

NEWS

US joins China in climate talks

But the two-day meeting was long on mutual understanding while being notably short on targets.

The United States and China adjourned a new round of bilateral talks in Washington DC last week with the vague outline of a climate partnership. But the 'G2' is far from sealing a meaningful deal in time for the global-warming summit in Copenhagen this December.

After two days of high-level talks opened by US President Barack Obama, officials from both countries signed a memorandum of understanding calling for cooperation on a range of energy and environmental issues. The document also establishes a bilateral dialogue covering the gamut of issues in the run-up to the United Nations climate talks.

Although much of the US–China meeting focused on monetary policy and security issues, energy and global warming emerged from the outset as a central theme in the talks, says Ken Lieberthal, a China expert based at the Brookings Institution in Washington.

Aside from a general call to “strengthen and coordinate” respective efforts on global warming, clean energy and other environmental initiatives, the memorandum itself was short on detail. It included no reference to programmes, targets or timelines for reducing greenhouse-gas emissions. The omission served as a tacit reminder that progress in the international climate talks will in no small part be determined by whatever comes of the bilateral negotiations between the world's top two polluters, together responsible for some 40% of global emissions.

US officials say they weren't expecting any breakthroughs from the meeting, which was designed to build relationships and deepen the discussion. “We're slogging ahead,” says Todd Stern, the chief US climate negotiator. “But I do think that we will get there, and I think that there is a lot of interest on the Chinese side to arrive at a constructive and successful outcome in Copenhagen.”

Chinese state councillor Dai Bingguo says that both countries face severe challenges and can make “an important contribution” to the global effort to tackle climate change. “We hope that through our joint efforts, we will be able to expand common ground and cooperation and take our collaborative efforts in these areas to a new height,” Dai says.

The Strategic and Economic Dialogue began in 2006, but Obama and Chinese premier Hu



Warming measures: Chinese vice-premier Wang Qishan (left) and US president Barack Obama.

Jintao have put the forum at the centre of their efforts to strengthen ties between the two increasingly interdependent countries. China flew about 150 diplomats into Washington this year, with the talks taking place almost exclusively behind closed doors.

David Victor, a climate and international-policy expert at the University of California, San Diego, says the talks had a “false ring” under President George W. Bush, who withdrew the United States from the Kyoto Protocol on climate change. Victor acknowledges that the “ratio of talking to action” between the United States and China is still high, but says he believes the current negotiations are much more serious.

“The Chinese know absolutely that they have got to do something on climate,” he says, suggesting that the Obama administration is worried about the domestic climate agenda as much as the international one. “The administration is scared that if they don't have anything credible with the Chinese and the Indians, that they are not going to be able to hold the politics together in the Senate.”

The House of Representatives passed a comprehensive climate bill in June that included a cap-and-trade system to regulate greenhouse gases, but the outlook for passing something

similar in the Senate remains unclear. Opponents argue that the United States can't solve the climate problem on its own, and thus should not bind itself to greenhouse-gas regulations unless major developing countries do so as well.

Nevertheless, William Chandler, a climate expert at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace in Washington who has been working with Chinese officials, says the Chinese feel the international pressure and are committed to taking action on global warming. “China understands and accepts, I believe, that in the long run it will have to accept binding targets and caps on greenhouse-gas emissions,” he says. “The important question is, ‘What year will that be, and what do you do between now and then?’”

Chandler believes that Xie Zhenhua, who heads climate policy as vice-chairman of the National Development and Reform Commission, sees progress on global warming as a kind of personal legacy issue. Similarly, vice-premier Wang Qishan has taken a strong interest in global warming policy, according to Lieberthal. Both attended the talks in Washington.

“These happen to be two very talented individuals,” Lieberthal says. “And they are both very committed to this issue.”

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See www.nature.com/roadtocopenhagen for more climate coverage.

