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OPINION | REVIEW & OUTLOOK

John Kerry's Climate Kowtow

How much will Biden trade away in exchange for empty promises?

By [The Editorial Board](#)

April 19, 2021 7:05 pm ET



Special Presidential Envoy for Climate John Kerry speaks during a press briefing at the White House, Jan. 27.

PHOTO: EVAN VUCCI/ASSOCIATED PRESS



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These columns noted last year that putting John Kerry in charge of climate negotiations with China was a recipe for coming home “dressed in a barrel.” After Mr. Kerry’s sojourn to Shanghai last week, the question is: What happened to the barrel?

President Biden’s climate envoy emerged from two days of meetings with counterpart Xie Zhenhua with a joint statement that says little new. The two sides say they “are committed to cooperating with each other and with other countries to tackle the climate crisis.” Both countries will work “to strengthen implementation of the Paris Agreement” limiting carbon emissions. Mr. Kerry didn’t make any big concessions to Beijing, and Beijing didn’t make any new promises about emissions limits it would break anyway.

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In one sense that's a relief. But all this empty hot air isn't cost free in U.S. prestige and the missed opportunity to engage in more important talks. Making climate the sole focus of an early visit tells the Chinese that the U.S. puts that single issue above everything else in the bilateral relationship. China is happy to jibber-jabber about climate with the Americans if it means not having to engage on Taiwan, Hong Kong, Beijing's repression of Uighurs in Xinjiang, the South China Sea, North Korea, or intellectual property theft.

But Beijing is clear that it will ignore any carbon-emissions commitments that might impinge on China's economic growth. "Some countries are asking China to do more on climate change," deputy foreign minister Le Yucheng said last week. "I am afraid this is not very realistic."

Instead of triggering a rethink in Beijing, Mr. Kerry's Shanghai jaunt gave China's leaders a new opportunity to go on the public-relations offensive. "China welcomes the U.S. return to the Paris agreement and expects the U.S. side to uphold the agreement," vice-premier Han Zheng told Mr. Kerry in a jab at Washington's withdrawal from the pact under President Trump. Mr. Kerry also flattered Beijing by all but begging President Xi Jinping to join another global climate confab later this week.

Meanwhile, Mr. Kerry sounds like he's blessing China's green industrial-policy ambitions by including in the joint statement a pledge to pursue "policies, measures, and technologies to decarbonize industry and power." For China, that means more industrial than green policy. Chinese officials will keep the words handy to read back to U.S. officials in future discussions about trade distortions or subsidies. Mr. Kerry is telling China the U.S. is fine with both as long as they're for green energy.

Beijing's rhetorical flourishes concerning the Paris agreement are especially rich. In the years since the Trump Administration withdrew from that pact in 2017, American carbon emissions have kept falling and in 2019 hit their lowest level since 1992, and their lowest per capita since 1950, thanks in large part to the revolution in shale drilling for natural gas.

China saw its emissions rise in the same period, and its commitment under Paris to reduce emissions doesn't even begin until 2030. As a Reuters dispatch in February put it: "China approved the construction of a further 36.9 GW of coal-fired capacity last year, three times more than a year earlier, bringing the total under construction to 88.1 GW. It now has 247 GW of coal power under development, enough to supply the whole of Germany."

Chinese leaders don't mind Paris because they know it binds them to nothing while Western nations will harm their economies with new regulation and misallocated resources. The Chinese must be dumbfounded that a U.S. Administration wants to kill the shale natural gas boom that has kept energy prices low and made the U.S. less reliant on foreign oil.

The lack of any new agreement is a blessing since it would limit the U.S. without doing so for China. But Mr. Kerry has shown, in Iran and elsewhere, that he will leave no concession unmade in his pursuit of a bad deal. No wonder Beijing thinks America is in decline.

Appeared in the April 20, 2021, print edition.

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