on areas ranging from legislation and policy to technology and finance. There will be another 30 documents published in the coming year that break down actions needed in key sectors, such as building and transport, as well as major industries including steel and chemicals. “No country has issued so many documents to support its targets,” he said. “It’s a holistic solution, but nobody knows.”

China’s two different targets pose very different challenges, he said. “The peaking issue is easy. More difficult is how to achieve neutrality ... We are in transition. Our concern in the future is not that China is too slow, but that it is too fast.”

He said the recent power shortages in China proved how serious it had been in shutting down overcapacity in its coal sector. Every decision had major consequences. “Our coal-fired plants have a life of 10 to 12 years. If we shut them down, who will pay for the stranded assets? Who will employ the laid-off workers?”

Decarbonisation is already under way. By the end of this decade, the government plans to reach 1200GW of wind and solar power, which would exceed the entire installed electricity capacity of the US, he said.

The final week of Cop26 will tackle the most contentious issues on the climate agenda. For China, the priority is to finalise the Paris rulebook, which will determine how money should flow across borders in support of decarbonisation, forest protection and other climate actions.

As at previous Cops, China will also push wealthy nations to make greater financial contributions to developing countries, which have done least to cause the climate crisis but suffer most from its consequences.

Wang pointed out that the 2009 promise of \$100bn (£73bn) a year in climate finance had yet to be realised and far more than this would be needed in the future to accelerate the pace of decarbonisation.

“China would like more effort on supporting developing countries,” he said. “If we are going to aim for 1.5C instead of 2C, then there has to be an increase in the funds available to make that happen.”

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Much remains to be done, but negotiation teams have less capacity than at previous Cops. Wang said China’s strict Covid regulations had pared down the entire delegation. “When we go back, we will have to isolate for 21 days,” he said. “So our negotiating delegations this time is just 50 people, compared with several hundred in Paris.”

He said Xi Jinping was not attending for the same reason. The fact that the Chinese president only sent a printed statement rather than a video was widely reported in the media as a snub, but Wang said this was incorrect because China had suggested a video message but the UK hosts felt it was not permitted.

China has been hesitant about pushing for a 1.5C target, which would require far more drastic actions. Wang recognised that small island nations may insist on this ambitious goal, but said it should not be to the detriment of other objectives. “1.5C is possible, but it would carry a cost, social and economic. If we cannot solve these problems equally, especially for developing countries, then it is not a real target.”

“We are all in the same boat, but different cabins,” he said. “Some live in a big space and eat too much. We need balance.”