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US-China pact is a step forward

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As I write the week before Thanksgiving, it feels like winter has arrived, and the ground has started to freeze. News comes to us in sound-bites. This past week gave us: “Earth has warmest October on record as ocean temperatures top charts”; “The National Weather Service warned that the snow, generated by cold air blowing over the warmer Great Lakes, could eventually total 6 feet in places”; and more dramatically “Are we doomed to Arctic Winters in America?”

But on the real Earth all these sound bites are inter-woven. Super Typhoon Nuri formed over the warm waters of the Western Pacific, peaking with sustained winds around 180 miles per hour - one of the strongest tropical storms of the year. As it moved north past Japan into the Arctic, it coupled with the polar jet-stream and re-intensified into a near-record storm in the Bering Sea off Alaska. This disrupted the Arctic vortex and dragged frigid air into the US, and down across the Great Lakes, which like the Pacific are getting warmer at the end of summer. Temperatures in Chicago fell 40 degrees in 2 days, and lake effect snow storms dropped many feet of snow on parts of Wisconsin, Michigan and New York State.

But the big news this month was the agreement by the United States and China to take action on climate change. Sure it is late in the game, but for climate change which is slowly accelerating and has a very long memory, it will never be too late to reduce greenhouse gas emissions. Whatever we do now will benefit the Earth and her children long after we are gone.

The US-China agreement infuriated some politicians because they had been arguing that the US did not need to take serious action until the Chinese did – and anyway climate change was invisible if you buried your head in the sand.

The Chinese had argued for years that the nations that industrialized first were responsible for most of the fossil CO2 in the atmosphere, so they should reduce their emissions first. It was only fair to let the developing nations industrialize by burning their share of coal. In fact, we helped them do this by moving our manufacturing to China. The result has been increasing wealth for China, but catastrophic air pollution that has made living in the cities unhealthy. Lung cancer rates are soaring among non-smokers.

More broadly, China now has polluted ground water, and so much fresh water has been diverted to industry and agriculture that the northern rivers are running dry. Faced with worsening environmental problems, China has been rapidly developing solar and wind energy. So the shift from burning coal is now possible, but it will still take a decade or two. This agreement is clearly a sane move for China that will benefit both its citizens and the Earth.

Our President made this agreement, but the US is a basket case politically, and Congress will now try to destroy it. They are attacking the EPA (once championed by Republican Presidents Nixon, Reagan and George H. Bush) by describing its measures to reduce CO2 emissions from coal-fired power plants as a “War on Coal”. Really! Would they like to fill our cities with smoke like China’s, and again pollute our lakes and soils with acid rain?

These same politicians say moving from fossil fuels to renewable energy will push up our utility rates and “destroy jobs”. Perhaps they should get on the train to Vermont. Here, employment is growing as we build solar farms at a fast pace, and GMP is reducing its electricity rates this fall.

The struggle for sanity and democracy are interconnected. The Peoples Climate March took a little credit for the US-China agreement. We all need encouragement, but we should remember we are part of a web of life that is far greater than humanity. Putting the profits of the fossil fuel companies over the climate of the Earth will be a humbling disaster for the United States – as well as other countries like Canada and Australia, who are retreating from climate action.