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China considers setting targets for carbon emissions

Government's decision could help negotiations on a Kyoto successor treaty in Copenhagen

Jonathan Watts, Asia environment correspondent
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The Chinese government is for the first time considering setting targets for [carbon emissions](#), a significant development that could help negotiations on a Kyoto successor treaty at Copenhagen later this year, the Guardian has learned.

Su Wei, a leading figure in [China's climate change](#) negotiating team, said that officials were considering introducing a national target that would limit emissions relative to economic growth in the country's next five-year plan from 2011.

"It is an option. We can very easily translate our [existing] [energy](#) reduction targets to carbon dioxide limitation" said Su. "China hasn't reached the stage where we can reduce overall emissions, but we can reduce energy intensity and carbon intensity."

A second government adviser, Hu Angang, has said China should start cutting overall emissions from 2020.

While that is a minority view and final decisions are some way off, the proposals are striking because they are at odds with China's official negotiating stance.

Beijing has hitherto rejected carbon emission caps or cuts, arguing that its priority is to improve its people's living standards – and that the west caused the global warming problem and should fix it. But developed nations argue that they cannot commit to deep cuts and to substantial funding for developing nations to fight climate change unless those countries embrace emissions targets.

Environmental groups and foreign diplomats said a carbon intensity target would be a significant step forward. Any move by China, the world's fastest expanding major economy, biggest emitter of greenhouse gases and most influential developing nation, would have an enormous impact on the outcome of the Copenhagen summit in December.

"It would be a significant step for China to set a target that directly links carbon emissions to economic growth for the first time," said Yang Ailun of Greenpeace.

"This is a green shoot of pragmatism that should be nurtured," said one European diplomat.

Hu, an influential economist and advocate of "green revolution", is pressing the government to take a leadership role in Copenhagen by making a public commitment to reduce emissions, and last week submitted the proposal to set a new carbon dioxide goal.

He is one of 37 members of an elite body that advised the premier, Wen Jiabao, to include ambitious targets of a 20% improvement in energy efficiency and 10% reduction of pollution in the 2006-2010 plan. With government figures suggesting the country is

on course to approach or exceed those goals, Hu suggests they be extended for the next plan with the addition of the carbon dioxide target.

If his proposal is accepted, Hu believes China will be able to make an international pledge this year to reduce carbon dioxide emissions from 2020.

His views are several steps beyond the negotiating position of the government and officials on the national development and reform commission (NDRC) are cautious even about goals for energy efficiency. "We are very optimistic to reach the energy intensity target of 20% or so," said Su. "But personally I don't think that we can achieve the same for the next five years as the low-lying fruit is already taken."

He was still more doubtful about Hu's suggestion that China's carbon emissions could start to go down after 2020.

"We are trying to reach the emissions peak as early as possible for the earth and future generations. I cannot give you a specific year, but it's certainly not realistic to say the peak will come in 2020," he said.

But the debate on China's role in greenhouse gas reductions is widening. Last month, the Chinese Academy of Science reported that the country's carbon dioxide emissions relative to GDP should be reduced by 50% by 2020, and that total CO₂ emissions should peak between 2030 and 2040 if the country introduced more stringent energy-saving policies and received more financial support and technology from overseas.

The Brookings Institution, a US thinktank, has pinpointed domestic reductions in emission intensity in China as a possible area of compromise with the US, which has made a greater effort to reach out to Beijing on climate change issues under President Barack Obama. The softening comes amid a flurry of talks between Chinese and US leaders and officials in Washington, London and Bonn.

"The message we have got is that the current US administration takes climate change seriously, that they recognise their historical responsibility and that they have the capacity to help developing countries address climate change," said Su. But he called on the US to go further than Obama's promise to cut emissions to 1990 levels by 2020.

Whether an agreement can be reached before the Copenhagen conference remains to be seen, but the debate inside China is moving into new areas. "Chinese leaders recognise China's responsibility. The question is whether or not they make a public commitment about how much they will do and by when," said Hu.

The urgency is increasing. Citing new figures from the state bureau of energy, Hu said China overtook the US last year as the world's biggest energy producer with 2.6bn tonnes of standard coal equivalent, seven years ahead of expectations. "If we can't succeed in reducing energy consumption, then no one can. I tell the government that a 1% failure in China is a 100% failure for the world," said Hu. "We must satisfy our national interest and match it with the interest of humanity."

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