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China's Climate Trajectory: Navigating Domestic Imperatives and Global Ambitions

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Abstract
China's engagement with climate change has evolved dramatically, from early skepticism prioritizing economic development to its current position as a central, albeit complex, actor in global climate governance. This paper analyzes the intricate interplay between China's domestic imperatives and its foreign policy objectives in shaping this transformation. Drawing on an extensive review of academic literature, policy documents, and official statements, the research traces the evolution of China's climate policy through distinct phases, highlighting key shifts in its negotiating stances and domestic commitments, including the ambitious goals of peaking carbon emissions before 2030 and achieving carbon neutrality before 2060, operationalized through the "1+N" policy framework. The study identifies critical domestic drivers, such as severe environmental pollution (the "airpocalypse"), energy security concerns, and aspirations for economic restructuring and leadership in green technologies. Concurrently, it examines foreign policy imperatives, including the enhancement of global image and soft power, the pursuit of leadership in global climate governance, and the use of climate initiatives like the Belt and Road Initiative to project geopolitical and economic influence. The analysis reveals that while synergies exist—where domestic needs align with foreign policy goals (e.g., renewable energy development)—significant tensions and contradictions persist, notably the continued reliance on coal alongside renewable expansion, and the challenges of central-local policy implementation. The paper concludes that China's climate trajectory is a dynamic balancing act, with its success in navigating these internal and external complexities holding profound implications for both its national development and the future of global climate action.

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INTRODUCTION

The escalating climate crisis demands urgent and concerted global action, with the role of major greenhouse gas emitters being paramount to the efficacy of any international mitigation and adaptation efforts. Among these, the People's Republic of China stands as a critical actor, not only due to its status as the world's largest emitter of carbon dioxide but also because of its significant and evolving influence on the architecture and momentum of global climate governance (Lai, 2021). If the European and American leaders were already aware of the climate change issues since 1980s, but under the direction of the State Science and Technology Commission, China's government primarily focused on scientific issues when it came to climate change at that time (Sandalow et al., n.d.) China's stance on climate change has changed significantly in recent decades, moving from one of relative caution and economic development to one of greater assertiveness and prominence on the global scene. This transformation is multifaceted, reflecting a complex recalibration of national priorities and international ambitions.

The pursuit of economic growth initially dominated China's policy landscape, especially in the late 20th and early 21st centuries, with environmental concerns—including climate change—frequently relegated to a secondary concern (Lai, 2021). Lai, for instance, characterizes China's climate policy before 2006 as "rather defensive," with a clear emphasis on the "urgency of economic development" over addressing climate issues. Moreover, as Jean Paul Marechal stated three reasons motivates China to change radically their attitudes in climate negotiations," the necessity to stop the airpocalypse, the will to conquer new foreign markets shares in the field of green technologies and, the desire to improve the country's image on the international stage" (Maréchal, 2018).

This research seeks to dissect the intricate dynamics that have propelled China's shift from this early scepticism and developmental focus towards its current, more engaged posture. The central analytical challenge lies in understanding how China navigates the often-competing pressures stemming from acute domestic needs—such as severe environmental pollution and energy security anxieties—and its evolving foreign policy objectives, which include enhancing its global image and asserting leadership in key areas of international cooperation. The core problem this paper addresses is how China manages these complexities to forge a path on climate change that serves its multifaceted national interests. Results and discussions section will be presented with three main subheadings— Domestic Drivers of China's Climate Action, Foreign Policy Imperatives and Global Climate Governance and The Interplay of Domestic and Foreign Policy.

Literature Review

This research selected several papers related to China's evolution towards climate change regime. Marechal (2018) said, China's role in the international climate change regime has evolved significantly, transitioning from a passive participant to a major player on the world stage (Maréchal, 2018). Initially, China prioritized economic development and viewed international climate agreements with some skepticism, particularly the notion of binding emissions targets. However, the increasingly evident impacts of climate change within China itself, such as air pollution and extreme weather events, coupled with growing international pressure, led to a shift in policy.

China now recognizes the urgency of climate action and has adopted a more proactive stance in international negotiations. This is evident in its commitment to the Paris Agreement (The Paris Agreement: China's 'New Normal' role in international climate negotiations, 2016), where it pledged to peak its carbon emissions by 2030 and achieve carbon neutrality by 2060 (*China Announces Plans for Major Renewable Projects to Tackle Climate Change | Reuters*, n.d.). China's role is particularly significant due to its position as the world's largest emitter of greenhouse gases. Its actions, therefore, have a significant impact on global efforts to mitigate climate change. However, China's transition to a low-carbon economy presents significant challenges, including its reliance on coal, the need for substantial investments in renewable energy, and the balancing of economic growth with environmental sustainability.

Despite these challenges, China's commitment to climate action provides a glimmer of hope in the fight against climate change. Its actions have the potential to inspire other nations and drive the development and deployment of clean technologies.

The second article is titled İrem Aşkar Karakır's work. The research examines how China and India are increasingly using environmental issues within their foreign policies to gain influence on the international stage. Environmental issues, particularly climate change, have become important tools for China and India to project themselves as responsible global actors and enhance their influence in international politics. Karakir highlights several points on how the development of China and India related to the use of Environmental Foreign Policy as a Tool for Soft Power (Karakır, 2018).

Karakir said that both China and India were initially hesitant to commit to international environmental agreements, prioritizing economic development(Karakır, 2018). However, in recent decades, they have become more active in global environmental governance, particularly in climate change negotiations. Both countries are strategically using their engagement with environmental issues to enhance their soft power—their ability to influence others through attraction and persuasion rather than coercion.

China and India's roles are increasing in the global climate negotiations, particularly their support for the Paris Agreement. This active participation is presented as evidence of their growing soft power in the environmental realm. The interplay between domestic and foreign policy in both countries shows how domestic environmental concerns and policies influence their international positions on climate change.

In the other hands, Lai (2021) provides a detailed periodization from 1990 to 2021, analyzing shifts from "defensive" to more "proactive" stances and attributing these changes significantly to domestic political economy factors, particularly the consolidation of leadership power and persistent concerns about economic growth (Lai, 2021). This perspective underscores the internal dynamics that often dictate the pace and nature of China's climate engagement.

The initial scepticism that characterized China's early approach has also been a subject of scholarly inquiry in the fourth article. Liu's work on reveals that this scepticism was often intertwined with nationalist sentiments and geopolitical concerns, manifesting in narratives such as the "low carbon plot," which framed international climate action as a Western strategy to curtail China's development (Liu, 2015).

China's changing climate policy is driven by a variety of factors. Authored by Beibei Yang, Mathieu Blondeel, and Philipp Pattberg, have explored policy frames within China in fifth article. Their research shows that the Chinese government sees the main problems as pressure from development, pollution, natural disasters, and damage to ecosystems—especially from the energy sector (B. Yang et al., 2024). The proposed solutions include cutting emissions from energy, changing how industries work, using nature to help the environment, using market tools, and working with other countries (B. Yang et al., 2024). The motivations behind these efforts are ideas like green development, building an "ecological civilization," sharing global responsibility fairly (CBDR), and working through international cooperation. We found that the way the government talks about problems, solutions, and motivations has changed over three time periods (B. Yang et al., 2024)

This paper builds upon this existing body of knowledge by focusing specifically on the *interplay* between these domestic drivers and foreign policy objectives. While many studies address either domestic aspects or international dimensions, fewer offer a holistic analysis of how these two spheres interact, reinforce, and sometimes conflict with each other in the continuous shaping of China's climate trajectory. By synthesizing diverse scholarly perspectives and incorporating recent policy developments and data, this research aims to provide a comprehensive and updated analysis of this critical interplay.

METHOD

This research adopts a qualitative approach that integrates a variety of primary and secondary sources to ensure a comprehensive and balanced analysis of China's climate policy trajectory. By drawing on multiple types of data, the study aims to triangulate information and build a nuanced understanding of how domestic and international factors influence Chinese climate governance.

Primary sources include official government documents and statements, such as those issued by the State Council and the Ministry of Ecology and Environment. Key planning documents, including the Five-Year Plans for National Economic and Social Development and the "1+N" policy framework for carbon peaking and neutrality, provide insight into China's strategic direction. Additional sources include China's National Communications and Biennial Update Reports to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC), as well as speeches and public declarations made by senior Chinese leaders, which offer context on evolving policy motivations and priorities.

Secondary sources encompass a wide range of peer-reviewed journal articles, scholarly books, and research papers focused on environmental policy, energy transition, and climate diplomacy in China. These were collected through targeted searches in academic databases and supplemented by publications from reputable international organizations.

The collected materials are examined through qualitative content analysis to identify recurring themes, policy shifts, motivations, and challenges within China's climate narrative. Particular attention is given to changes in official rhetoric and policy priorities over time. Comparative analysis is employed to explore differences in China's climate stance across historical periods and global forums, revealing patterns of continuity and adaptation. Finally, insights from diverse sources are synthesized to illuminate how domestic development goals and international

climate commitments interact—sometimes synergistically, sometimes in tension—shaping the evolution of China's climate strategy.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

China's shifting climate policy is strongly influenced by critical domestic priorities. Growing environmental challenges, the need to ensure energy security, economic development goals, and broader national strategies have increasingly aligned to elevate climate action as a key focus in policymaking.

Domestic Drivers of China's Climate Action

China's shifting climate policy is strongly influenced by critical domestic priorities. Growing environmental challenges, the need to ensure energy security, economic development goals, and broader national strategies have increasingly aligned to elevate climate action as a key focus in policymaking.

Environmental Degradation and Public Health: The "Airpocalypse" Catalyst

One of the most powerful domestic motivations for stronger environmental and climate measures in China has been the intense and widespread pollution impacting its major cities and industrial areas. The term "airpocalypse" gained currency to describe the hazardous levels of air pollution, particularly PM2.5 particulate matter, that frequently blanketed cities like Beijing, leading to significant public health concerns and growing social discontent (Williams, 2014). As Marechal noted, the urgency to address this air quality crisis became a key motivator for China's government to adopt a more proactive stance on pollution control, which has strong co-benefits for climate mitigation(Maréchal, 2018). The article rightly points out that "China does not have an option except adopted a more proactive attitude toward climate-change mitigation... to solve the domestic environmental problems"(Maréchal, 2018).

As the severe air pollution episodes affecting China's major urban areas during the early 2010s significantly heightened public concern and political urgency. The health impacts and widespread discontent—particularly during events labeled as the "airpocalypse" in cities like Beijing—played a critical role in pushing the government to act. The shift toward more proactive environmental and climate policies can therefore be understood not only as a response to international pressure but also as a necessary strategy to address domestic environmental crises, as highlighted by Williams (2014) and Maréchal (2018).

Pollution imposes significant economic burdens on China. According to findings by Crane and Mao (2015), air pollution alone cost the country approximately $535 billion in 2012—around 6.5% of its GDP—mainly due to reduced labor productivity and rising healthcare costs(Maréchal, 2018). These statistics provided strong economic motivation for the Chinese government to pursue cleaner energy alternatives and enforce stricter environmental regulations. Recent studies on China's domestic policy narratives also affirm that "pollution and ecosystem damage/change" are recognized as critical issues demanding immediate action(B. Yang et al., 2024). Beyond air quality, there is also growing domestic awareness of the direct impacts of climate change itself, including the increased frequency and intensity of extreme weather events (such as floods and droughts), threats to water resources, and risks to agricultural output and food security(Maréchal, 2018).

Energy Security Concerns

Ensuring energy security remains a top priority for China's leadership, as the country is the world's largest energy consumer and heavily depends on imported fossil fuels—especially crude oil and natural gas (Williams, 2014). This reliance on imports exposes China to risks from global market fluctuations and geopolitical tensions. As a result, expanding domestic energy production—particularly through renewable sources—is seen as a vital strategy to strengthen energy independence and minimize external vulnerabilities (Williams, 2014). As Chiu argued, substantial investment in renewable energy not only addresses environmental problems like air and water pollution but also serves to "mitigate risks of socioeconomic instability" linked to energy supply(Maréchal, 2018). The 14th Five-Year Plan (2021-2025) explicitly lists achieving "more safe and solid" energy security as one of its primary energy system development goals, underscoring the strategic importance of this driver(The Carbon Brief Profile: China, n.d.).

This argument above is well-founded, as China's heavy reliance on imported fossil fuels does indeed present significant strategic and economic vulnerabilities. The prioritization of energy security, as highlighted in national plans and supported by expert analyses, reflects a rational response to both external risks and domestic environmental pressures. The integration of renewable energy development into this strategy not only aligns with long-term sustainability goals but also contributes to reducing the potential for socioeconomic instability, reaffirming the centrality of energy security in China's climate and development agenda.

Economic Restructuring and Technological Leadership

China's climate actions are also intricately linked to its broader economic strategy, which aims to transition the economy away from a model reliant on low-cost manufacturing, heavy industry, and export-led growth towards one driven by innovation, technological advancement, high-value services, and sustainable development(Williams, 2014).In this context, climate action, particularly massive investment in "green technologies"—such as solar photovoltaics, wind turbines, electric vehicles (EVs), battery storage, and energy efficiency solutions—is not merely an environmental imperative but a significant economic opportunity. Marechal identified the "will to conquer new foreign markets shares in the field of green technologies" as a key motivator for China(Maréchal, 2018).

By developing these emerging sectors, China aims to drive new sources of economic growth, generate high-skilled employment opportunities, and secure a competitive edge in the fast-growing global green economy. China has indeed become a dominant global force in the manufacturing and deployment of renewable energy technologies(Maréchal, 2018). For instance, official statistics from 2021 showed that China's installed capacity of non-fossil energy surpassed that of coal for the first time, with total renewable energy installed capacity reaching 1.063 billion kilowatts(*China Policies and Actions*, n.d.). More recent data from Ember for 2024 indicates record-breaking annual additions of solar (278 GW) and wind (79.8 GW) capacity, meaning China surpassed its 2030 target of 1,200 GW of solar and wind capacity six years ahead of schedule(Powering China's New Era of Green Electrification, n.d.). This reflects a strong determination to take a leading role in the global shift toward cleaner energy, both in terms of technological innovation and industrial capacity.

Foreign Policy Imperatives and Global Climate Governance

Beyond pressing domestic drivers, China's approach to climate change is significantly shaped by a range of foreign policy considerations and its evolving role in global governance. As China's economic and geopolitical stature has grown, its engagement with international climate issues has become increasingly intertwined with its broader strategic ambitions on the world stage.

Enhancing Global Image and Soft Power

A key foreign policy imperative for China is the desire to cultivate and project an image of a responsible major power *(大国担当 – dàguó dāndāng)*. Marechal explicitly identified the "desire to improve the country's image on the international stage" as one of the motivations for China's increased climate engagement(Maréchal, 2018). In a world increasingly concerned with environmental sustainability, a proactive stance on climate change offers a valuable avenue for enhancing China's international reputation and soft power. Karakır's research suggests that China, much like India, strategically utilizes environmental foreign policy, particularly concerning climate change, as an instrument to "project themselves as responsible global actors and enhance their influence" in international politics(Karakır, 2018).

Under the leadership of Xi Jinping, responding to climate change has been elevated from a sectoral concern to a core component of China's national strategy, deeply integrated into the overarching concepts of "Ecological Civilization" and the pursuit of high-quality, sustainable socio-economic development(*China Policies and Actions*, n.d.). To operationalize these high-level commitments, China has developed and is implementing the "1+N" policy framework. This system provides the top-level design and guiding principles ("1") for achieving carbon peaking and carbon neutrality, supported by a series of specific action plans and policies for key sectors and areas ("N")(*China Policies and Actions*, n.d.).

The decision by the United States to withdraw from the Paris Agreement for the second times in 2025 under the Trump administration created a perceived leadership vacuum in global climate governance and potential effects on climate change mitigation, since the United States is the second largest global emitter of greenhouse gases (U.S. Withdrawal from the Paris Agreement: Process and Potential Effects, 2025).This gave China a major opportunity to assert its leadership by reaffirming its support for the Paris Agreement and presenting itself as a strong advocate of multilateral climate cooperation, thereby enhancing its soft power and strengthening its international reputation. This strategic maneuvering allowed China to contrast its approach with that of the US, bolstering its image as a reliable partner in addressing global challenges.

Seeking Leadership in Global Climate Governance

Concurrent with enhancing its image, China has demonstrated a clear ambition to play a more leading role in shaping the agenda and outcomes of global climate governance. This marks a significant departure from its earlier, more defensive posture. Especially under the leadership of Xi Jinping, China has transitioned towards a more proactive and assertive stance in international climate diplomacy(J. Yang, 2022).President Xi's statement that China is "taking the driving seat in international cooperation to respond to climate change" is indicative of this ambition(Sandalow et al., n.d.).

Some scholars conceptualize this evolving role as China constructing a "Yinling leading power" *(引领型大国 – yǐnlǐng xíng dàguó)* identity, which emphasizes a form of shared or guiding leadership rather than unilateral dominance(J. Yang, 2022). This framing suggests a desire to influence and shape global norms and institutions collaboratively. From an offensive realist perspective in international relations theory, China's active engagement in climate diplomacy can be interpreted as a strategy to maximize its power and influence within the international system(Shabirah et al., 2025) By taking the lead on a critical global issue like climate change, China can enhance its legitimacy, build coalitions, and strengthen its overall geopolitical standing.

Geopolitical and Economic Influence through Climate Initiatives

China advances its climate-related foreign policy goals through targeted international initiatives that carry both economic and geopolitical significance.

Belt and Road Initiative (BRI): Initially launched as a large-scale global infrastructure development strategy, the BRI has come under international criticism for its environmental impact (Huang, 2016). In response, China has made efforts to integrate environmental sustainability into the initiative through the promotion of a "Green BRI." This includes supporting renewable energy projects, sustainable infrastructure, and green financing in partner countries. These efforts not only enhance the BRI's environmental profile but also help China export its green technologies, standards, and financial capital—strengthening its economic reach and opening new markets for its growing clean-tech sectors(Huang, 2016).

South-South Cooperation: China consistently positions itself as a leading voice for developing nations in international climate negotiations (Sandalow et al., n.d.). This role is backed by concrete actions, including the creation of the China South-South Climate Cooperation Fund and President Xi's $3.1 billion pledge (J. Yang,

2022). These initiatives support climate adaptation, mitigation, and capacity-building projects across the Global South. By doing so, China deepens its diplomatic influence among developing countries and gains leverage in shaping global discussions on climate finance and technology transfer.

The Interplay of Domestic and Foreign Policy

The formulation and implementation of China's climate policy are characterized by a complex and dynamic interplay between its domestic imperatives and foreign policy ambitions. This interaction is not always linear or harmonious; it involves synergies where domestic needs align with international goals, but also significant tensions and contradictions where competing priorities must be navigated.

Synergies: When Domestic Needs Align with Foreign Policy Goals

In several key areas, China's domestic requirements and its foreign policy objectives have been mutually reinforcing, creating a powerful impetus for climate action.

A prime example is the aggressive development of renewable energy. Domestically, investing heavily in solar, wind, and other renewable sources helps address severe air pollution, enhances energy security by reducing reliance on imported fossil fuels, and drives economic restructuring towards high-tech, green industries(Williams, 2014). Simultaneously, this domestic push allows China to project itself internationally as a global leader in green technology and a responsible actor in combating climate change, thereby bolstering its soft power and international image(Maréchal, 2018). The narrative of tackling the "airpocalypse" while becoming a renewable energy superpower is a potent one both at home and abroad.

Similarly, the development of a robust domestic carbon market, specifically the national Emissions Trading System (ETS), serves multiple purposes. Internally, it aims to create economic incentives for emissions reductions from major industrial emitters and contribute to achieving China's carbon peaking and neutrality goals(J. Yang, 2022). Externally, a functioning and expanding ETS positions China as a significant player in international discussions on carbon pricing mechanisms and demonstrates its commitment to utilizing market-based instruments for climate mitigation, aligning it with trends in other major economies. This Covers approximately 2,257 power-generating companies, managing around 5.1–5.2 billion tonnes of CO_2 emissions annually—making it the world's largest carbon market by volume, accounting for over 40% of China's total emissions(*The Carbon Brief Profile: China*, n.d.)

Tensions and Contradictions: Navigating Conflicting Imperatives

Despite these synergies, China's climate policy landscape is also marked by significant tensions and apparent contradictions, often stemming from the difficult trade-offs between short-term economic and energy security concerns and long-term climate objectives.

The Coal Conundrum: The most prominent tension lies in China's continued reliance on and investment in coal-fired power generation, even as it champions renewable energy and makes ambitious international climate pledges (*China's Construction of New Coal-Power Plants 'Reached 10-Year High' in 2024 - Carbon Brief*, n.d.). Reports from CREA and Global Energy Monitor indicate that China started construction on approximately 94.5 GW of new coal power capacity in 2024, the highest level since 2015, and accounted for the vast majority (93-95%) of new coal power construction globally in recent years(*China's Construction of New Coal-Power Plants 'Reached 10-Year High' in 2024 - Carbon Brief*, n.d.). This persistent development of coal capacity is driven by deeply entrenched domestic factors: concerns about ensuring baseload electricity supply and grid stability to support economic activity (energy security), the economic importance of coal mining and coal-dependent industries in certain provinces, and the considerable influence of powerful state-owned energy enterprises with vested interests in the coal sector(Williams, 2014). This "coal conundrum" creates a significant credibility gap, drawing international criticism and raising doubts about the feasibility of China meeting its climate targets. This apparent contradiction between green ambitions and coal realities might be interpreted not just as policy incoherence, but potentially as a form of strategic ambiguity or a dual-track approach.

Economic Growth vs. Climate Targets: The historical and ongoing prioritization of GDP growth has often been in tension with the implementation of stringent environmental regulations and the pursuit of deep decarbonization(Lai, 2021). As Lai argues, the leadership's concern with economic growth has been a primary determinant of China's climate policy, leading to periods of both progress and regression ("ebbs and flows")(Lai, 2021). During times of economic slowdown or uncertainty, there is a risk that environmental enforcement may be relaxed, or that economic stimulus measures might favor more carbon-intensive industries to shore up growth and employment, as suggested by Lai for the 2020-2021 period in response to the COVID-19 pandemic's economic impact(Lai, 2021).

Central Directives vs. Local Implementation: Ambitious national climate targets and policies formulated by the central government in Beijing frequently encounter significant challenges in their translation and effective implementation at the provincial and local levels(SHEVCHENKO, 2024). Local governments may prioritize more immediate concerns such as local GDP growth, employment, and social stability over long-term climate goals. They may also lack the technical capacity, financial resources, or political will to fully enforce central directives. This can lead to a substantial "implementation gap," where the on-the-ground reality falls short of national aspirations. Identified challenges include legislative bottlenecks at the national level that hinder effective enforcement, and insufficient mechanisms for public participation and oversight in the policy process.

Refining Transitions and Argument Flow

Throughout this analysis, an effort has been made to ensure smooth logical connections between different arguments and to break down complex sentences for improved clarity and readability, addressing a general concern for academic writing. The interplay of domestic and foreign factors is inherently complex, and clear exposition is crucial.

The domestic policy choices made by China have profound global ripple effects that extend far beyond its direct greenhouse gas emissions. Its decisions on coal consumption, for example, directly impact global coal markets and the overall trajectory of global emissions(*Global Electricity Review 2024 | Ember*, n.d.). Conversely, China's massive scale-up of renewable energy manufacturing has been a key driver in reducing the global costs of solar panels and wind turbines, thereby accelerating the energy transition in many other countries. However, if China's implementation of its ambitious climate targets falters due to domestic constraints, it could significantly dampen global ambition and render the Paris Agreement goals unattainable. The success or failure of its "1+N" policy framework(*China Policies and Actions*, n.d.) will not only determine China's own decarbonization path but also offer critical lessons—positive or negative—for other large developing nations grappling with similar challenges.

Furthermore, China's approach to coal creates a "soft power paradox." While it aims to build international goodwill and influence through its climate leadership and promotion of green technologies, its continued large-scale domestic coal development and, until recently, its financing of coal projects overseas (though now pledged to halt(Shabirah et al., 2025)), send mixed signals to the international community. This can undermine the credibility of its green leadership narrative and

diminish the soft power gains accrued from its achievements in renewable energy, presenting an ongoing challenge for China's climate diplomacy.

Table 1: Interplay of Domestic and Foreign Policy Drivers in China's Climate Action

Key Policy Area/Decision	Primary Domestic Drivers	Primary Foreign Policy Drivers	Nature of Interplay
Rapid Renewable Energy Expansion	Air pollution reduction (health, social stability); Energy security (reduce import reliance); Industrial strategy (green tech leadership, new growth engines).	Enhance global image as climate leader; Export green technologies; Gain soft power; Influence global energy transition standards.	**Synergistic:** Domestic needs for clean air, energy independence, and economic upgrading align strongly with foreign policy goals of projecting leadership and capturing green markets.
Continued Coal Power Development/Approval	Energy security (baseload power, grid stability); Support local economies/employment in coal regions; Influence of state-owned coal/power enterprises.	(Primarily domestic drivers); Negatively impacts international perception of climate commitment and leadership claims.	**Conflicting/Tension:** Strong domestic pressures for energy security and economic stability via coal directly contradict foreign policy goals of climate leadership and undermine the credibility of international commitments. Creates a "soft power paradox."
Setting Ambitious International Pledges (e.g., 2060 Carbon Neutrality)	Long-term driver for "Ecological Civilization"; Stimulus for domestic green innovation and structural adjustment.	Demonstrate responsible major power status; Fill leadership vacuum; Gain diplomatic leverage; Shape global climate norms.	**Complex/Mixed:** Pledges serve foreign policy goals immediately by enhancing image. Domestically, they create long-term pressure for transformation but can conflict with short-term economic concerns if implementation is too rapid or costly. Performative aspect is strong.
Development of National Carbon Market (ETS)	Create economic incentives for emission reduction; Achieve domestic carbon targets efficiently; Promote low-carbon innovation.	Showcase market-based policy instruments; Align with international trends; Position for potential international carbon market linkages.	**Largely Synergistic:** Domestic policy tool aligns with international expectations for market mechanisms and demonstrates commitment to sophisticated climate policy, enhancing global standing.
Promotion of "Green Belt and Road Initiative (BRI)"	Export surplus industrial capacity (including green tech); Secure resources and markets.	Improve BRI's environmental image; Export Chinese green standards/technologies; Enhance geopolitical/economic influence in partner countries.	**Mixed/Evolving:** Initially, BRI had significant environmental concerns. "Greening" efforts are a response to both domestic push for green tech export and foreign policy need to make BRI more sustainable and acceptable, but implementation and actual green impact vary.
South-South Climate Cooperation	(Limited direct domestic driver, more about resource allocation)	Strengthen ties with developing countries; Bolster leadership claims within Global South; Counterbalance influence of developed nations; Enhance soft power.	**Primarily Foreign Policy Driven, Synergistic with Leadership Goals:** Domestic resource allocation supports foreign policy aims of building alliances and projecting leadership among developing nations, reinforcing its global standing.

CONCLUSION

This research has demonstrated that China's climate policy trajectory is profoundly shaped by a dynamic and often intricate interplay of pressing domestic imperatives and evolving strategic foreign policy objectives. The nation's journey from a cautious, development-focused actor to a more proactive, albeit at times contradictory, participant and aspiring leader in global climate governance is not a monolithic or linear progression. Instead, it is characterized by continuous negotiation between internal demands—such as combating severe environmental degradation like the "airpocalypse," ensuring national energy security, and fostering new avenues for economic growth through green industries—and external ambitions, including the desire to enhance its global image, exert greater influence in international affairs, and assume a leadership role in addressing one of the 21st century's most critical challenges.

Furthermore, this research contributes to the existing scholarship by providing a synthesized and nuanced analysis of this crucial interplay, drawing upon a broad range of academic sources and updated empirical evidence. It has highlighted how domestic drivers, such as the public health crisis precipitated by pollution and the strategic need for energy independence, have created powerful internal stimuli for climate action. Simultaneously, it has examined how foreign policy considerations, including the pursuit of soft power, the ambition to fill perceived leadership vacuums, and the strategic use of initiatives like the Belt and Road Initiative, have influenced China's international climate posture. A key insight is the recognition that these domestic and foreign drivers are not always aligned; indeed, significant tensions and contradictions, most notably the "coal conundrum" versus renewable energy expansion, and the rhetoric of global leadership versus the complexities of domestic implementation, are central features of China's climate story.

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