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China, Climate Multilateralism, and the Road to COP 30 in Belém

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Executive Summary

COP 30, held in Belém, Brazil, in 2025, is a decisive moment following the first Global Stocktake under the Paris Agreement. It occurs amidst U.S. withdrawal from active multilateral climate leadership and Brazil's efforts to mediate fractious global divides. China's landmark 2035 pledge to reduce emissions 7–10% from its peak marks its first absolute target, positioning it as a central but contested actor. While the EU criticizes its modest ambition, it pursues pragmatic cooperation with China, and the Global South broadly supports China's equity-focused climate stance. U.S. federal disengagement contrasts with subnational and expert calls for selective engagement. China's success at COP 30 depends on advancing transparency, scaling adaptation finance—particularly through South–South cooperation—and aligning with Brazil's leadership. Key challenges remain in finance mobilization, technology transfer, and trust. The summit's possible trajectories include breakthrough cooperation, incremental progress, or deadlock, with China's diplomatic balance between ambition and equity underscoring Belém's legacy as either a revitalization or further fragmentation of climate multilateralism.

1. Introduction: A Moment of Inflection

COP 30 unfolds in the Amazon basin, symbolizing the climate imperative amid political tensions and competing powers. The first global stocktake reveals a gap between pledged commitments and the 1.5°C target. China's announced 2035 emissions peak and reduction target represents an unprecedented measurable step, but international recognition depends on diplomatic environment, China's transparency, and equity considerations.

2. COP 30 Agenda: Priorities and Process

The summit focuses on transforming Nationally Determined Contributions (NDCs) into implementation with five key priorities:

- Strengthening 2035 NDCs
- Accelerating energy transitions and resilience
- Mobilizing climate finance targeting USD 1.3 trillion annually by 2030
- Establishing accountability and transparency mechanisms
- Embedding justice and equity aligned with Global South needs

Brazil's agenda includes a ministerial on adaptation finance and loss and damage, emphasizing the Amazon's critical role and high-level North-South mediation goals.

3. Global Consensus and Divides

Convergence Areas:
Broad acceptance of the urgency to address climate change, support for renewables expansion, and recognition of the need to prioritize adaptation alongside mitigation.

Divergence Lines:
Disputes persist over climate finance deliverables, the interpretation of equity and CBDR principles, concerns about protectionist carbon border adjustments (CBAM), and evolving transparency standards.

4. Shifting Alliances in Climate Diplomacy

China–EU "Managed Rivalry":
Characterized by strategic competition yet economic interdependence, notably in green industrial supply chains, signaling opportunities for regulated cooperation amid critique of China's climate target.

BRICS and South Atlantic Coordination:
Focus on climate justice and development rights with Brazil highlighting the Amazon and China advancing South–South collaboration on finance and technology.

Brazil's Mediation Role:
Brazil aims to act as an inclusive broker, balancing its environmental stewardship with internal socio-economic interests, requiring China's diplomatic respect through cooperative local and regional initiatives.

Fragmented Western Front:
The weakened transatlantic climate consensus elevates China, Brazil, and the EU as critical actors in sustaining multilateral progress.

5. The United States: Internal Disjunction and External Retreat

Official Policy:
Formal U.S. withdrawal from the Paris framework continues, focusing domestically on fossil fuels and carbon capture.

Subnational and Expert Engagement:
States and experts pursue constrained cooperation pathways with China, especially on methane and carbon markets, although federal politics limit these efforts.

Strategic Posture:
The U.S. combines isolationist tactics with efforts to curb China's green tech advances, paradoxically ceding leadership space in global climate diplomacy.

6. Global Expectations and Critical Voices on China's 2035 Target

While developing countries applaud China's equity-based target, Western stakeholders critique its insufficiency and call for greater sectoral detail and transparency. NGOs highlight gaps in methane targets and overseas fossil financing. China's credibility depends on operationalizing its headline pledge at COP 30.

7. China's Strategic Posture and Recommended Actions

- Define sectoral targets (power, industry, methane) to address vagueness.
- Adopt transparent emissions auditing with neutral partners like Brazil's INPE.
- Scale South–South adaptation finance aiming at USD 20 billion by 2030.
- Recast Belt and Road as "Green Belt and Road 2.0" focusing on climate solutions.
- Coordinate respectfully with Brazil through joint initiatives on Amazon restoration.
- Manage narratives proactively with open dialogue events and monitoring.

8. Cooperation Challenges: Finance, Technology, and Trust

Finance:
Persistent shortfalls in the USD 100 billion goal and heavy reliance on off-balance-sheet mechanisms constrain credibility. China's AIIB-led green transition facility could be pivotal if aligned multilaterally.

Technology Transfer:
IP protectionism restricts diffusion of key clean technologies. Collaborative manufacturing and technology development in regions like Latin America could diversify supply chains.

Governance:
Transparent, verifiable data and real-time emissions disclosure are vital to overcoming mistrust and ensuring accountability.

9. Brazil as Host: Opportunities and Limitations

Brazil seeks to restore the multilateral process's credibility, positioning the Amazon as both symbol and action space for climate finance and adaptation. Success requires credible inclusive dialogue bridging BRICS and Western interests, with China playing a complementary diplomatic role.

10. Anticipated Roles of the EU and U.S.

EU:
Faces internal divisions but champions finance ambition and carbon market rules,

balancing public critique of China with behind-the-scenes collaboration in green investments.

U.S.:
Officially sidelined but exerts influence via geopolitical strategies and NGO advocacy. Its retreat creates leadership openings largely filled by China, EU, and Brazil.

11. Possible Outcomes: Three Scenarios for COP 30

Scenario	Description	Impact on China	Global Governance
Positive	Brazil broker consensus; China and EU enhance targets and transparency	Enhances leadership and cooperation	Restores trust and BRICS credibility
Moderate	Incremental advancement, finance partial, equity debates continue	Maintains diplomatic balance	Procedural legitimacy preserved
Negative	Negotiation collapse, accusations of under-ambition	Damages credibility and South-South unity	Weakens Paris Agreement, fuels nationalism

12. China’s Long-Term Strategy Beyond COP 30

China should embed an open leadership model emphasizing equity with small and developing states, lead through green trade and cross-border carbon markets, and globally reposition “ecological civilization” as inclusive sustainable development.

13. Conclusion: Between Leadership and Legitimacy

COP 30 is a pivotal test of China’s ability to balance ambition with equity amid global fragmentation. Success depends on strategic transparency, South–South financing, and supporting Brazil’s mediating role. Belém’s outcome will signal whether multilateral climate action advances through cooperation or stalls in rivalry.