

# Introduction

Cooperation in tackling climate change has been one of the most prominent achievements in strengthening the China-EU relation, as highlighted by Mr. Wang Yi, the state councillor and the Foreign Minister of China, in the press conference held at European Policy Centre (EPC) referring climate change as one of the foremost global challenges of our times, and a big highlight of China-EU cooperation<sup>1</sup>. The EU have a shared understanding with China on the issue of global climate change. In the remarks made by Mr. Nicolas Chapuis, the Ambassador of the Delegation of the European Union to China, in an interview on January 7, 2020, Mr. Chapuis described the year of 2020 as a pivotal year in EU-China cooperation, because it is the time when the two parties could put joint efforts into tackling climate change. China and the EU is expected to hold Leaders' Summits at the end of March and mid-September this year respectively<sup>2</sup>.

The global outbreak of COVID-19 pandemic in January 2020 has severely distracted the living of people and unravelled the order of the world's economy and society tremendously, with China and European countries being epicentres of this crisis. Hence, the top priority for both sides is to actively prevent the spreading of the virus and speed up the R&D of testing a vaccine against COVID-19. In response, China and EU (hereinafter referred to as 'the two sides') have re-structured their priorities and adjusted their consultation agenda in a timely manner. For example, the China-EU Leaders' Summit, which was originally scheduled to be held at the end of March 2020, has been postponed, which is believed to leave a negative impact on the China-EU climate change cooperation only in the short run, as the long-term pattern of their cooperation on climate change, which is believed to be stable and consistent, will neither be interrupted nor thwarted by this pandemic. Since the establishment of the China-EU partnership on climate change in 2005, the two sides have carried out a series of fruitful cooperation in tackling climate change and both sides have been vital partners in the global governance of climate change. The joint efforts made by the two sides to fight against this public health crisis will build up mutual trust and help relieve other crisis in a more positive manner. As the regular epidemic prevention and control is getting normal in China, the China-EU cooperation agenda on climate change will get back on track and to be the heart concern in the development of China-EU relations. The latest strategy proposed by the new European Commission, i.e. the European Green Deal, brings up both opportunities and challenges to the future cooperation between the two sides on climate change.



H.E. Wang Yi, State Councillor and Minister of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China. Speech at the "Sixty-Minute Briefing", Event of The European Policy Centre, Brussels, December 16, 2019. Photo by Zheng Huansong, Xinhua News Agency.

1 Minister of Foreign Affairs of China (2019).

2 Zhou (2020).

# I. Combating the climate change: China and the EU as two major international actors

## 1. China and the EU being advocators and key partners in response to climate change

The negative impact on global climate from human activities is not simply a lower rate of economic growth, the living condition of human are also in danger ecologically. This is the source from which stems the incentives for all countries to strengthen cooperation to mitigate climate change. It is essential to realise the limitation of approaches based on entirely pure research to deal with climate change, as its impact on politics, national security, economics and environment must also be addressed. China and the EU have long been considered as the two major actors in the governance of climate change: having different levels of economic growth and different political systems, both sides have been active players and action bodies in combating the global climate change. China and the European Union were founding members of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (hereinafter referred as 'IPCC') subject to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change. IPCC was signed by more than 150 countries and regions around the world and came to effect on 21 March, 1994. Since then, China and the EU have successfully kept the atmospheric temperature at an appropriate level by the adoption of various mitigation and adaptation measures. In particular, the EU has kept its leadership role and taken actions to deal with climate change while going through a series of enlargement between 1995 and 2013, after which the union expanded to 28 member states in 2013 with the accession of Croatia. The historical moment when the United Kingdom formally left the union on 31 January, 2020 making the total number member states to 27, is considered to be a risk of the EU's disintegration, but the EU's dominating position and its leading role in the governance of climate change will not be fundamentally weakened and undermined by this movement.

As the largest developing country in the world, China has a high degree of concern over climate change and has been playing an important role in IPCC and other multilateral organisations. As pointed out in the IPCC AR5 Synthesis Report: Climate Change 2014, which was completed by 259 researchers worldwide including 18 Chinese scholars, "...the globally averaged combined land and ocean surface temperature data as calculated by a linear trend show a warming of 0.85°C over the period 1880 to 2012", "Many of the observed changes since the 1950s are unprecedented over decades to millennia" etc., the scientific evidence of global warming is strong and solid. The president of the IPCC AR5 report working group 1, Dr. Thomas F. Stocker, spoke highly of China's contribution to this assessment: "Since the founding of IPCC in 1988, progress has been made in capacity building and the propagation of knowledge with the engagement of developing countries and transition economies. In the past 15 years, Chinese experts have indeed made great contributions..."<sup>3</sup>

China has been a member of IPCC for over 30 years. On November 9, 2018, at the commemorative event marking the 30th Anniversary of China's membership in the IPCC, Xie Zhenhua, China's Special Representative for Climate Change, acclaimed the crucial role of IPCC in terms of establishing multilateralism<sup>4</sup>. In addressing the challenges of global climate change, China has been contributing China's wisdom and plan actively to implement the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change. By speeding-up emission cut process, moderating its industrial structure and innovating clean energy techniques, China is also making every endeavour to control the global temperature at the level of 1.5.

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3 Qin (2013).

4 Ministry of Ecological Environment of China (2018).

## 2. China and the EU anchoring pledges of the Kyoto Protocol, carrying the post-Kyoto agenda to a new era

China and the EU are key members of the Kyoto Protocol, and both sides are also the main contributing parties to implement this treaty. The withdrawal of the United States and Canada gave rise to tremendous uncertainty to the future of Kyoto Protocol. At the time, the EU actively communicated and consulted with other countries to dismiss doubts and concerns to this treaty, persuading other countries to join. With the joint efforts of the EU and China, the Kyoto Protocol entered into force on February 16, 2005, effectively thwarted the unilateralism pursued by the United States. Kyoto Protocol marks the first move in human history to legalise the emission-reduction targets and global warming controlling standards.

EU has shown positive signs and taken concrete actions on climate change since the millennial, who claimed itself as the keen advocator as well as the rule-maker in the policy area of mitigating global climate change<sup>5</sup>. To fulfil the commitments laid out in Kyoto Protocol, EU has established the EU Emissions Trading System (EU ETS) in 2005. In 2007, the European Commission proposed an integrated energy and climate change package to achieve the '20-20-20' key targets by 2020<sup>6</sup>. The 2030 Climate and Energy Framework was presented by the European Commission in 2014; following that, all member states have formulated their own emission-reduction action plan at national levels to target at greenhouse gas emission cut more precisely, develop clean energy and improve energy efficiency. According to the statistics of the EU in 2019, the 28 member states in 2017 have cut emissions by 22%, equivalent to 1.24 billion tonnes of CO<sub>2</sub> emission, suggesting the EU has accomplished its 2020 reduction task ahead of time<sup>7</sup>.

The Chinese government has made early preparation to implement carbon emission-reduction targets. According to the Kyoto Protocol, developing countries should start the emission-reduction actions from 2012<sup>8</sup>, and China took actions at least 5 years earlier. Since 2006, the Chinese government has considered combating climate change as a major economic and social issue, and it has been embodied in the medium and long-term plan of economic growth and social development. China proposed obligatory targets in 2006 and energy consumption per unit of GDP in 2010 shall be shrank by approx. 20% compared with the level in 2005. China is also pioneering in adopting as well as enforcing state plans of tackling climate change. In 2007, China became the first developing country to formulate and implement a national program to address climate change. In 2009, China put forward the goal of action to reduce the per-unit GDP greenhouse gas emission in 2020 by 40% to 45% as compared to that of 2005. China earnestly performs its duties stipulated by the UNFCCC and Kyoto Protocol, released China Initial National Communications on Climate Change in 2004, and issued the National Plan for Coping with Climate Change and China's Special Sci-Tech Campaign to Cope with Climate Change in June 2007<sup>9</sup>.

Responses to climate change of China have been synchronized at multiple levels including mechanisms, policies, and actions. In details, those emission-reduction tasks are achieved by various measures including industrial structure re-adjustment, increasing the proportion of renewable energy in the overall energy consumption, setting up the first Chinese carbon trading market, energy saving, and improving energy efficiency. To better serve the implementation of its climate policy, moderation and adjustment in mechanisms, relevant departments and institution of China have been put in place. In 2007, the National Leading Group to Address Climate Change was set up, and in 2008, the NDRC set up a department to coordinate and supervise the relevant work. Following that, Relevant departments under the State Council have founded supportive organs such as the National Centre for Climate Strategy and International

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5 Zhang (2014), pp. 453-459.

6 20% cut in greenhouse gas emissions (from 1990 levels), 20% of EU energy from renewables, and 20% improvement in energy efficiency. For more details, see: [https://ec.europa.eu/clima/policies/strategies/2020\\_en](https://ec.europa.eu/clima/policies/strategies/2020_en)

7 European Commission (2020). See "Trends in greenhouse gas emissions".

8 Kyoto Protocol Chinese Version (2003).

9 Information Office of the State Council of China (2008).