

Cop28: China ‘would like to see agreement to substitute renewables for fossil fuels’

But country’s climate envoy, Xie Zhenhua, would not say whether it would support phase-out wording in climate deal

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Fiona Harvey in Dubai

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- China's climate envoy, Xie Zhenhua, indicated that the country was trying to find a compromise on the issue of phasing out fossil fuels. Photograph: Giuseppe Cacace/AFP/Getty Images

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China would like to see nations agree to substitute renewable energy for fossil fuels, the country’s chief climate official has said, as nations wrangled over the weekend on the wording of a deal on the climate crisis.

Xie Zhenhua, China's climate envoy, would not be explicit on whether China supported or opposed a phase-out of fossil fuels, which more than 100 governments are pushing for at crucial climate talks, the Cop28 UN summit.

But he did indicate that he and his delegation were engaging positively to try to find a compromise on the contentious issue, which has become the focal point of the fortnight-long negotiations, now reaching their final stages in Dubai and scheduled to end on Tuesday.



Azerbaijan chosen to host Cop29 after fraught negotiations

He gave an indication of what China sees as a possible compromise, by referring to a joint statement made with John Kerry, the US climate envoy, at a meeting in Sunnylands, California, in November. “We had this language which said that both China and the US will massively promote renewable energy deployment and use it to gradually and orderly substitute oil, gas and coal power generation, so that we can reduce greenhouse gas emissions,” Xie said through an interpreter at a small press conference attended by the Guardian on Saturday evening.

He added: “I’ve also heard another option for the language [in a Cop28 agreement] that is to gradually reduce the share of fossil energy in the global energy mix.”

But he said: “Of course, there are also some other options. I will not list them all, and we will not prejudge the final outcome. But I think we will all work together to try to find a language that accommodates the needs of all parties and also reflect the big trends of transition and innovation. I think this is also in line with the requirements of the Paris agreement.”

China is the world’s biggest emitter and the second biggest economy, and is highly dependent on coal. Other delegations have told the Guardian that China has been blocking discussions of a phase-out of fossil fuels.

Xie also said oil-producing countries could face particular issues. “I’ve already talked with the minister of one oil-producing country. And he said to me 80% to 90% of his country’s income depends on oil production. So if we phase out all the fossil energy, including oil, how will their country survive or develop?” he asked.

“This process of transition. It is a process. We have to understand each other, support each other and cooperate with each other to jointly find a best solution that resolves the issue and is acceptable to all. I think that is the best way out,” he said.



Failure to agree fossil fuel phase-out at Cop28 ‘will push world into climate breakdown’

Xie's words may signal a softening in China's position or a willingness to seek compromise, though there is no guarantee that the country would agree to any form of wording on fossil fuels in the final text. At the Cop26 summit in Glasgow in 2021, the final agreement included a commitment to phase out coal until the very last moments, when China and India decided to raise an objection leading to a watering-down of the language to a "phase-down" instead.

Xie said China was reducing its dependence on coal. He said: "China has already announced that during the 14th five-year plan period, that is from 2021 to 2025, China will strictly control the increase of coal production. And also then during the 15th five-year plan period, that is after 2025, China will gradually reduce coal production.

"We have also been developing renewable energy very robustly and, as I said, the installed capacity of renewable energy has already surpassed that of coal power in China. So, this is very fast development of renewables."

But he added that further development was needed. "The actual power generated by renewables is not growing as fast as the installed capacity because we still face technical bottlenecks, difficulties like large-scale energy storage, smart grids and virtual power plants. So I believe if we get all these technical difficulties resolved, China's renewable energy will develop even faster and better in the future."

Xie, a long-serving official who is one of the key figures at the annual conference of the parties to the UN framework convention on climate change, parent treaty to the Paris agreement, enjoys a warm relationship with Kerry. At Cop28, the back of the US offices is situated strategically close to the entrance to China's offices, facilitating occasional "impromptu" meetings between the two.

Two developed country negotiators told the Guardian that Xie's words confirmed that China was actively engaging on fossil fuels. "It would be nice to see Opec countries also engaging in this manner," said one.

Li Shuo, of the Asia Society Policy Institute, said: "The US-China Sunnylands agreement sets the floor for COP28. This agreement will help stabilize the politics in Dubai, but if the global ambition is limited at the G2 level [of the world's two biggest economies, the US and China] we will be in trouble. The remaining days at the COP need to see countries actively building up from the floor set by the G2. Whether they manage to do it will define the success of this climate summit."