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Distinct drivers of recent seasonal precipitation increase over Central Asia: roles of anthropogenic aerosols and greenhouse gases

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Abstract. Observational evidence reveals a pronounced wetting trend over Central Asia in recent decades, with the most substantial increases occurring during winter and summer. Yet the extent to which the drivers of these changes differ seasonally remains unknown. Here, we use single-forcing experiments from the Precipitation Driver and Response Model Intercomparison Project (PDRMIP) to examine the effects of various external forcings on winter and summer precipitation across Central Asia and to explore the physical mechanisms underlying seasonal precipitation changes. We find that greenhouse gas (GHG) forcing mainly increases winter precipitation by enhancing atmospheric moisture content through warming. In contrast, in summer, Asian sulfate aerosols enhance precipitation by modulating the westerly jet, which strengthens atmospheric moisture transport into the region. Asian black carbon exerts an opposing influence that partially offsets the sulfate-induced effect. Further attribution analysis based on CMIP6 simulations reinforces these sensitivity results that GHG forcing is the primary driver of winter precipitation increases whereas anthropogenic aerosols dominate summer trends. Future CMIP6 projections suggest that under moderate- to high-emission scenarios, winter precipitation will continue to rise due to increasing GHG concentrations, while summer precipitation may decline across much of Central Asia as a result of reduced aerosol emissions following Asian clean air policies. These findings highlight a distinct seasonality in the drivers of recent precipitation increase and suggest a plausible divergence in future winter and summer precipitation trends.

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1 Introduction

Central Asia, located in the mid-latitude westerly-dominated areas of the Northern Hemisphere, is a typical arid and semi-arid region characterized by scarce precipitation (Lioubimtseva and Henebry, 2009). Under global climate change, the regional precipitation changes profoundly impact local ecological stability, agricultural production, and socio-economic development (Gessner et al., 2013; Reyer et al., 2017). In recent decades, observational evidence indicates that Central Asia has experienced significant wetting, particularly in winter and summer (Chen et al., 2011; Li et al., 2016; Hu et al., 2017; Peng and Zhou, 2017; Ma et al., 2020).

Many previous studies showed that human activities play a crucial role in recent wetting over Central Asia, as a result of increased levels of greenhouse gases (GHGs) (mainly CO_2 and CH_4), and anthropogenic aerosols (Peng et al., 2018; Dong et al., 2022; Xie et al., 2022; Fallah et al., 2023). Increasing GHG concentrations induced by anthropogenic emissions have driven global warming, which tends to intensify the global hydrological cycle (Held and Soden, 2006; Oki and Kanae, 2006). The warming-induced increases in oceanic evaporation and water vapor transport lead to enhancements in mean and extreme precipitation in Central Asia (Chen et al., 2011; Peng and Zhou, 2017; Wang et al., 2017; Yang et al., 2020). Furthermore, the warming rate in the past three decades is significantly higher than the rate of global mean surface temperature increase of about 0.39 °C decade^{-1} (Vose et al., 2012; Hu et al., 2014), which accelerates regional snow and glacier melting in high-mountain Asia and increases regional precipitation (Kraaijenbrink et al., 2021; Zhang et al., 2022). Besides GHGs, anthropogenic aerosols influence the Earth's energy budget through absorbing and scattering shortwave and longwave radiation, and interacting with clouds as well (Rotstayn and Lohmann, 2002; Ramanathan and Carmichael, 2008; Shindell and Faluvegi, 2009; Booth et al., 2012; Bond et al., 2013; Myhre et al., 2017; Jia et al., 2021). These aerosol-radiation and aerosol-cloud interactions not only impact local precipitation but also induce remote precipitation responses through large-scale atmospheric circulation modulation (Shindell et al., 2012; Myhre et al., 2013; Shawki et al., 2018; Undorf et al., 2018; Westervelt et al., 2018; Guo et al., 2024). Owing to industrialization and urbanization in Asian developing nations since the 1980s, anthropogenic aerosol emissions from East and South Asia have risen substantially (Ohara et al., 2007; Lu et al., 2011). Several studies indicate that increased Asian anthropogenic aerosols drive a meridional shift of the Asian subtropical westerly jet, which potentially affects precipitation in Central Asia (Dong et al., 2022; Xie et al., 2022). In addition, internal variability,

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such as interdecadal variations in Atlantic and Pacific sea surface temperature, can also contribute to the regional precipitation changes in Central Asia (Huang et al., 2013; Gerlitz et al., 2016; Jiang et al., 2021).

It is noted that previous studies have mainly focused on annual precipitation changes in historical and future times and the corresponding physical drivers (Chen et al., 2011; Huang et al., 2014; Li et al., 2016; Hu et al., 2017; Jiang et al., 2020). However, it remains unknown whether seasonal differences exist in the drivers of regional precipitation change. In this study, we employ single-forcing sensitivity experiments in the Precipitation Driver and Response Model Intercomparison Project (PDRMIP) to examine the effects of GHGs and anthropogenic aerosols on seasonal precipitation changes in Central Asia, especially for winter (December–February, DJF) and summer (June–August, JJA). Combined with multi-model simulations from the Coupled Model Intercomparison Project Phase 6 (CMIP6), we examine the responses of winter and summer precipitation changes to external forcings in the historical simulations over Central Asia, and further reveal possible future trends in winter and summer precipitation under different emission scenarios.

2 Data and Methods

2.1 Observed datasets

The Global Precipitation Climatology Project (GPCP) dataset, which integrates multiple satellite measurements and rain-gauge observations (Adler et al., 2003), provides long-term global precipitation data and has been widely used to study precipitation changes in Central Asia (Yu et al., 2018; Ma et al., 2020; Yang et al., 2020; Liu et al., 2022). In this study, the GPCP Version 2.3 monthly dataset (Adler et al., 2018), spanning 1979–2014 with a 2.5°×2.5° horizontal resolution, is utilized to investigate the observed seasonal precipitation trends in Central Asia (35°N–50°N, 65°E–90°E).

2.2 PDRMIP simulations

Multi-model simulations from the PDRMIP are utilized to explore the impacts of several external forcing factors on seasonal precipitation in Central Asia and identify the underlying physical mechanisms (Myhre et al., 2017, 2022). Detailed information on the PDRMIP models used in this study is summarized in the supplement (Table S1). Baseline experiments were conducted using nine GCMs under year 2000 anthropogenic and natural forcing conditions, with different conditions for HadGEM2 (Stjern et al., 2017). Three global-scale perturbation experiments include doubling CO_2 concentrations

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(CO_2x2), tripling CH_4 concentrations (CH_4x3), and increasing solar irradiance by 2% (Solar+2%). Two regional aerosol perturbation experiments involve increasing Asian sulfate concentrations or emissions by a factor of 10 (Sulx10Asia) and increasing Asian black carbon (BC) concentrations or emissions by a factor of 10 (BCx10Asia). All the models incorporated aerosol direct effects and BC semi-direct effects, and some of these models adopted full microphysics parameterizations of aerosol-cloud interactions (Myhre et al., 2017; Liu et al., 2018). The climate responses to various external forcings were evaluated by nine models for CO_2x2, CH_4x3, and Solar+2% forcings, seven models for Sulx10Asia forcing, and six models for BCx10Asia forcing (Supplement Table S2). All numerical experiments were conducted including the coupled ocean-atmosphere simulations (except for NCAR-CESM1-CAM4, with a slab ocean) and fixed-SST simulations. The coupled ocean-atmosphere simulations were run for at least 100 years, with the last 50 years used for analysis. Fixed-SST simulations were performed for at least 15 years, with the last decade used for analysis. These fixed-SST simulations are used to estimate effective radiative forcing (ERF) of external forcings, calculated as top-of-atmosphere net radiative flux differences between baseline and perturbation experiments (Hansen et al., 2005; Myhre et al., 2013; Forster et al., 2016; Smith et al., 2020). Compared to instantaneous radiative forcing, ERF additionally includes rapid adjustments in the forcing estimate, such as cloud adjustments (from atmospheric temperature and aerosols), fast land surface responses, and tropospheric temperature and humidity changes (Hansen et al., 2005; Boucher et al., 2013; Myhre et al., 2013; Forster et al., 2016; Bellouin et al., 2020; Smith et al., 2020). Vertical coordinates were transformed to a 17-level pressure coordinate system to enable multi-model averaging.

2.3 CMIP6 simulations

To examine the attribution of historical precipitation changes, we utilize multi-model simulations from the Detection and Attribution Model Intercomparison Project (DAMIP) in CMIP6 (Gillett et al., 2016). Our analysis includes all-forcing historical simulations, simulations with only well-mixed GHGs (hist-GHG), simulations with only anthropogenic aerosols (hist-aer), and simulations with only natural factors of solar activity and volcanic forcing (hist-nat) in DAMIP. For future projections, we use three Shared Socioeconomic Pathways (SSPs: SSP2-4.5, SSP3-7.0, and SSP5-8.5) from the Scenario Model Intercomparison Project (ScenarioMIP; O'Neill et al., 2016; Eyring et al., 2016) in CMIP6. The medium GHG emission scenario (SSP2-45) assumes moderate climate mitigation measures. The high GHG emission scenarios (SSP3-70 and SSP5-85) represent limited climate policy intervention in the future. Table S3 in the supplement summarizes the models utilized in the CMIP6 analysis. We

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calculated precipitation trends over Central Asia separately for summer and winter during historical (1979–2014) and future (2015–2100) periods. Both for PDRMIP and for CMIP6 outputs, the data were interpolated to a 2.5°×2.5° horizontal resolution using bilinear interpolation.

3 Results

3.1 Observational seasonal precipitation trends

We examine the temporal and spatial characteristics of seasonal precipitation in Central Asia derived from GPCP. Figure 1a shows annual and seasonal trends of the regionally averaged observed precipitation over Central Asia from 1979 to 2014. The annual precipitation change exhibits a statistically significant increasing trend of 0.23 mm day^{-1} per 100 years. Among the four seasons, summer and winter precipitation show more significant increases, with linear trends of 0.41 mm day^{-1} per 100 years for summer and 0.35 mm day^{-1} per 100 years for winter, respectively. Spring precipitation shows a small negative trend, and autumn exhibits a slight increase. The probability density functions (Fig. 1b) and spatial distribution of precipitation trends (Figs. 1c-e) indicate that the precipitation significantly increases across most regions of Central Asia during summer and winter, with insignificant precipitation changes in spring and autumn (Supplement Fig. S1). The summer and winter increases dominate the annual precipitation changes in Central Asia, consistent with other observed precipitation datasets (Chen et al., 2011; Li et al., 2016; Hu et al., 2017; Peng and Zhou, 2017; Ma et al., 2020). Additionally, we also examine the precipitation trends calculated as the relative change per decade (unit: % decade^{-1}) in Supplement Fig. S2. The higher value of the positive trends over the arid region of northwestern China indicates a significant regional wetting during recent decades, larger than 12% decade^{-1} for annual precipitation (Supplement Fig. S2). We further investigate the driving factors behind these seasonal precipitation trends using sensitivity experiments in PDRMIP and CMIP6.

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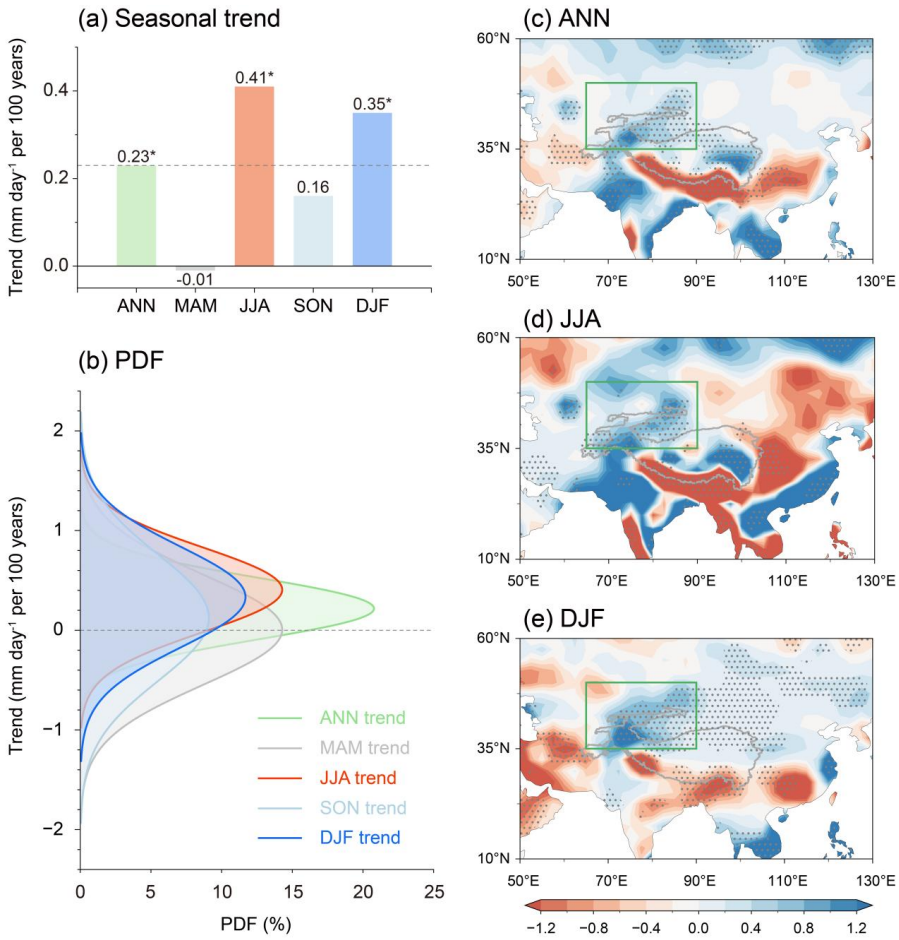

Figure 1. Seasonal precipitation trends over Central Asia derived from GPCP (1979–2014). (**a**) The trend (mm day^{-1} per 100 years) of regionally averaged precipitation for annual (January–December, ANN), spring (March–May, MAM), summer (June–August, JJA), autumn (September–November, SON), and winter (December–February, DJF). (**b**) The probability density functions (PDFs) of seasonal precipitation trends. Spatial distributions of precipitation trends for (**c**) ANN, (**d**) JJA, and (**e**) DJF. The black stars in (**a**) and the gray stippling in (**c–e**) indicate trends that are statistically significant at the 90% confidence level based on a standard t-test. The region of Central Asia (35°N–50°N, 65°E–90°E) is delineated by thick green boxes and the thick gray curves denote Tibetan Plateau terrain height > 2500 m in (**c–e**).

3.2 Responses of seasonal precipitation to external forcings

To investigate the influence of different external forcings on seasonal precipitation, we utilize the sensitivity experiments of global-scale and regional aerosol forcings from PDRMIP. Figure 2 shows the responses of regional average precipitation to external forcings during winter and summer in Central

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Asia. Under global-scale forcings, winter precipitation in Central Asia is significantly increased by 24% for CO_2x2, 8% for CH_4x3, and 25% for Solar+2%, likely dependent on the magnitude of ERF induced by these three forcings. All the nine models exhibit a positive trend of winter precipitation, despite differences in precipitation magnitude. Meanwhile, the multi-model mean shows a small and insignificant decrease in summer precipitation. In contrast, summer precipitation over Central Asia exhibits a significant 15% increase induced by Sulx10Asia forcing, whereas a 13% decrease is induced by BCx10Asia forcing. The changes in aerosols lead to a negligible change in winter precipitation. We further examine the spatial distribution of seasonal precipitation changes induced by individual external forcings. As shown in Fig. 3, the CO_2x2 (Fig. 3a), CH_4x3 (Fig. 3b), and Solar+2% (Fig. 3c) forcings all yield increased winter precipitation across Central Asia. During summer, Sulx10Asia forcing increases precipitation in Central Asia (Fig. 3d), whereas BCx10Asia forcing reduces precipitation across most regions (Fig. 3e). Furthermore, we examine the influences of individual forcings on spring and autumn precipitation (Supplement Fig. S3). It shows that the global forcings increase spring precipitation in Central Asia, while BC aerosols significantly suppress spring precipitation. BC aerosols over the Tibetan Plateau increase surface temperature and enhance the plateau heat source, thereby inducing compensatory downdrafts and decreasing precipitation over arid Central Asia (Supplement Fig. S4; Qian et al., 2015; Shi et al., 2019; Xie et al., 2020a). The offsetting effects of BC aerosols may explain the spring precipitation decrease over Central Asia. The autumn precipitation response to external forcings is consistent with that in summer, indicating that sulfate aerosols increase precipitation and BC aerosols decrease precipitation. These results suggest that there are pronounced seasonal differences in the drivers of precipitation changes in Central Asia. The winter precipitation change is dominated by global-scale forcings whereas the summer precipitation change is primarily affected by regional aerosol forcings.

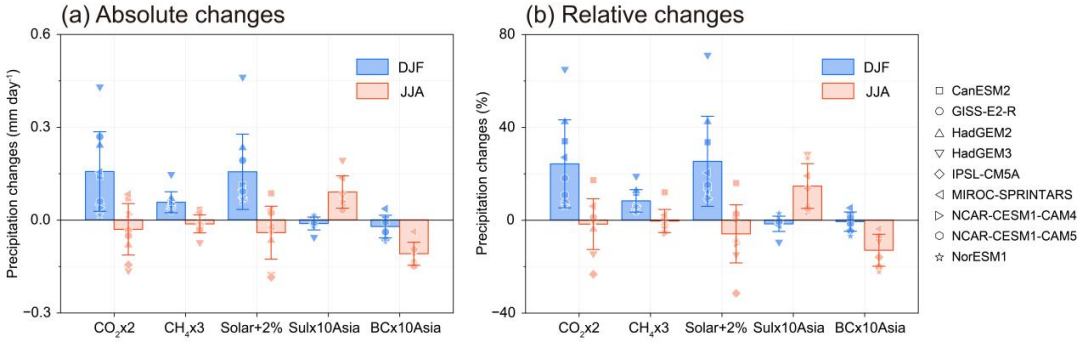

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Figure 2. Seasonal precipitation responses to CO_2x2, CH_4x3, Solar+2%, Sulx10Asia, and BCx10Asia forcings during DJF and JJA over Central Asia in PDRMIP. (**a**) Absolute changes in precipitation (mm day^{-1}) over Central Asia. (**b**) Relative changes in precipitation (%) over Central Asia. Error bars represent the multi-model ensemble standard deviation of PDRMIP.

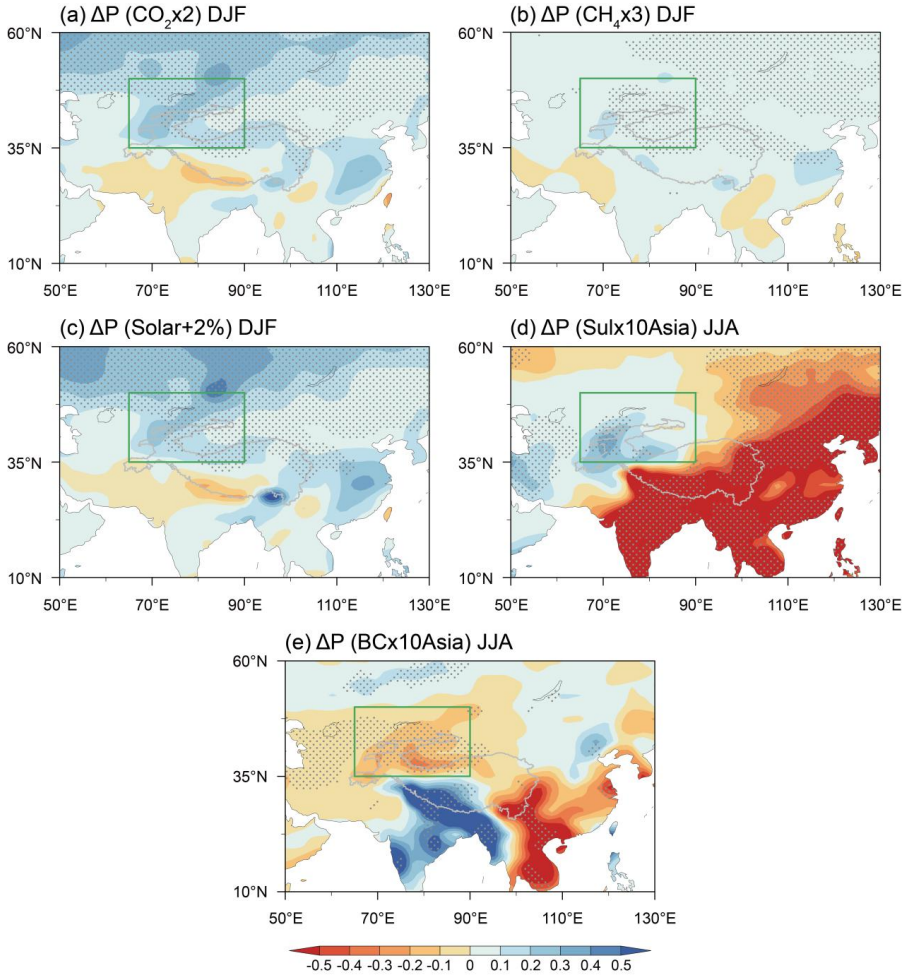

Figure 3. Spatial distributions of precipitation responses to CO_2x2, CH_4x3, Solar+2%, Sulx10Asia, and BCx10Asia forcings in PDRMIP. Spatial distribution of changes in DJF precipitation (mm day^{-1}) under (**a**) CO_2x2, (**b**) CH_4x3, and (**c**) Solar+2% forcings, and changes in JJA precipitation (mm day^{-1}) under (**d**) Sulx10Asia and (**e**) BCx10Asia forcings. The region of Central Asia is delineated by thick green boxes. The thick gray curves denote Tibetan Plateau terrain height > 2500 m. The areas with gray stippling indicate regions where the PDRMIP multi-model mean changes exceed 1 standard deviation from zero.

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The resultant physical mechanisms of seasonal precipitation changes involve ERF induced by external forcings and changes in atmospheric temperature, specific humidity, and large-scale circulation. In winter, CO_2x2, CH_4x3, and Solar+2% forcings induce relatively uniform ERF patterns with positive values (Supplement Figs. S5a, S5c, and S5e). The positive ERF leads to tropospheric warming (Supplement Figs. S5b, S5d, and S5f), featuring significant temperature increases in high latitudes of the Northern Hemisphere (Shindell et al., 1999; Gillett et al., 2008). Through intensifying supplies of atmospheric water vapor, the warming caused by the global-scale forcings results in statistically significant increases in vertically integrated water vapor (Figs. 4a, 4c, and 4e), enhancing winter precipitation in Central Asia (Figs. 3a-3c). The low-level tropospheric circulation responses are relatively weak, with insignificant changes of 700 hPa wind fields (Figs. 4b, 4d, and 4f). In summer, GHGs also induce a positive ERF and global warming (Supplement Fig. S6), which increases the supply of atmospheric water vapor. Note that large-scale circulations, such as the Asian summer monsoon, play a crucial role in influencing regional precipitation. Several studies suggest that large-scale circulation may weaken under global warming, which may suppress regional precipitation (Kjellsson, 2015; Xie et al., 2020b; Zhou et al., 2024). The offset between thermodynamic and dynamic effects may result in the relatively weak response in Central Asian summer precipitation under GHG forcing. Our results indicate that GHGs and solar irradiance forcings enhance winter precipitation over Central Asia primarily through thermodynamic processes under global warming.

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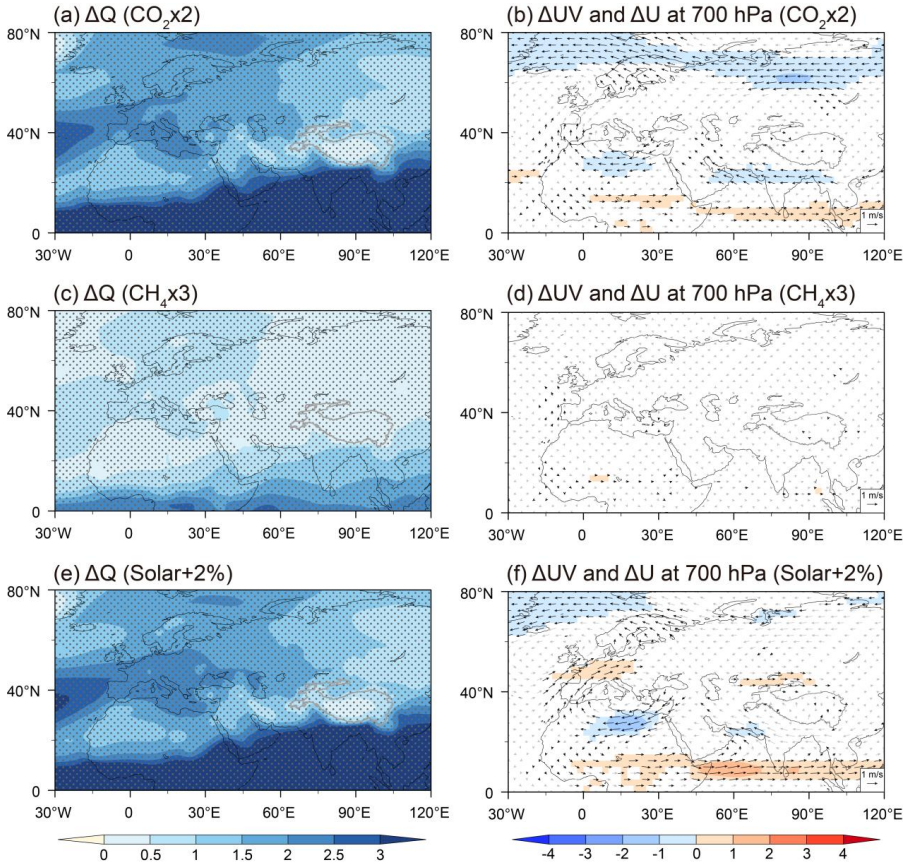

Figure 4. Multi-model mean anomalies during DJF induced by CO_2x2, CH_4x3, and Solar+2% forcings in PDRMIP. (**a**) Anomalies of vertically integrated (surface-300 hPa) water vapor (ΔQ, kg m^{-2}) and (**b**) the wind field and zonal wind at 700 hPa under CO_2x2 forcing. (**c, d**) Same as (**a, b**) but for CH_4x3 forcing. (**e, f**) Same as (**a, b**) for Solar+2% forcing. In (**a, c, e**), gray stippled regions indicate where the multi-model mean exceeds 1 standard deviation from zero. In (**b, d, f**), black arrows and colored contours denote wind field and zonal wind anomalies, respectively, where the multi-model mean exceeds 1 standard deviation from zero. The thick gray curves denote Tibetan Plateau terrain height > 2500 m.

However, in summer, changes in Central Asian precipitation are primarily associated with the adjustment of large-scale circulation due to regional aerosol forcings. Under Sulx10Asia forcing, increased sulfate aerosols over Asia produce a regionally negative ERF and pronounced cooling across mid-latitude regions in Supplement Figs. S7a and S7b. The mid-latitude cooling alters the meridional temperature gradient, induces a southward shift of the westerly jet, and subsequently strengthens westerly winds in low-latitude regions, which influences moisture transport (Xie et al., 2022; Guo et al., 2024). As shown in the spatial distribution of vertically integrated water vapor (Fig. 5a), the enhanced

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westerlies transport more atmospheric moisture over the Atlantic Ocean to northern Africa, Central Asia, and the arid northwest of China (Figs. 5b and 5c). Atmospheric circulation changes also facilitate the transport of water vapor from the Indian Ocean into Central Asia (Zhao et al., 2014; Peng and Zhou, 2017; Wei et al., 2017; Yang et al., 2020; Xie et al., 2022). Thus, Sulx10Asia forcing enhances moisture transport to Central Asia through large-scale circulation modulation, increasing regional summer precipitation, especially convective precipitation (Xie et al., 2022). Contrary to sulfate aerosol forcing, increased Asian BC aerosols absorb shortwave radiation, producing a positive ERF over Asia (Supplement Fig. S7c) and significant warming across Northern Hemisphere mid-latitudes (Supplement Fig. S7d). These changes induce a northward shift of the westerly jet and a weakening of the westerlies in the low-latitude regions (Figs. 5e and 5f), suppressing moisture transport from the Atlantic to Central Asia and reducing summer precipitation (Figs. 5d and 3e). This suggests that Asian BC forcing might partially offset the precipitation increases caused by increased Asian sulfate aerosols in recent decades. Our results suggest that the summer precipitation changes in Central Asia are mainly determined by the dynamical responses to Asian anthropogenic aerosols.

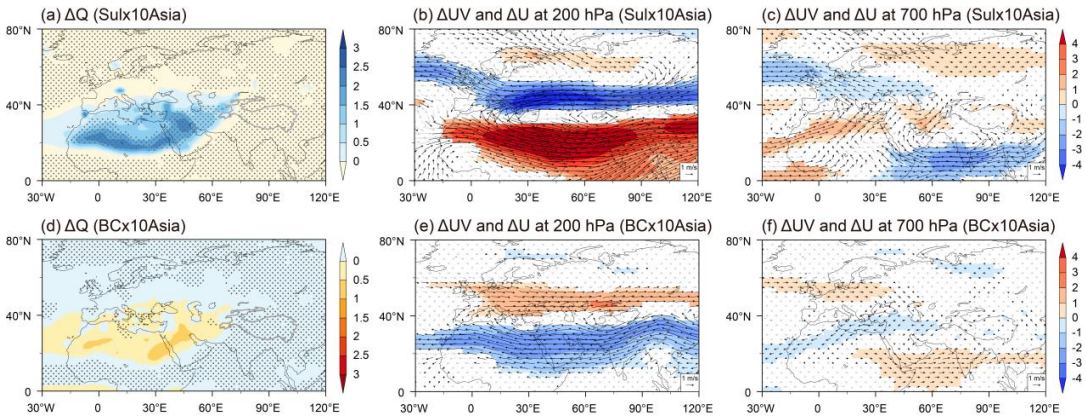

Figure 5. Multi-model mean anomalies during JJA induced by Sulx10Asia and BCx10Asia forcings in PDRMIP. (**a**) Anomalies of vertically integrated (surface–300 hPa) water vapor (ΔQ, kg m^{-2}), (**b**) wind field (ΔUV vector, m s^{-1}) and zonal wind (ΔU shading, m s^{-1}) at 200 hPa, and (**c**) wind field and zonal wind at 700 hPa under Sulx10Asia forcing. (**d–f**) Same as (**a–c**) but for BCx10Asia forcing. The gray stippled regions in (**a, d**), the black arrows in (**b, c, e, f**), and the colored contours in (**b, c, e, f**) indicate regions where the PDRMIP multi-model mean anomalies exceed 1 standard deviation from zero. The thick gray curves denote Tibetan Plateau terrain height > 2500 m.

3.3 Historical attributions and future projections of seasonal precipitation

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The DAMIP simulations in CMIP6 are employed to further examine potential seasonal differences in the drivers of historical precipitation increases over Central Asia. Figure 6 shows the simulated winter precipitation trends during 1979-2014 over Central Asia under individual forcings. All-forcing historical simulations exhibit an increasing winter precipitation trend of 0.28 mm day^{-1} per 100 years (Fig. 6a). This increasing trend in winter precipitation is close to the observed result (0.35 mm day^{-1} per 100 years). The individual forcing simulations indicate that GHG-induced changes dominate the increase in Central Asian winter precipitation, with 0.24 mm day^{-1} per 100 years, while anthropogenic aerosol and natural forcings induce small negative trends. The spatial distribution of precipitation trends also indicates that the GHGs mainly determine the winter precipitation increase in Supplement Figs. S8a-S8d. Figure 6b shows that all-forcing historical simulations exhibit an increasing trend of Central Asian summer precipitation with a linear trend of 0.26 mm day^{-1} per 100 years. CMIP6 multi-model ensembles underestimate summer precipitation increases by 37% relative to observations (0.41 mm day^{-1} per 100 years). Anthropogenic aerosols increase the summer precipitation the most, by 0.19 mm day^{-1} per 100 years, followed by GHGs (0.14 mm day^{-1} per 100 years) and natural forcing (0.04 mm day^{-1} per 100 years). As shown in the spatial distribution of precipitation trends (Supplement Figs. S8e-S8h), anthropogenic aerosols are the primary driver of summer precipitation increases in Central Asia. Multi-model results from DAMIP support the recent increases in winter and summer precipitation over Central Asia and indicate significant seasonal differences in precipitation drivers, in line with the results from PDRMIP.

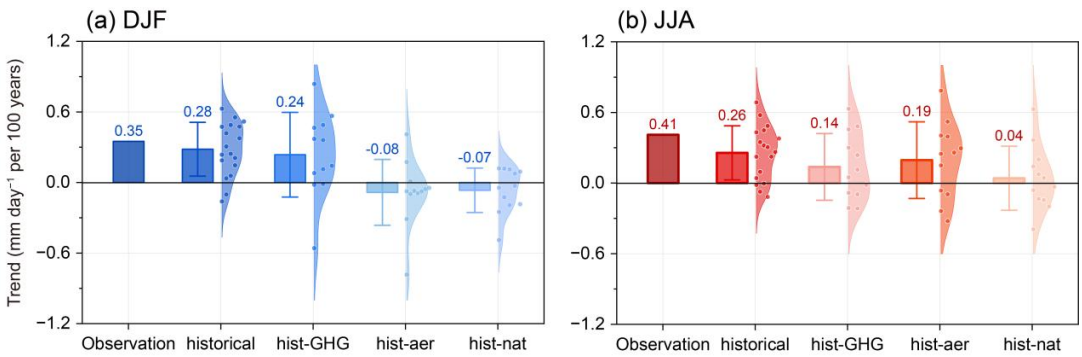

Figure 6. Central Asian seasonal precipitation trend in observations and DAMIP (1979−2014). **(a)** Central Asian DJF precipitation trend (mm day^{-1} per 100 years). **(b)** Central Asian JJA precipitation trend. Error bars represent ±1 standard deviation among the DAMIP models. The curves denote the kernel density estimate of the trends using 50 bins.

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To project future seasonal precipitation, we utilize the ScenarioMIP in CMIP6 to investigate the changes of precipitation in Central Asia under SSP2-45, SSP3-70, and SSP5-85 scenarios during 2015–2100. These scenarios represent different future changes in GHGs and anthropogenic aerosols (O'Neill et al., 2017; Rao et al., 2017; Samset et al., 2019; Turnock et al., 2020; Wilcox et al., 2020). Under the "middle of the road" pathway of SSP2-45, despite moderate climate mitigation measures, GHG concentrations increase continuously, inducing a significant winter precipitation increase across Central Asia (Fig. 7a). Under high GHG emission scenarios (SSP3-70 and SSP5-85), Central Asia exhibits a larger increase in winter precipitation compared to SSP2-45 (Figs. 7b and 7c). As shown in Figs. 9a-9d, the magnitude of these increasing trends is strongly dependent on the GHG emission levels, with the value of 0.16 mm day^{-1} per 100 years for SSP245, 0.35 mm day^{-1} per 100 years for SSP370, and 0.44 mm day^{-1} per 100 years for SSP585 scenarios. The relative changes in winter precipitation per decade also show a wetting trend across Central Asia, with the most drastic increases found in the arid region of northwestern China (Figs. 7d-7f). Furthermore, it shows a significant reduction of summer precipitation in most regions of Central Asia under future emission scenarios (Fig. 8), especially in SSP3-70 and SSP5-85. The regional precipitation reduction is likely driven by the future reduction of anthropogenic aerosol emissions over Asia owing to the projected implementation of Asian clean air policies (O'Neill et al., 2017; Rao et al., 2017; Wilcox et al., 2020). Regionally averaged summer precipitation over Central Asia (Figs. 9e-9h) shows smaller future changes compared to those for winter season. Our results indicate, under the SSP2-45, SSP3-70, and SSP5-85 scenarios, that Central Asian winter precipitation increases significantly in the future while summer precipitation decreases in most regions, due to distinct external drivers.

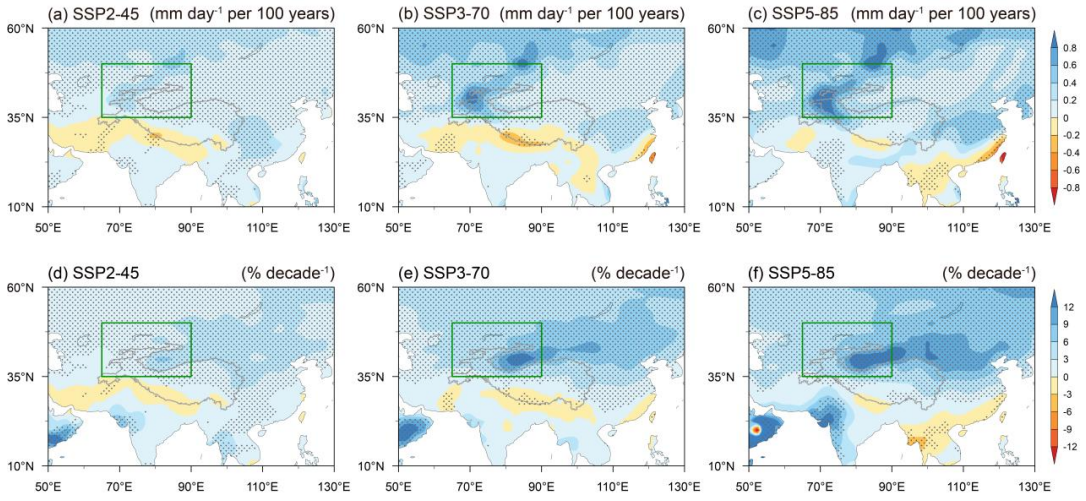

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Figure 7. Spatial distribution of DJF precipitation trends over Central Asia derived from ScenarioMIP simulations. DJF precipitation trends (mm day^{-1} per 100 year) under (**a**) SSP2-45, (**b**) SSP3-70, and (**c**) SSP5-85 scenarios for 2015–2100. (**d–f**) Same as (**a–c**), but showing the trend (% decade^{-1}) as the percentage change relative to the 2015–2034 DJF climatological mean. Thick green boxes delineate the region of Central Asia. The thick gray curves denote Tibetan Plateau terrain height > 2500 m. The gray stippled regions indicate where at least 70% of models agree on the sign of the trend.

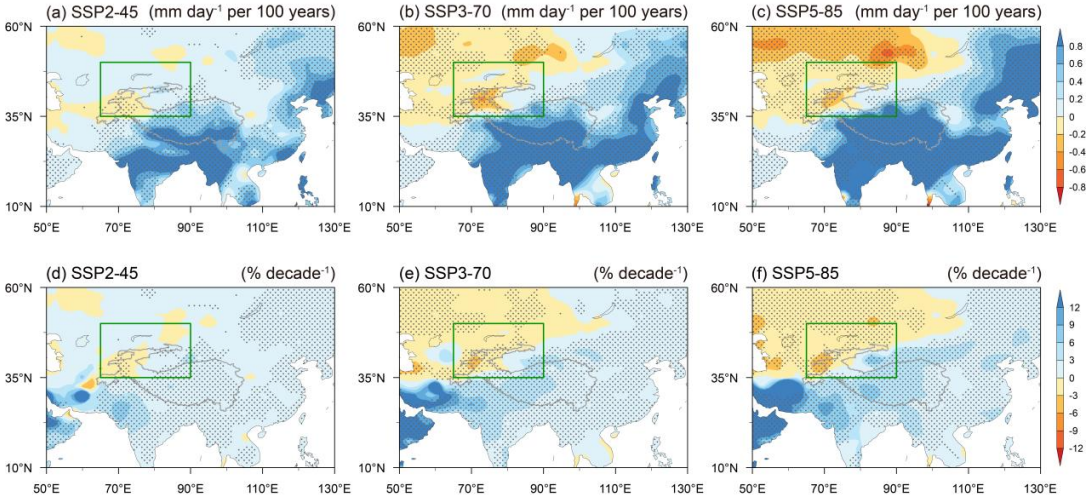

Figure 8. Spatial distribution of JJA precipitation trends over Central Asia derived from ScenarioMIP simulations. JJA precipitation trends (mm day^{-1} per 100 year) under (**a**) SSP2-45, (**b**) SSP3-70, and (**c**) SSP5-85 scenarios for 2015–2100. (**d–f**) Same as (**a–c**), but showing the trend (% decade^{-1}) as the percentage change relative to the 2015–2034 JJA climatological mean. Thick green boxes delineate the region of Central Asia. The thick gray curves denote Tibetan Plateau terrain height > 2500 m. The gray stippled regions indicate where at least 70% of models agree on the sign of the trend.

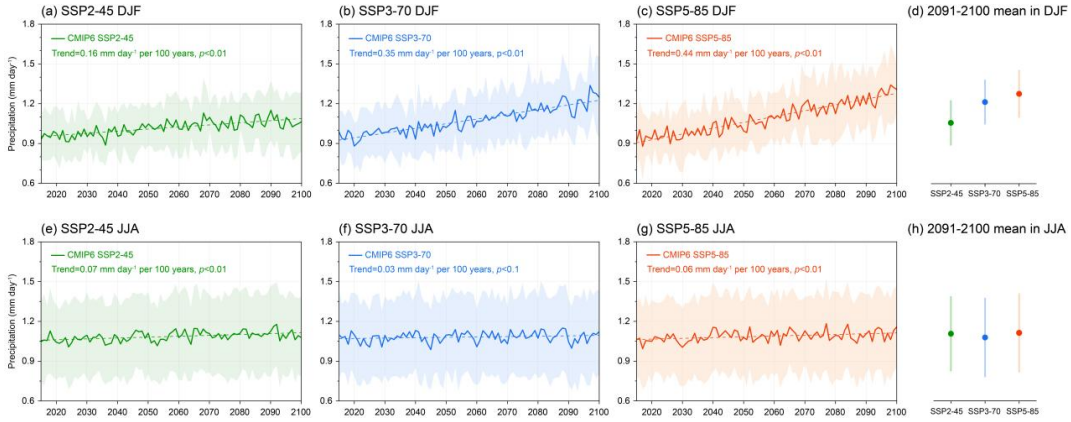

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Figure 9. Seasonal precipitation over Central Asia derived from ScenarioMIP simulations. Time series of simulated Central Asian DJF precipitation (mm day^{-1}) in (**a**) SSP2-45, (**b**) SSP3-70, and (**c**) SSP5-85 (2015–2100). (**d**) Climatological mean of DJF precipitation over Central Asia for 2091–2100 under SSP2-45, SSP3-70, and SSP5-85 scenarios. (**e−h**) Same as (**a−d**) but for JJA precipitation. The dashed lines represent the precipitation linear trend (mm day^{-1} per 100 years) and the shadings indicate ±1 standard deviation among the models.

4 Conclusions and discussion

Central Asia is a typical arid and semi-arid region characterized by scarce precipitation, where the regional precipitation changes profoundly impact local ecological stability, agricultural production, and socio-economic development under global climate change. Observational evidence indicates that Central Asia has experienced significant wetting in recent decades, with the most substantial increases occurring during winter and summer. In this study, we investigate the impacts of different external forcings on seasonal precipitation over Central Asia and explore their underlying physical mechanisms, utilizing sensitivity experiments of single forcing from multi-model simulations in PDRMIP. The CO_2x2, CH_4x3, and Solar+2% forcings mainly increase winter regional precipitation through warming-induced atmospheric moisture enhancement. In summer, the Sulx10Asia forcing enhances the precipitation through shifting the westerly jet southward and intensifying westerlies at lower latitudes, which strengthens atmospheric moisture transport into the region. BCx10Asia tends to yield an opposite effect relative to Sulx10Asia, in that it partially counteracts the sulfate-induced summer precipitation increase. The CMIP6 historical attribution analysis reinforces the PDRMIP results, showing that GHGs primarily increase winter precipitation and anthropogenic aerosol emissions increase summer precipitation. CMIP6 future projections further indicate that Central Asian winter precipitation will continue to increase under SSP2-45, SSP3-70, and SSP5-85 scenarios, mainly driven by increasing GHG concentrations. The magnitude of these increasing trends strongly depends on the GHG emission levels, with 0.16 mm day^{-1} per 100 years for SSP2-45, 0.35 mm day^{-1} per 100 years for SSP3-70, and 0.44 mm day^{-1} per 100 years for SSP5-85. The future analysis further shows a summer precipitation reduction in most regions of Central Asia, likely induced by the emission reduction of sulfate aerosols due to Asian clean air policies. Our results suggest that the driving factors of the observed increased precipitation in Central Asia exhibit seasonal differences, and future precipitation has divergent trends in winter and summer.

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The CMIP6 historical simulations show that the models do capture positive seasonal precipitation trends over Central Asia, although these trends are underestimated (particularly for summer precipitation). A positive historical summer precipitation trend of 0.26 mm day^{-1} per 100 years is found, about 37% underestimation relative to the observation of 0.41 mm day^{-1} per 100 years. Note that the CMIP5 models were found to severely underestimate the Asian aerosol optical depth, especially over eastern China and South Asia (Allen et al., 2013; Sanap et al., 2014; Cherian and Quaas, 2020). Despite significant improvements of CMIP6 models in simulating aerosols compared to CMIP5 (Eyring et al., 2016), the model biases of Asian aerosol persistently exist (Li et al., 2021; Fan et al., 2022; Jaisankar et al., 2024), contributing to the underestimation of the summer precipitation trend. In addition, several previous studies have shown that internal variability, such as interdecadal variations in Atlantic and Pacific sea surface temperatures, also influences precipitation trends in Central Asia (Huang et al., 2013; Gerlitz et al., 2016; Jiang et al., 2021). However, multi-model means are known to underestimate internal variability and its impacts on regional climate change (O'Reilly et al., 2021; Yao et al., 2024; Guinaldo et al., 2025).

In the PDRMIP sensitivity experiments (Sulx10Asia and BCx10Asia), anthropogenic aerosols, including sulfate and BC, are prescribed to increase in eastern China and South Asia in an idealized and uniform way, which neglects the recent dynamic changes of Asian aerosol emissions. Since 2010, anthropogenic aerosol emissions have exhibited a dipole pattern with a marked reduction over eastern China and a concurrent increase over South Asia (Samset et al., 2019). Further examination is required to investigate the impact of this dipole pattern of Asian aerosol emissions on Central Asian precipitation and the underlying physical mechanisms. Additionally, future seasonal precipitation changes in Central Asia are projected based on different CMIP6 emission scenarios. It is noted that the CMIP6 SSP emission scenarios underestimate the actual reduction of anthropogenic aerosols during recent decades in China (Wang et al., 2021; Ali et al., 2022), and the bias between scenario assumptions and actual reductions may hold on until mid-21st century projections (Wang et al., 2021). Future anthropogenic aerosol emission scenarios incorporating actual pollution control policies in China and India may improve the reliability of future precipitation projections in Central Asia and elsewhere in the broader region.

Code availability

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In this study, data processing was conducted using the Climate Data Operators (CDO, version 1.9.3) and the NCAR Command Language (NCL, version 6.6.2). Data visualization was performed with NCL and the open-source programming language Python (version 3.10.18). No custom code was developed. All plotting and analysis scripts are available upon request from the corresponding author.

Data availability

All data supporting the findings of this research are openly accessible. The GPCP version 2.3 monthly mean precipitation dataset is publicly available at https://psl.noaa.gov/data/gridded/data.gpcp.html. The PDRMIP numerical simulation dataset can be accessed at https://doi.org/10.26050/WDCC/PDRMIP_2012-2021. CMIP6 simulation datasets used in this study were obtained from the Earth System Grid Federation (https://aims2.llnl.gov/search/cmip6/)

Author contributions

JNG and XNX produced the analysis of model results and wrote the original manuscript. GM, DS, AK, TI, AV, TT, KS, XZL, ZGS, YL, XDL, and HY assisted data analyses and contributed to the commenting of the results and revising of the manuscript.

Competing interests

At least one of the (co-)authors is a member of the editorial board of Atmospheric Chemistry and Physics.

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