Press release

EV-related oil cuts drove China’s clean air progress in H1 after Hormuz disruption

The country's traffic-related air pollution plummeted in H1 2026, but ongoing coal pressure means long-term gains will require more effort.

BEIJING, 14 July 2026 – Electric vehicle (EV)-related oil cuts were a key driver of cleaner air in China in H1 2026, as disruptions in the Strait of Hormuz led to fuel price hikes and increased EV usage, public transport, and car sharing. However, coal activities remained a major challenge for air pollution improvements, signalling that long-term gains require much deeper structural changes, according to the latest analysis from the Centre for Research on Energy and Clean Air (CREA).

EVs — which offer the clearest benefits for transport-related nitrogen dioxide (NO2) emissions, primary particles, and urban roadside exposure — are displacing China’s need for oil at a growing scale. CREA’s China air quality H1 review found that avoided oil consumption reached an estimated 33.7Mtoe (Million Tonnes of Oil Equivalent) in H1 2026, roughly equivalent to six percent of China’s total crude oil imports in 2025, or about three weeks' imports at the 2025 average pace. Meanwhile, urban NO2 pollution levels, which are closely linked to traffic emissions, saw a notable 7% drop in the second quarter.

However, coal-related activity remains a major contributor to China’s PM2.5 (secondary particulate matter), especially now that earlier end-of-pipe control gains have narrowed. Since 2023, coal consumption has rebounded at times, and PM2.5 has become more vulnerable to those shifts, especially in late 2023 and early 2024. PM2.5 improved again in 2025 and early 2026 as coal consumption growth slowed, but the gap between the two has not returned to the level seen in the earlier years. Earlier pollution-control upgrades have already delivered most of their benefits, and now bad weather can quickly erase part of the progress.

The Beautiful China 15th Five-Year Plan keeps air pollution control on the agenda, but national ambition remains modest. The strongest PM2.5 requirements are focused on key regions, while the national targets imply only incremental improvement by 2030. Ozone also remains a policy gap, despite growing levels in warmer months.

In addition, China's stricter PM2.5 standard has exposed a larger compliance gap. Under the new 30 μg/m^3 benchmark, 18 of 31 provincial capitals exceeded the standard in H1 2026, compared with 11 that exceeded the previous 35 μg/m^3 benchmark in 2025. The 2030 target requires only a 4% reduction by 2030, even though achieving the 2035 target will require an overall decline of at least 11% from 2025 levels. This would leave most of the necessary progress until after 2030, when further reductions are likely to become increasingly difficult.

CREA finds that if all cities met China's new interim PM2.5 standard for 2030, roughly 156,000 air pollution-related deaths per year could be avoided. With the stricter standard entering into force in 2031, this would nearly double to 300,000 avoided deaths per year.

'While coal consumption is still a major source of pressure on China's air pollution progress, transport electrification is becoming the other side of the story. The rapid growth of EVs is now visibly cutting into oil demand, making what was once a small effect in the mid-2010s into one large enough to matter. That said, those gains could quickly taper off as China's PM2.5 improvement curve flattens, meaning further progress will depend on more of these kinds of structural changes: cutting coal-related emissions on one side, and reducing petrol and diesel combustion on the other,' said Qi Qin, China Analyst at CREA.

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Note to editors

The publication related to this press release is available here.
Our monthly snapshots on China's air pollution trends are available here.

About CREA

The Centre for Research on Energy and Clean Air (CREA) is an independent research organisation focused on revealing the trends, causes, and health impacts, as well as the solutions to air pollution. We use scientific data, research and evidence to support the efforts of governments, companies and campaigning organisations worldwide in their efforts to move towards clean energy and clean air.

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