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Have global emissions peaked?

2024-2025 ENVIRONMENT

oral sessions with C. Hamard

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Nov 18th 2024, By Rachel Dobbs, Environment editor, *The Economist*

HAVE GLOBAL emissions of greenhouse gases passed their peak? It is entirely possible. The world will find out, one way or another, in 2025. Passing the peak would be a significant moment in the fight against climate change. In its most recent assessment report, the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, the UN body that monitors climate science, said 2025 was the year by which greenhouse-gas emissions must peak if the world is to have a good chance of keeping global temperature rises within the 1.5-2°C limits specified by the Paris climate agreement.

Why the uncertainty? It takes time to tot up the overall balance of emissions for each country, and to ensure that minor fluctuations are not mistaken for major trends. Under UN rules, rich countries must submit their emissions inventories each year. Poorer countries every two years in 2024.

Having grown wealthy and powerful through industrialisation, the world’s rich democracies have moved away from heavy industry and have decoupled economic growth from their emissions. Most have reported falling emissions for at least a decade, if not longer. Japan hit its peak in 2013, America in 2007, Germany in 1990 and Britain in 1973. Poorer countries’ emissions, however, have continued to expand alongside their economies and left them wary of curtailing either. China will not promise anything before 2030; Brazil, India and Indonesia, among others, have yet to commit to a specific date.

But the link between emissions and development has been steadily weakening as energy is used more efficiently and produced in greener ways. This is particularly true of China, which is both the largest greenhouse-gas emitter—producing 30% of the planet’s total—and the main driving force behind the expansion of renewable energy (it is building twice as much new solar and wind capacity as the rest of the world combined). China has to report its emissions figures less frequently than Europe or America, and because of delays it has not submitted an update since December 2023, when it provided data only up to 2018.

Observers have, therefore, been frantically trying to divine the trajectory of China’s emissions. They rose sharply in 2023 after draconian covid-19 restrictions were lifted. But they seem to have fallen since.

None of this is certain. Mr Myllyvirta notes that higher-than-expected demand for fossil fuels from Chinese industry could upset the predicted trend. China’s next official emissions report—due on the last day of 2024—will clarify matters, as will further updates in 2025. But China’s emissions are so enormous that a peak would alter the global trajectory.

That would be a great achievement. But it means very little on its own. Any pathway to 1.5°C (and many that end up somewhere hotter) would still require further aggressive emissions cuts and carbon removal. Passing peak emissions should be celebrated. But once emissions are no longer going up, what really matters is how quickly they can be brought down. (485 words)