

Hot topic

China may become the world's single biggest polluter sooner than you think



AFP

THE latest news on climate change is neither welcome nor terribly surprising: within a couple of years, at most, says the International Energy Agency, China will surpass America as the world's biggest emitter of greenhouse gases, the ones that contribute to climate change. China's race to the number-one spot is not because America has cleaned up its act, sadly, but a sign that the booming Asian economy is pumping out pollution faster than had been expected. The news also highlights an awkward fact: in the debate on what to do about climate change, America finds itself acting more like China and less like its rich-world friends in Europe and elsewhere.

On Monday April 30th leaders from America and Europe will gather in Washington, DC, for a summit, with a particular focus on energy security and the global climate. But there is no agreement yet on a draft declaration, reflecting sharply different views on what to do about the changing climate. Europe has gone beyond pledges in the Kyoto protocol, recently agreeing to cut greenhouse-gas emissions by 20% by 2020 (though allowing some flexibility for the poorer and less green countries of eastern Europe). Germany's chancellor, Angela Merkel, suggests Europe is now a "world pioneer" in tackling emissions.

It seems unlikely that next week's summit will see America hitching up close to the pioneer, however. The American ambassador to the European Union (EU), Boyden Gray, suggests that America cannot agree to any hard caps on emissions unless China does so too. (America also mentions India in this context from time to time, but for political reasons China is more tempting to bash.)

The Bush administration knows, as an official Chinese government report confirms, that no such caps are forthcoming. China's rulers recognise that they face serious consequences from local pollution and from changes to the global climate. On April 25th the prime minister, Wen Jiabao, repeated a "solemn promise" that some industrial emissions and the rate of energy consumption would fall. Between 2006 and 2010, according to official targets, emissions of big industrial pollutants are supposed to drop by 10%, and energy efficiency is supposed to rise sharply in the same period. But as the report made clear, there will be no caps on greenhouse emissions if that means slowing economic growth. China argues that other countries polluted their way to development; capping emissions now would unfairly punish those who come late to the game.

Every country, of course, has an excuse ready. China can rightly note that, per person, its billion plus population is much less polluting than America's or Europe's. American officials say their country invests more in trying to find green technologies than anyone else, as a way of avoiding painful, inflexible caps. And as for the holier-than-thou Europeans, their targets and declarations of principles sound good, say sceptics, but are non-binding. Without a mechanism for punishing laggards at least some will slip behind, as many EU countries (including traditionally green ones like Austria and Denmark), and Canada, are set to do with their Kyoto targets.

The Bush administration has begun talking more about climate change, just as China is putting the best public face on its efforts. But the difference between these two countries (and other holdouts like Australia) and the Europeans is still wide. To a large extent, it is one of urgency. Europe included the greenhouse-gas cut promise in the Berlin declaration celebrating 50 years of integration, putting it at the core of Europe's purpose for the next half century. America and

others recognise that climate change is one of the world's hottest topics, but still squirm when talking about doing something painful to tackle it.

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