California pushes ahead for new era of US-China climate partnerships

State politicians view Trump's Paris Agreement exit as hot air that will not blow Sino-US climate action off course.

By Feng Hao, China Dialogue

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Street view of Dali City, Yunnan province, China showing installed solar panels to power streetlights. Image: Asian Development Bank, CC-BY-NC-ND 2.0.

The day after President Trump held a White House press conference to announce the US withdrawal from the Paris Agreement, California's governor flew to China.

Governor Jerry Brown, 79, had a brisk schedule for his week-long trip in early June. First, he attended the eighth Clean Energy Ministerial (CEM8) in Beijing with energy ministers from two dozen countries.



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Next he joined the Underz Clean Energy forum, a global gathering of city and regional leaders, co-hosted by China's Ministry of Science and Technology and Sichuan province. Then he visited Sichuan and Jiangsu provinces to beef up California's regional clean energy partnerships with them.

President Trump's indifference to climate change was well flagged during his election campaign.

California's response was ready too: "I want to do everything we can to keep America on track, keep the world on track, and lead in all the ways California has," Mr Brown said on May 23.

> **China's local governments must transform the way they think and seriously deal with the potential risks of climate change, rather than stubbornly cling to a fossil fuel development path.**
>
> *Kasne Sandholt, chief expert, China National Renewable Energy Centre's International and Regional Cooperation Department*

Stepping up

Brown stressed California's readiness to reach out across the leadership gap, saying, "We cannot reach the carbon reduction target alone."

Wealthy global tech-hub California with 39 million people would rank as the world's sixth largest economy if it were a nation. Support for green politics is bi-partisan, dating back to Republican governor Arnold Schwarzenegger in 2005.

California's assertiveness suggests that the US federal government's flip-flop on the Paris Agreement could forge closer links between Chinese and US regions committed to a low-carbon path.

It demonstrates Trump's blow against the Paris Agreement is not the end of US-China climate cooperation.

Co-operation will sidestep the top-level pause.

As Tang Wei, associate research professor at the Shanghai Academy of Social Sciences Institute of International Relations, has argued, the commercial synergies underpinning US-China low-carbon development partnerships remain unchanged.

"There is enormous potential and impetus for corporate and regional cooperation from the bottom up," according to Tang.

Pushing local links

Brown's June visit to China exemplified this approach, focused as it was on wide-ranging partnerships in clean energy and carbon trading.

California is establishing relationships with seven Chinese provinces, focusing on green energy, as Robert B Weisenmiller, chair of the California Energy Commission, told *chinadialogue*.

Regional links are growing, and California has led the way.

When Schwarzenegger visited Beijing in 2005, he put climate and energy issues on the agenda. Soon after, The California Public Utilities Commission, the California Energy Commission, and a Californian public utility agreed cooperation arrangements with Jiangsu province, and training programmes for Shanghai municipal government officials and utility company personnel.

California's utilities offer useful lessons as energy efficiency and management measures have kept the state's average per capita energy consumption flat for 30 years.

When China's president Xi Jinping visited the US in 2015, the two countries formally signed a state/provincial clean energy development cooperation agreement to hasten the use of renewables and commercialization of new clean energy and renewable energy technologies. At CEM8, Brown signed cooperation agreements with seven Chinese provinces, expanding California's links to include poorer, inland regions.

Sichuan gears up

Inland Sichuan province, in southwest China, looks like being the next hotspot for US-China climate cooperation: California signed a memorandum of friendship with Sichuan in 2015, and Brown visited in June.

In 2015, Sichuan and Jiangsu became the first Chinese provinces to join the Underz Coalition at an event in Los Angeles fostering sub-national and regional climate co-operation.

Sichuan has also promoted setting up national clean energy demonstration provinces in China.

Apple, headquartered in Silicon Valley, is among one of the globally famous companies with operations in Sichuan, and providing a model for renewable energy partnerships.

Renewable initiatives

In 2015, Apple built a 40-megawatt solar farm in Sichuan. Katie Hill, an Apple global supply chain and clean energy project manager, said its Sichuan factory has approval to buy renewable energy direct from the producers: 67 per cent of the factory's power now comes from renewables, and it hopes to reach 100 per cent by next year.

Such a target would be impossible without local government support, she said. Local officials also see the clean energy transition creating jobs in the province.

Kasne Sandholt, chief expert at the China National Renewable Energy Centre's International and Regional Cooperation Department, told *chinadialogue* there is potential for California and Sichuan to weave together energy solutions partnerships in their regions.

"China can benefit greatly from California's experience, though it should make appropriate changes to fit the Chinese context. China's leading, or first-tier, local governments must transform the way they think and seriously deal with the potential risks of climate change, rather than stubbornly cling to a fossil fuel development path," Sandholt said.

Fears and objections

Problems remain, and opposition to these agreements remains strong.

Of course, China-US trade cooperation in clean energy products has not always been smooth.

This has been especially true for solar panels. Since November 2011, the US has conducted two subsidy and dumping investigations into Chinese solar panel imports, resulting in back-and-forth trade disputes, and significantly increasing import tariffs on solar PV products.

Jigar Shah, chairman of the Campaign for Affordable Solar Energy, has objected that higher tariffs have suppressed competition, increased prices of US solar panels, and undermined commitments to reduce carbon emissions.

Californian venture capitalists and clean energy technology companies such as Scott Sandel of the Silicon Valley-based venture capital firm New Enterprise Associates also worry about poor protection for intellectual property in China.

However, the framework is now established for co-operation to proceed at regional level. Obstacles, tensions and risks remain in the way local and national government work together, which is different in the two countries.

In the US, clean energy technology leaders like California hope they will be able to pursue international cooperation opportunities independently, without being affected by the federal government. They are gearing up to defend strong local auto emissions laws from any federal challenge.

In China, central government efforts to redirect local officials to place environmental protection alongside economic development are still getting enough traction. Provincial and municipal officials continue to pursue a simpler, economic growth-oriented mindset due to taxation pressures and career ambitions.

However, California has shown it intends to make regional cooperation the way forward, which may provide extra impetus.

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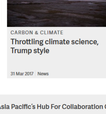
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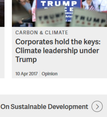
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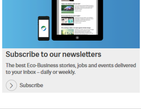
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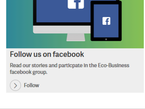
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