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A U.S.-China Climate Change Roadmap

Asia Society and Pew Center on Global Climate Change 02.08.09, 10:47 PM ET

The challenge of global climate change is unprecedented in world history. The fact that a molecule of carbon dioxide emitted in the U.S. is just as harmful to Chinese as one emitted in China is to Americans—or, indeed, to anyone on our planet—means that no human being is exempt from our inescapable commons. This new reality begs a completely new set of global responses. One of the most critical responses must come from the U.S. and China. For without the two largest emitters of greenhouse gases in the world forging a new and extensive collaborative relationship, this global problem will remain intractable and unsolvable.

While a Sino-U.S. bilateral effort is a critical element in any overall global climate strategy, it is not an alternative to the multilateral U.N. climate change process. Collaboration between the U.S. and China will be crucial both to achieving significant greenhouse gas reductions in both countries, and to creating the joint momentum that will be required for a larger multilateral solution to this collective challenge. Read the [report](#).

China's leadership has shown a growing awareness of the concrete threats that global warming poses to China and the world. With new government policy pronouncements and bureaucratic restructuring to focus on climate change as well as regular public discussion of the issue, there is reason to be optimistic that China is in the process of becoming a more receptive partner with the U.S. and others to take increasingly concrete and meaningful climate change remedies.

In Washington, the new administration of President Barack Obama also portends a sea change in both awareness of the seriousness of this threat and a commensurate change in government policy. And while the recent global financial crisis will mean even greater competition for government resources, the various economic recovery packages now being adopted in both capitals may well provide opportunities for clean tech industries that will be the engines of the next technological revolution.

While at first blush the faltering global economy may seem to present an inhospitable environment in which to confront such a massive and costly challenge, historically it has been precisely during such times of stress and crisis that rigid structures and systems that have outlived their usefulness have often become malleable and susceptible to change or replacement. This change will, of course, take wise leadership. If such leadership is forthcoming, however, there will be an incomparable opportunity not only to reformat the energy systems of both countries, but also to gain a new and welcomed measure of energy security.

If the U.S. and Chinese leaderships are, in fact, capable of forging a new and effective alliance, not only will they succeed in taking a giant step forward for the world as a whole on the question of climate change, but they will also afford Americans and Chinese a second incomparable benefit: a new, more collaborative, and stable basis for interaction in their countries' relations, which is now commonly acknowledged to be the most important bilateral relationship in the world.

That our planet is now on the precipice of a point of no return seems increasingly self-evident. And while it is true that recognition of the perils implicit at such moments can be unsettling, it is also true that with bold leadership, such moments can also be galvanizing. The moment now upon us begs an unprecedented effort from both the world at large and, in particular, from the U.S. and China, the most important players in this "game." If the U.S. and China can find ways to bridge the divide, the benefits will not be limited to helping solve the climate change challenge.