

After very mixed assessments on the achievements of COP26 in Glasgow, a surprise joint statement by the US and China, issued on 11 November 2021, seemed to inject renewed momentum into global efforts to tackle climate change. Yet the joint statement offered few new commitments and any additional pledges were essentially unilateral action points, issued simultaneously. The joint statement is, nonetheless, significant as a reflection of a thaw in US-China tensions and a mechanism for trust building between the two powers.

After a somewhat gloomy week in Glasgow marred by bilateral bickering – with US President Joe Biden lamenting President Xi’s absence and China’s chief negotiator Xie Zhenhua lambasting the US for having withdrawn from the Paris agreement – the Joint Statement came as a welcome surprise.

However, the declaration offers no new joint pledges or commitments, it has not increased the US or China’s levels of ambition, but merely reiterates individual commitments. Indeed, the Glasgow Declaration builds on the joint US-China declaration in April 2021 and emphasises both sides’ agreement to “work together and with other parties to strengthen implementation of the Paris Agreement” most notably on reducing methane emissions, promoting decarbonisation and protecting forests.

To be sure, pledges regarding methane and deforestation are significant: for instance, China joined the global deforestation pledge at COP26, after having shunned it in 2014. But it was not US-China negotiations that led to Beijing’s change of heart: Chinese negotiators joined the global deforestation pledge a week before the Glasgow Declaration. Similarly, the US-China declaration highlighted cooperation on methane emission reductions, but this included a repetition of China’s announcement, made the week prior, that it would develop a domestic plan for cutting methane. Importantly, China did not sign onto the Global Methane Pledge.

Even the optics of the Glasgow Declaration with consecutive press conferences rather than a joint announcement – despite Kerry and Xie having been seen engaged in long, in person, conversations during the week – highlight that the US and China can come together, but still stand apart. Arguably, Chinese domestic politics dictate that some distance must be kept so that Beijing is not perceived to be bowing to US pressure.

But even though the Glasgow Declaration, unlike the US-China joint announcement in 2014, did not lead to more ambitious commitments from China or the US, it did create new opportunities for regular exchanges between the US and China, including an agreed meeting in the first half of 2022 to focus on measurement and mitigation of methane. Moreover, the decision to create a “Working Group on Enhancing Climate Action in the 2020s,” that will meet regularly will help establish working relations between the US and China following several years of limited engagement and a no-trust environment. It remains to be seen how regularly the Working Group meets, the makeup of the delegations and the topics it discusses.

In that sense, the Glasgow Declaration provided a positive basis for the video call between Xi and Biden on 16 November, highlighting that both sides are looking for common ground to alleviate tensions. Chinese domestic politics may also be supportive of the gradual thaw in ties seen since September. Historically, Chinese leaders have sought to stabilise the external environment and mainly relations with the US ahead of Party Congresses – a key political date. But in the past, both sides have worked to ensure deliverables can be announced during high level meetings. This was not the case in the Xi-Biden call which was mostly about signalling a cooling of tensions.

Dragoman

So, China may be seeking a calm external environment to avoid disrupting the Beijing Winter Olympics in February and the 20th Party Congress in November 2022, where Xi is expected to begin an unprecedented third term in power. It is, however, debatable, whether Xi needs stability in bilateral relations with the US for domestic political purposes, given that he has largely consolidated his personal standing, as attested by the outcome of the 6th Plenum. But Xi does need the US in order to stabilise the global economy and both sides may be building on the improving momentum in an effort to cool inflationary pressure by, among other things, removing some of the bilateral trade tariffs.

Neither Beijing or Washington likely expect relations to improve dramatically. On the contrary, both sides seem to be preparing for a protracted period of competition, but they are still keen to avoid conflict, as the numerous references to “guardrails” in the 16 November Biden-Xi call suggest. By committing to regular meetings, especially in areas with clear common interests such as climate, Beijing and Washington are creating such guardrails. And perhaps along the way, if regular meetings on climate can deliver global regulatory frameworks and environmental standards, or progress on new technologies such as CCUS, they will generate real momentum on climate change too.



Dr Michal Meidan is Director of the China Energy Programme at the Oxford Institute for Energy Studies and a Dragoman Counsellor. Before joining OIES in July 2019, she headed cross-commodity China research at Energy Aspects. Prior to that, she headed China Matters, an independent research consultancy providing analysis on the politics of energy in China.