

U.S., China versus climate change

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A statement issued April 13 announced a renewed collaborative effort and call to action against climate change between the U.S. and China, the world's two largest greenhouse gas emitters. Both nations have agreed to combine strategies, efforts and resources in order to address the large-scale issue of global climate change, which has become increasingly evident through recent extreme weather events. In order to realize these aspirations, the two countries have created a Climate Change Working Group to facilitate the lowering of overall carbon gas emissions, foster cooperation between the two nations and promote a cleaner environment while minding finite natural resources.

Aside from a commitment to uphold the principles and priorities of the Working Group, the Chinese government's 12th Five-Year Plan aims for 20 percent of all new construction projects to meet green building standards by 2015. Currently, China is ranked as the third largest market in the world for LEED-registered and -certified buildings, and it promotes sustainable design and construction through the Three Star building rating system. Both LEED and Three Star demonstrate a commitment to green development and overlap in many "credit categories," including water and energy utilization. McGraw-Hill Construction's World Green Building Trends Report, released in 2012, revealed that among firms that operate in sustainable building environments, improved health and well-being among employees has nearly doubled since 2008, while worker productivity has nearly tripled. In addition, green buildings offer firms a large overall reduction in water usage, improvement in air quality, and the business benefits of decreased operating costs and/or paybacks and subsidies provided by local governments.

Although it is encouraging to learn of the actions (or intended actions) to address this prevalent issue, discrepancies and uncertainties remain as to whether the goals of these two nations can be realized. After attending a Department of State briefing pertaining to this Working Group, I remain somewhat undecided as to whether the U.S.-China effort will be able to make a substantial impact on climate change. The sentiment among the joint effort is extremely positive and aims to be ambitious; however, I believe that the working group lacks specific direction for how it intends to address climate change. I am concerned that the loose definition of this joint effort has created too broad of an umbrella for immediate and efficient action. As the greatest-impact and least costly way to reduce greenhouse gas emissions, green building programs and sustainable cities initiatives would be an effective and important pillar to include in the U.S.-China Climate Change Working Group. I hope that the U.S. and China consider green buildings and sustainable cities as a high-impact way to reduce greenhouse gas emissions while promoting human health and well-being.

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