

The Leaders Summit on Climate: A Munich Moment or Global Action at Long Last?

By **ROBERT SANDFORD**

ON April 22 and 23, the Biden administration invited 40 world leaders to a virtual climate summit with the hope that other countries would follow the American example of announcing new and expanded commitments to achieving net global carbon neutrality by 2050. But while all of the right elements seemed to be aligned, including planning the opening day of the virtual conference to coincide with the Earth Day, the results of the summit were mixed. However, history is likely to be a fierce judge of the Leaders Summit on Climate. Either the summit will have been another Munich moment of failure and false hope or it will have been a bridge to meaningful climate action at the next UN climate change conference in November. China has the opportunity to greatly influence that verdict.

Deepening Crisis Elevating Urgency to Emergency

One crisis does not come to an end just because another one arrives. The COVID-19 crisis is on a collision course with climate disruption. The United Nations Secretary-General, Antonio Guterres, has stated that the world is “at the verge of the abyss” because of climate change and must take aggressive steps to avoid catastrophe. The World Meteorological Organization’s State of the Global Climate 2020 report has confirmed that he is right.

We have discovered that there are tipping points widely in natural systems, including the climate system. These feedback loops are creating themselves faster than science can keep up. Our greatest fear is that we won’t know where they are until we have already crossed them. And that is why NASA’s warning in early April of this year should be of great concern to us all.

On April 7, 2021, NASA made it widely known that on April 3, carbon dioxide concentration in the global

atmosphere had, for the first time in recorded history, exceeded 420 parts per million. This occurred despite the fact that the second year of a pandemic has slowed human activity to such an extent that it reduced carbon dioxide emissions by as much as four percent globally. So, what does this mean and why should it concern us?

The continuing elevations of CO2 concentrations in the global atmosphere matter because they mean that self-reinforcing feedbacks originating in accelerating carbon emissions from what were previously carbon sinks like the Arctic and the Amazon will continue to increase independently of how much we as a society reduce our emissions. This means we need to decarbonize our society even faster than we have been doing heretofore and speed it up over the next decade.

It is for that reason that signatories to the Paris Agreement have to take immediate responsibility for dramatically reducing their own country’s carbon footprint when each submits its national net zero plan at the UN’s next climate change conference scheduled to be held in Glasgow this November.

All national plans, however, have to demonstrate that we have reached the most important tipping point of all. Enough of us see we are at a point of no return with respect to climate disruption and finally must take collective action before it threatens to end our prosperity.

Cooperation Beyond Borders Needed

The response to the COVID-19 pandemic is only one example of how much influence a coherent and distributed response to the pandemic has beyond an individual state. If humanity is to survive and thrive, it cannot go back in time to a world in which only individual states matter.

Chinese President Xi Jinping’s participation in the Leaders Summit on Climate clearly reinforced the sense that the United States and China can seek common ground on the critical issue of climate change. In September 2020, President Xi pledged to the United



Visitors have an immersive and multi-sensory interaction experience at the new exhibition halls of China Science and Technology Museum themed around the Earth and energy on May 2, 2021.

Nations that China would achieve carbon neutrality before 2060, but more clarity is needed about how China intends to get there. The world awaits that clarity.

While President Xi's participation in the U.S.-led Leaders Summit on Climate is of historical note, so were his meetings with France's Emmanuel Macron and Germany's Angela Merkel. These virtual meetings, not surprisingly, led to the full endorsement of China's climate action intentions. Perhaps even more important from a historical perspective was President Xi's remarks at the opening ceremony of the Boao Forum for Asia Annual Conference 2021 held on April 20. Considered to be the Davos of Asia, President Xi used the forum to emphasize China's stance and proposals on major global issues. Among many historically noteworthy references to the role China will play on the global stage was a reference to a green agenda. President Xi committed his country to strengthening cooperation on green infrastructure, green energy, and green finance.

China's Moment

The next venue for a potential Chinese announcement on their roadmap to carbon neutrality will be the 26th United Nations Climate Change Conference, known as COP 26 to be held in November. COP 26 will be a multilateral forum that presents a high-profile op-

portunity to update global leadership on how to address the climate threat. What can China bring to the COP 26 table?

China can lead the way in helping the UN build a coalition of political will needed to reorient the international community towards the transformational change our global society needs to make if we are to achieve a low-carbon future. I know this first hand because I participated in the 2016 InterAction Council meeting in Guiyang, China, where our Chinese partners unveiled the breathtaking concept of a global ecological civilization.

To make a global ecological civilization a reality, China can help other countries establish concrete emissions reduction goals and net-zero plans.

Perhaps most importantly, however, China can once again show the world it can do what seems impossible – something China appears to be good at – and outline how it will fulfill its pledge of moving from peak carbon to net zero in just 30 years, the span of a single generation.

About the threat posed by climate disruption, the world cannot afford to witness another political disaster like the Munich Agreement. Ultimately, there is only one measure that matters with respect to the global climate threat and that is how quickly the entire world can get to net-zero emissions and halt the warming of the planet.

This is clearly a transformational moment for China and for the world as a whole. This is, perhaps, the very transformational moment in which China could create an ecological civilization that positively changes not only China, but the entire world. It is a moment of potential leadership everyone who lives on this planet should hope that China will take. ■

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