

News digest

The big environmental stories in the Chinese media (12-18 March)

Sandstorm envelops Beijing

The worst [sandstorm](#) to hit Beijing in a decade swept across northern China on Monday, sending citizens onto social media to share apocalyptic photos.

At its worst, levels of PM10 particulate matter were as high as 8,000 micrograms per cubic metre in Beijing, 160 times the safe limit set by the World Health Organization.

The China Meteorological Administration said the sandstorm had originated in Mongolia, where six people were reportedly killed and at least 80 reported missing.

The storm raised doubts about the [Three-North Shelterbelt](#) afforestation program to halt desertification and reduce sandstorms in the north. China initiated the program in 1978 and last year [announced](#) it had afforested at least 30 million hectares of land so far.

Asked about the latest sandstorm, Chinese experts [explained](#) the program makes little impact on atmospheric circulations, but can reduce sand and dust at ground level.

“Sandstorms are also an unpredictable natural phenomenon that can not be fully avoided,” said Yang Wenbin, the chief expert on sandstorm prevention at the Chinese Academy of Forestry.

According to Chinese state broadcaster [CCTV](#), the frequency of sandstorms in northern China has dropped in the past decades, to less than one day per year since 2011. Although it's hard to attribute this directly to the shelterbelt

program, there has also been a reduction in strong winds and an increase in rainfall in the region, said CCTV.

However, Beijing residents shared concern on social media for what the sandstorm means for Mongolia's semi-arid plateau. [One study](#) shows heatwaves and droughts have increased there over the past two decades. While [analysis](#) from the International Monetary Fund also pointed out that a tripling in livestock numbers in the region since 1990 has caused land degradation. Both factors could have contributed to the storm.

Read China Dialogue stories on [how herders fight against desertification](#) and the [battle to clean up the air in central China](#)

Top leadership calls for renewables to move to 'centre' of power generation

China should undergo a "far-reaching, systemic socio-economic transformation" to realize the vision of carbon neutrality and build a "new generation power system with renewables at the centre."

This was the message that emerged from a meeting of the Party's top policy-making body on economic affairs, headed by President Xi Jinping, when it convened on Monday to [discuss](#) China's carbon peaking and carbon neutrality goals.

The Central Financial and Economic Affairs Commission met right after the conclusion of the Two Sessions and the approval of the 14th Five Year Plan.

The language was an upgrade from that in the FYP, which talked of "building a new generation power system compatible with high percentage of renewable energy" but made no mention of its centrality.

Chai Qimin, director for strategic planning at the National Centre for Climate Change Strategy and International Cooperation (NCSC), told [21st Century Business Herald](#) that connecting a lot of renewables to the grid poses challenges for the existing power system, and creates new demand for power storage and computerisation. China needs to synchronise its power sector reforms with deploying more renewables to help the power system “evolve into a modern one.”

In a press conference last December, the head of the National Energy Administration (NEA) Zhang Jianhua explained that boosting the use of non-fossil energy to 25% in China’s energy mix by 2030 (which is its [new NDC target](#)) would mean that at least 70% of energy demand newly added in the next decade would need to be met by non-fossil sources.

At the meeting, the top Party leadership further emphasised the need to control consumption of fossil fuels, increase energy efficiency and deepen power market reforms.

Experts [believe](#) the meeting sent strong signals for “breakthroughs” in China’s power sector reforms during the 14th FYP period. These may include pricing mechanisms for [“flexibility providers”](#) in the power system; mechanisms to encourage the “bundling” of power generation, storage, grid and demand-side management; and better integration of distributed solar and wind into the power market.

Read China Dialogue’s recent coverage of [the 14th Five Year Plan](#) and [reforms in China’s power sector](#).