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The 2 Biggest Carbon Emitters Find Common Ground in Clean Energy Technology

By LISA FRIEDMAN of [ClimateWire](#)

America's relationship with China may be a swinging pendulum, but energy cooperation between the two greenhouse gas-spewing giants appears to be on a steady track, Energy Department officials and others familiar with the programs say.

From Google's denunciation of China's Internet censors to the White House decision to sell Taiwan \$6.4 billion in new armaments, relations with China appeared to be on a collision course through early 2010. Recent weeks, though, have seen a spate of reconciliations. Treasury Secretary Timothy Geithner met with top economic officials in Beijing earlier this month, and the relationship warmed a bit further when President Obama welcomed Chinese President Hu Jintao to Washington for a nuclear security summit.

Behind the scenes, energy and climate experts say, efforts to build Sino-U.S. cooperation on energy have progressed steadily.

"The deterioration in bilateral relations between December and February is exaggerated, and I think the sudden recovery that's being reported in the past few weeks is also exaggerated. There are mature adults on both sides of the Pacific," said Trevor Houser, a former senior adviser to State Department Special Envoy on Climate Change Todd Stern.

While flare-ups over specific issues like Obama's meeting with the Dalai Lama can certainly put a "chill" over the relationship, Houser said, "I don't think that's had a material impact on clean energy cooperation."

In the run-up to the Copenhagen climate change conference last year, the United States and China forged a far-reaching package of energy measures, including a jointly funded \$150 million clean-energy research center aimed at boosting cooperation between the countries. It also included initiatives between private companies and collaborations on everything from electric cars to shale gas.

Late last month, Energy Secretary Steven Chu announced \$37.5 million over the next five years for the research center, which will be located at existing facilities like universities and national laboratories in both countries. U.S. groups that receive the Energy Department grant funding will be expected to match it, and China will kick in the other \$75 million.

A basis for a broader partnership?

"By jointly developing new technologies and learning from China's experiences, we can create new export opportunities for American companies and ensure that we remain on the cutting edge of innovation," Chu said in a statement. "This partnership will also be a foundation for broader partnerships with China on

cutting carbon pollution."

Some have questioned whether the United States should be competing with China instead of joining forces. In recent testimony to the U.S.-China Economic and Security Review Commission, Assistant Secretary for Policy and International Affairs David Sandalow said the transition to clean energy is "not a zero-sum game."

The United States and China, he argued, can "leverage each other's comparative advantages and bolster our energy security by becoming more energy efficient and developing new sources of energy," adding, "Working together, we can do more than working alone."

Asked recently how the fluctuating relationship between the United States and China is affecting the energy cooperation, Sandalow declined to say. But in testimony before the commission, he indicated that the Obama administration is ramping up its efforts.

The Department of Energy, he said, has created a new Office of East Asian Affairs and is hiring five new full-time staff to focus on implementing the cooperative agreements. Chu, he said, will travel to China at the end of May "to advance our overall objectives for clean energy cooperation."

Others, meanwhile, said the U.S.-China cooperation can be a key element in helping China meet the commitments it made at the U.N. climate summit in Copenhagen last year. China pledged to reduce carbon intensity up to 45 percent by 2020 -- something it is already well on its way to achieving. But in Copenhagen it also agreed to record and submit the country's mitigation actions -- something that will require significant improvements in China's domestic emissions reporting and its capacity to reduce greenhouse gases.

Part of the agreement, for example, furthers cooperation between U.S. EPA and China's National Development and Reform Commission on the detail-laden work of establishing an accurate inventory of its greenhouse gas emissions.

Where technology can trump politics

Julian Wong, a senior policy analyst with the Center for American Progress, noted that the clean energy agreements are "more technical in nature than political" and have largely been unaffected by Sino-U.S. diplomatic spats.

Angel Hsu, a doctoral candidate at Yale University, told the commission that the United States is "already late in coming to the game" of green energy cooperation with China.

She noted that the Chinese already have long-standing partnerships with European nations, Japan and several developing nations. In the months before the U.N. climate summit in Copenhagen, she pointed out, China and Japan unveiled no fewer than 42 clean energy projects under way. Meanwhile, China isn't waiting for money from richer nations. To the contrary, it last year pledged \$10 billion in aid to Africa -- including the construction of 100 clean energy projects.

"The good news is that while the United States may have shown up late to the game, it's not over yet," Hsu testified. "All the pieces are in place for the United States and China to work together on clean energy research, energy efficiency, renewable energy, clean coal and carbon capture and sequestration projects, and

clean vehicle technology."

Still, she argued, neither country has put in enough resources yet to adequately move the partnerships forward.

Rob Bradley, director of international climate policy for the World Resources Institute think tank, also pointed to the need for more funding. He called on Congress to authorize money for sustained bilateral energy cooperation with China. Specifically, he testified to the commission this month, "Congress must commit sustained funding to U.S.-China research efforts" like the new center and to enable staff increases at U.S. agencies in Beijing.

Some movement amid suspicions

In his testimony to the commission, Bradley noted that the United States has collaborated with China on energy and climate for 20 years, working on everything from efficiency standards for home appliances to improving building efficiency.

He called the newest joint efforts on things like "smart" electrical grids and carbon capture and storage systems part of a mutual recognition that both countries can benefit -- China from America's technical expertise and the United States from China's ability to drive down the global costs of low-carbon technologies.

"The importance of these collaborations in realizing the goals expressed in Copenhagen cannot be overstated," Bradley said.

Ned Helme, president of the Center for Clean Air Policy, said China already is moving far along with its carbon intensity target and other clean energy goals. He said China's next five-year plan, which leaders are expected to craft this year, will be critical. A number of lawmakers remain critical and suspicious of China's plans to cut carbon, he acknowledged. But, he said, despite the rifts that emerged between the United States and China in Copenhagen, its acceptance of targets and transparency measures has made some difference.

"There's a much more nuanced appreciation of China and India that we didn't have before. The game has shifted a little bit," Helme said. "The key is to watch what goes into the five-year plan and what they actually do. Judge 'em by their actions. That's the test."

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