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# Decoding China's upcoming climate targets

10 September 2025

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In April, President Xi Jinping [pledged](#) that China would announce its 2035 Nationally Determined Contributions (NDC) before the United Nations Climate Change Conference COP30 in Belém and that it would cover all economic sectors and all greenhouse gases. It is one of the most anticipated climate targets, as the country is the largest emitter of and a leader in clean energy. China alone contributed around [90% of the emissions growth](#) over the last decade. At the same time, it manufactured and installed more renewables than the rest of the world combined, cutting emissions at home and abroad through its exports.

This is the first time that China will set actual emission reduction targets after it pledged to peak emissions before 2030 and will determine China's trajectory towards carbon neutrality in 2060. The credibility of China's carbon neutrality goal requires substantive emission reductions towards the goal over the next decade.

Yet reading and interpreting China's NDC is not always straightforward. The phrasing of commitments, the choice of base years, the presence (or absence) of sectoral targets, and the reaffirmation of current pledges all matter greatly for understanding what Beijing is actually promising.

This article unpacks some of the key elements to look for when reading China's NDC.



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## Why phrasing matters

China's headline emission reduction target will be the one most people are looking out for. At least [30% emission reductions by 2035](#) compared to 2023 would be required to align with the Paris Agreement. But the language of China's headline target will be just as important as the figures included. It is not just about rhetoric, but it signals levels of ambition and flexibility for the implementation of the pledge. There is a range of possible ways the headline target could be framed, and the nuance here matters.

China's current clean energy trends, policies and targets are likely to enable the country to reduce emissions more than it's prepared to commit to at the moment, so an important question is whether the NDC signals preparedness to exceed and strengthen the targets in the next years.

**“Strive to achieve X%”** would indicate the least ambitious framing in a softer, aspirational tone. This would mean that the target is conditional on favourable circumstances such as economic growth, energy security, or technological progress. Such a headline target would send a negative signal to the downpayments made by clean energy sectors and give polluting sectors a free pass for another time.

**“Reduce by X%”** would be more binding. It sets a clear quantitative goal that China commits to reach, but if the figure is relatively low, it also doesn't indicate much room or aspiration for the target to be overachieved.

**“Reduce by X–Y%”** introduces a range. The lower bound is effectively the guarantee, while the upper bound represents potential ambition.

**“Reduce by at least X%”** would constitute a strong signal that China acknowledges its NDC as a minimum floor that it plans to exceed. This could ensure that the target eventually becomes aligned with the Paris Agreement.



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**“...and strive to do more”** would add interpretative space and a diplomatic signal that China is willing to go beyond if others step up. Countries around the world should interpret this as an open invitation to work with China to accelerate the green transition.

Understanding these nuances helps us gauge not just what China is committing to, but how much flexibility it is building into its climate roadmap. An example of this flexibility is President Xi’s 2020 [announcement](#) of increasing the carbon intensity target for 2030 from the one originally set in 2015.

## The importance of the base year

Another subtle but critical detail is the choice of the base year. Most countries have chosen a base year that closely coincides with their emissions peak as the base year from which emission reductions are being calculated. Therefore, it will be crucial to see how Beijing frames this base year in its NDC.

If the base year is set for a **specific year, such as 2025**, this would give a firm and near-term anchor. Progress can be measured directly and transparently against that milestone. It would also indicate that the government confirms the recent trends in China’s emission trajectory, suggesting that China’s [emissions are likely to peak in 2025](#). This would limit the extent to which coal power and heavy-emitting industrial sectors could expand going forward.

However, if the base year is set as an **undefined peak** anytime before 2030, it would signal that the top decision-makers expect further increases in emissions before the peak, and would reinforce the dynamic of firms and provinces racing to lock in fossil fuel-based capacity and emissions before the peak.

## Sectoral targets as enablers

Beyond the headline commitments, sectoral targets also offer insights into how China is planning to implement its NDC.



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**Clean energy targets:** China's previous NDCs have included targets for the share of non-fossil energy. Continuing the current build-out could [increase](#) the share of non-fossil energy in total energy consumption to above 40% and the share of non-fossil power generation to at least 65% by 2035. Setting such targets would create a strong backstop for emission reductions and for the development of the clean energy industry.

**Wind and solar capacity:** China's promise to reach 1,200 GW of combined wind and solar capacity by 2030 was achieved six years early and is therefore certainly due for an update. While putting out a number for solar and wind had important signal value at the time, the target was always going to be exceeded, as it would have been too low to achieve other targets, such as China's non-fossil energy and carbon intensity targets for 2030. Raising the bar in line with deployment rates over the past couple of years would be a strong signal of enhanced ambition. In concrete terms, China could achieve [4,500 GW of solar and wind capacity in 2035](#), if the current build-out continues. A continued buildout of clean energy will also make a crucial contribution to China's economic growth targets. In fact, [China's clean energy industries could double in value by 2035](#), adding CNY 15 trillion (USD 2.1 trillion) to the economy, if China and the world's other large markets follow Paris Agreement-aligned emission targets.

**Steel decarbonisation:** Heavy industry is China's largest single source of emissions. In particular, the [steel sector](#) has some of the largest emission reduction potential of [cutting around 40% of emissions](#) over the coming decade. Setting a target for the share of clean steel production would elevate the profile of the current domestic targets and significantly bolster the credibility of the overall NDC.

Sectoral targets provide practical levers. They also reveal how seriously China is preparing to not only meet but possibly exceed its headline targets.

## Reaffirming existing commitments



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Continuity of China's existing climate targets will be another litmus test. Any new target for total emission reduction needs to be at least as ambitious as what is already required for the implementation of current targets.

China's **carbon intensity target** is the most relevant in this case. China has committed to reducing carbon intensity by over 65% by 2030 compared to 2005. However, due to the emissions-intensive post-Covid recovery period, China is currently far [off track for its interim carbon intensity target for 2025](#). This means that to still achieve its carbon intensity target for 2030, absolute emission reductions will already be required over the next five years. When President Xi announced the 2030 carbon-intensity target in 2020, he [emphasised](#): "China always honours its commitments." The new NDC and China's upcoming Five-Year Plan target will be the test of those words, and of China's commitment to the Paris Agreement.

Reaffirming China's goal to **phase down coal consumption** over the coming five years will be another element to evaluate China's NDC. While President Xi has [committed](#) to "strictly control" new coal power projects and coal consumption growth during the current 14th Five-Year Plan, coal power project approvals and coal consumption growth accelerated sharply. The new NDC will be an opportunity for China to outline its vision for the coal sector's development and align it with the need to phase down coal consumption, production, as well as coal-fired power generation. Restating President Xi's pledge to phase down coal consumption during the 15th Five-Year Plan in the NDC would signal that China remains committed to its international pledges.

To what extent these targets will be reaffirmed will illustrate the credibility and continuity of China's climate targets for both domestic and international audiences, even amid economic or political uncertainty.

## Conclusion

To align with the goal of the Paris Agreement and get on track to carbon neutrality before 2060, and without leaving a much bigger challenge to later decades, China should cut its CO<sub>2</sub> emissions by [28 to 37%](#) from current levels by 2035. Importantly, extending current clean



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energy trends and policies out to 2035 will enable China to deliver a reduction of around 30%, as outlined in our [NDC scorecard](#), which outlines the practical policies and technical solutions to achieve this.

However, China's leaders are [unlikely to commit](#) to this level of ambition at the moment. Because of the clean energy boom, which has run ahead of government targets, the NDC won't be the final word on how much China's emissions will fall over the next decade, with a good chance that the targets will be substantially overachieved and upgraded later.

The NDC is, however, an important signal, as a document directly shaped by the country's top leadership and reflecting its current thinking, and as such will require careful interpretation. The phrasing of commitments, the choice of base year, the inclusion of sectoral targets, and the reaffirmation of existing goals all shape the true level of ambition.

In reacting to the NDC, other countries and actors need to hold China to its commitments — and to the Paris agreement targets. Any backsliding from existing commitments should be rebuked, while steps forward need to be acknowledged.

China's climate pledges are not just rhetoric but also political statements charting the way for China's future economic development. President Xi [said](#), "Instead of talking the talk, we must walk the walk. We must turn our goals into tangible results through systematic policies and concrete measures." Therefore, China's NDC will not provide a final declaration but a starting point and guiding direction for China's development. The upcoming 15th Five-Year Plan and the years ahead of 2030 will provide further opportunities for policymakers to refine and revisit the targets set based on real-world developments.