

Climate change

Trump warming to reality of climate change, says senior Chinese official

Beijing's chief climate negotiator, Xie Zhenhua, talks down fears that joint leadership shown by China and the US will be reversed under new president



A protest in New York against climate change sceptics in Donald Trump's cabinet. Photograph: ddp USA/REX/Shutterstock

China's chief climate negotiator has attempted to calm fears that Donald Trump's arrival in the White House will spell disaster for the fight against climate change.

Trump, who has dismissed climate change as "bullshit" and a Chinese hoax, will become the first climate sceptic to occupy the highest office in the US when he is sworn in on Friday.

Climate scientists and campaigners have expressed alarm at the impact the presence of so many climate deniers and environmental enemies in Trump's cabinet could have on efforts to prevent catastrophic and irreversible global warming.



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But speaking to the government-run China Daily newspaper, China's special representative for climate change, Xie Zhenhua, played down such concerns.

Xie reaffirmed Beijing's "firm attitude" towards fighting global warming and noted that the incoming US president had "softened his tone on whether climate change is real" following his election in November.

In an interview with the New York Times after his shock victory Trump said he had an "open mind" about how he would approach the issue and conceded there was "some connectivity" between global warming and human activity.

Xie, a Communist party veteran who spent more than a decade at the helm of China's environmental agency, told the China Daily the global momentum behind the push towards a low carbon future was now such that no one person was capable of halting progress.

"Industrial upgrades aiming for more sustainable growth is a global trend ... It is not something that can be reversed by a single political leader," he was quoted as saying.

The newspaper said Xie believed "the international community and US citizens will pressure the Trump administration to continue clean energy policies".

Weeks of tension between Trump's team and Beijing have sparked fears that collaboration on climate change - one of the few bright spots of US-China relations under Barack Obama - may be at risk.

In September 2016 Obama and the Chinese president, Xi Jinping, earned global plaudits when they jointly announced their decision to ratify the Paris climate accord.

Two years earlier, in November 2014, Obama and Xi unveiled a historic secretly negotiated deal to tackle climate change, including China's first commitment to cap its greenhouse gas emissions.

"This is a major milestone in US-China relations and shows what is possible when we work together on an urgent global challenge," Obama said at the time.

Xie played down the suggestion that frictions between Trump and Xi might thwart joint efforts by the world's top two emitters to fight global warming. "Collaboration on climate change has never ceased amid the political tensions," he said.

Xie was speaking on the eve of a major speech that Xi Jinping is due to deliver at the World Economic Forum (WEF) in Davos on Tuesday.

Environmentalists and some foreign policy experts hope Xi, the first Chinese president to attend the forum, will use part of his opening address to restate Beijing's determination to fighting climate change amid fears over the future role of the US.

"I think it is absolutely brilliant that he is going to Davos. I think that is a very smart move on his part. I'm in favour of a China that becomes a global leader doing good things and behaving responsibly," said Susan Shirk, the chair of the 21st Century China Centre at the University of California San Diego, who expects Xi's speech to touch on China's climate leadership.

"Frankly if the US is going to abdicate leadership then it is good to have somebody step forwards and defend positions which I can identify with," Shirk added.

"But let's remember, China can't do this stuff alone ... [Taking greater leadership on climate] will enhance China's reputation as a responsible global leader ... but it's not going save the planet.

"If the US is pulling in the opposite direction, we are not going to be able to make the progress on climate change the way we should, or could, if we were working together."

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