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Climate Change in the Foreign Policy of the Trump Administration

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This paper summarises the recent changes of foreign policy direction in the US, following the election of President Donald Trump. It focuses on the Trump administration's foreign policy relative to climate change. Following a brief background on the Paris Agreement, it provides an analysis of the reasons underlying the Trump administration's decision to withdraw from this agreement, with context on the historical background of the initial US ratification.

The key objective of this paper is to show analytically that the manner in which the Trump administration's foreign policy addresses climate change is not in line with previous US and global environmental concerns. As it will explain, the underlying issue/problem is not global climate change, but rather the nature of Trump foreign policy on the climate regime. This article will highlight the various drivers in the US that lie beneath these policy choices (see Figure 1). It is of paramount importance to address such questions, based on qualitative analysis, applying the analysis-of-factor method to draw out the diverse range of reasons underlying those policy choices.

The author has chosen to examine this topic for both practical and theoretical reasons. Concerns about climate change are mounting, and many now regard it as the major challenge confronting the US and the international community.

Background: Climate Change

Climate change is one of the greatest global challenges of the 21st century. Increasing evidence of present and anticipated impacts of climate change highlights the need for action (Akasaka, 2005). The evidence of climate change is compelling: Between 1880 (the industrial revolution) and 2015, average global surface temperature

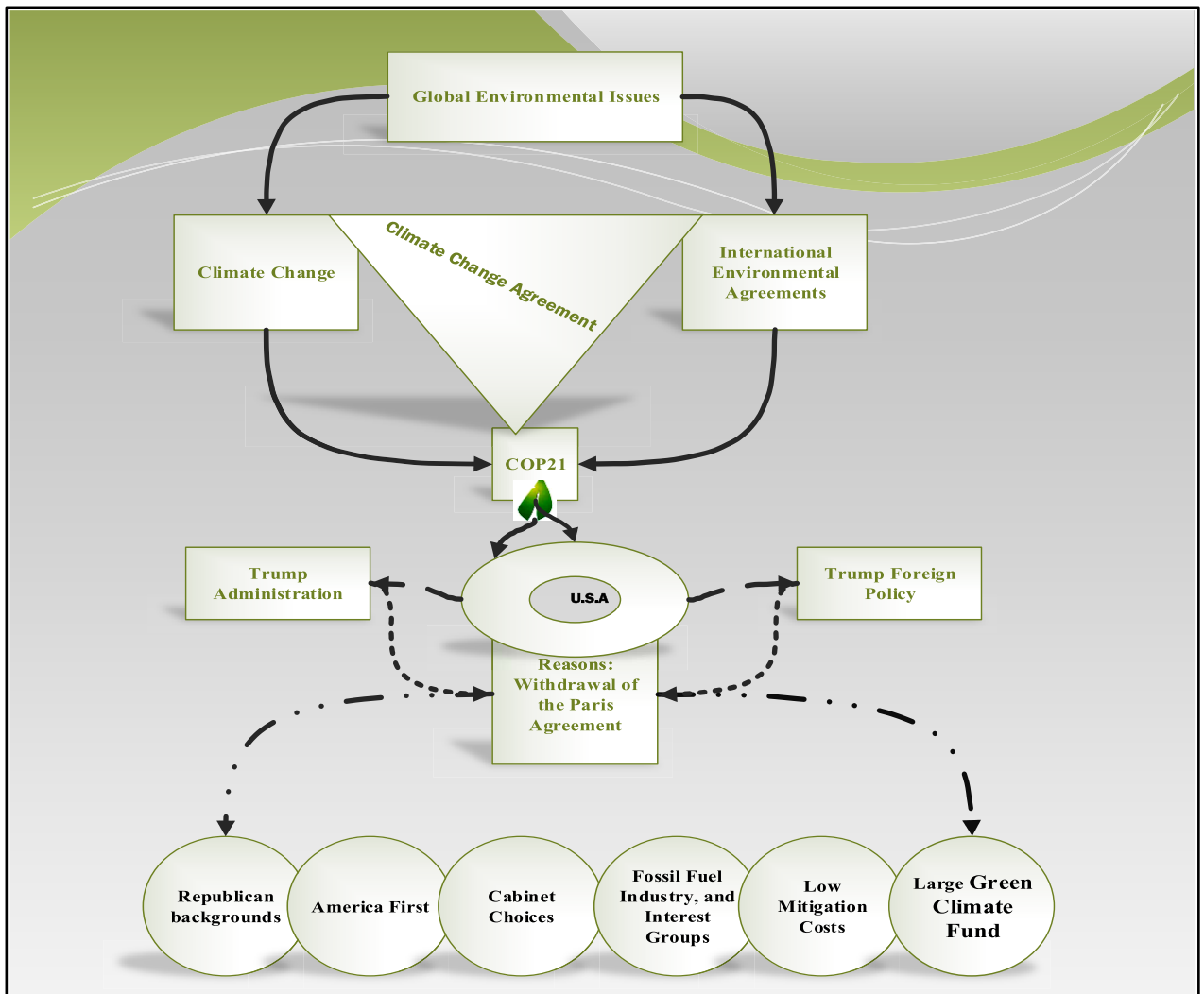
rose by 0.9°C (1.5°F), as shown in Figure 2. In 2016, the earth experienced its third consecutive hottest year since records began (Greenfieldboyce, 2017). According to the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, the current rate of greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions is likely to cause average temperatures to rise by 0.2°C per decade, reaching by 2050 the threshold of 2°C above pre-industrial levels. Some evidence suggests an even more rapid change, which will greatly, and in some cases irreversibly, affect not just people, but also species and ecosystems (Adedeji *et al.*, 2014).

The US is already experiencing the effects of climate change, and these effects will be much worse without action to sharply curtail emissions. Average US temperatures have already risen by 2°F over the past 50 years, and are projected to rise another 7–11°F by the end of this century under a high-emissions scenario, and 4–6.5°F under a low-emissions scenario (Ackerman and Stanton, 2008). Thus, most Americans understand that climate change is real and are concerned about it. Climate change, as well as related extreme events across shared US borders, can have direct and indirect impacts on those living in the US. For example, increased temperatures coupled with decreased precipitation in northern Mexico can lead to an increase in the intensity of dust storms and wildfires, which can cross the border into the US. Similarly, smoke from wildfires across the Canadian borders can lead to air quality and health concerns in the US (US Global Change Research Program, 2018).

Actions in response to these effects of climate change fall into two broad categories. The first involves *mitigation* measures to reduce future climate change by reducing emissions of heat-trapping gases and particles, or increasing the removal of carbon dioxide from the atmosphere. The second involves *adaptation* measures to improve society's ability to cope with or avoid harmful

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Figure 1. Trump administration policy in regard to the Paris Agreement



Source: Author constructed figure.

impacts and take advantage of beneficial ones, now and in the future. At this point, both categories of response activities are necessary to limit the magnitude and impacts of global climate change on the US (UNFCCC, 2014).

During its Obama administration (2008–2016), more than at any other time in US history, that country was engaged both at home (at the federal, state and local

levels) and abroad, in enhancing its efforts to reduce climate change effects. While in office, President Obama moved quickly to establish new federal policies and measures designed to reassert American leadership in solving the global climate challenge (UNFCCC, 2010). His administration supported a diverse range of national and international policies, with the goals of both mitigating the harmful effects of climate change and becoming engaged in the international arena with other countries through the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) and through complementary efforts in support of a successful global climate agreement. In the UNFCCC Climate Summit in Copenhagen (2009), the US announced that it would increase its climate assistance contributions to ensure a fast start for international post-Copenhagen efforts, which were then fast approaching US\$ 30 billion for 2010–2012. During that time, in the context of meaningful mitigation actions and transparency on implementation, developed countries committed to a goal of mobilising

Figure 2. Global land-ocean temperature index, 1880–2015

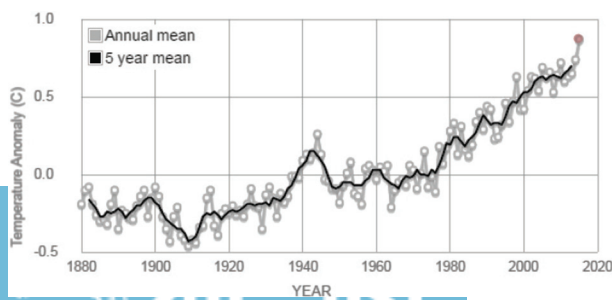
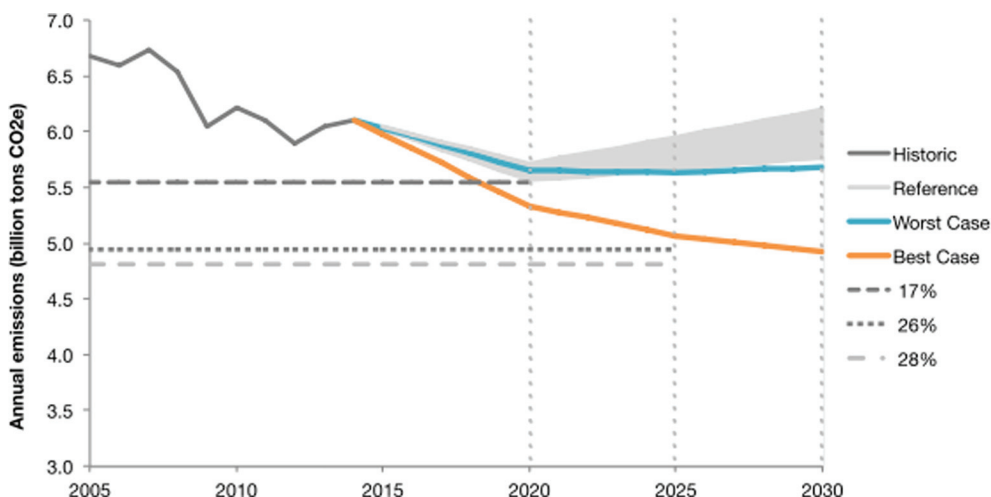


Figure 3. Projected emissions under Obama policies relative to targets



Source: Adapted from Climate Advisers. 2017. "The United States and the Road to 2025: The Trump Effect". Online at <https://www.climateadvisers.com/>.

US\$ 100 billion globally by 2020 for countries in need, from various public and private-sector sources (UNFCCC, 2014). The suite of domestic and foreign policies put forward during the Obama administration placed the US on the path to meet both its 2020 and 2025 emissions targets (Figure 3). In the best-case scenario, this includes the achievement of the Obama administration's goals of (i) reducing methane emissions from oil and gas by 40–45 percent between 2012 and 2030, and (ii) seeing an emissions decrease by 2025 of up to 24 percent below 2005 levels. In the worst-case scenario, the US would achieve just 16 percent emissions reductions in total.

Since Trump's election, Republican control of the White House and Congress enabled the appointment of different policy makers, able to reverse Obama administration regulations and foreign policy. In a sense, the election in November 2016 of Donald Trump as a nationalist and unpredictable US President has up-ended many aspects of international relations and policy, and of American national and foreign policies, regulations and practices (Trump, 2017b). Climate change is an ideological issue for Trump's administration and political base, and so climate policy is under assault. US federal climate policies and institutions are being dismantled, climate science is questioned and its funding threatened, and the President has announced that the US will reject previous policies, in particular climate policies, by withdrawing from the Paris Agreement, a signature achievement of his predecessor Barack Obama (see UN Treaty Service, 2017).

Background: the Paris Agreement

The Paris Agreement was adopted at the 21st Conference of Parties to the UNFCCC in December 2015. It entered into force within a year of its adoption, in November 2016. Its adoption signalled the willingness of member countries to cooperate and their agreement on the need for global cooperation toward a low-carbon

transformation. Climate change thus entered a new era (Zheng *et al.*, 2016). A study by researchers at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology in the US actually concluded that the pact would slow warming by 0.6–1.1°C, specifically stating that it would produce "two-tenths of 1°C reduction in global temperature by the year 2100" (Tollefson, 2017).

Trump Foreign Policy Preferences

Prior to his election, Trump never publicly spelled out his foreign policy agenda. His ramblings on the topic ranged from isolationism and trade protectionism to the possibility of all-out war with China, the Islamic and Arab world, North Korea and the cancellation of Iranian nuclear deals (Pijovic, 2016). It continues to be difficult to identify Trump's policy priorities, because he makes conflicting statements and claims to rely on a campaign platform that was, in large part, radical and unrealistic (Thompson, 2016). On 27 April 2016, he gave a speech in Washington where he outlined many of his goals for foreign policy. Early on in the speech (Trump, 2016), he makes it very clear that

[t]he direction I will outline today will also return us to a timeless principle. My foreign policy will always put the interests of the American people, and American security, above all else. That will be the foundation of every single decision that I will make.

Analysts, including some Trump aides, have repeatedly observed that President Trump takes a transactional view of foreign affairs. In order to achieve results that "put America first", he has generally tried to "win" newly negotiated deals with other States, including long-time allies and trading partners. Trump has often suggested the need to renegotiate bilateral arrangements – including military commitments – with a long list of countries, including Germany, Japan, South Korea and Saudi Arabia, as well as major trading partners, including Mexico and China (Nedal and Nexon, 2017). In addition,

his National Security Strategy, unveiled in December, asserts that “[t]he United States will respond to the growing political, economic, and military competitions and threats we face around the world” (White House, 2017). It’s no coincidence that the same National Security Strategy that downplays the importance of cooperation with countries around the world also omits the words “climate change” as an important environmental global issue. President Trump has announced that he will “unleash” the US coal, oil and gas industries, deregulate existing environmental laws, and lift environmental and climate restrictions (Caro, 2017).

Thus, Donald Trump’s “America First” approach appears to express an existing undercurrent of foreign policy thinking rather than a startling new development. Trump appears to believe his own campaign rhetoric, and he has had few around himself willing to challenge his underlying beliefs. This is partly by choice; prizing loyalty, he was most unwilling to bring into his team experienced foreign policy hands who had worked for other Republican candidates or who had signed letters during the primary campaigns vowing not to work for him. This has meant that he has had limited access to foreign policy talent (Morrison, 2018).

Once in office, he set aside some of his doubts and committed himself to participate in the essential multilateral meetings and conferences. However, the Trump administration’s representatives in such meetings have generally pitched the administration’s “America First” approach and stood out as strident voices, unwilling to agree with the international cooperation rhetoric that was standard in the past. On environmental matters and climate change, Trump is obviously more comfortable in unilateral actions such as his withdrawal from the Paris Agreement – an approach that put him out of step with every other country in the world (Jenks and Kharas, 2016).

Trump Foreign Policy towards Climate Change and the Paris Agreement

Climate change is also not a priority of current US domestic environmental policy. The Trump administration emphasises the position that the US economy and domestic jobs must not be unduly impacted (for instance, through higher electricity prices and higher taxes). In a 2017 Executive Order, President Trump indicated that he considers the environmental regulations adopted by the former administration as being excessive and also being the main cause of the job losses in the coal-mining and oil and gas industries (Executive Order 13783 of 28 March 2017; Trump, 2017a; Davenport and Rubin, 2017). For example, immediately after Trump took office, a new energy plan, the America First Energy Plan, was published on the White House website. According to this plan, policies that it characterised as “harmful and unnecessary”, such as the Obama administration’s “Climate Action Plan”, would have to be eliminated, the practice of “fracking” embraced for the extraction of oil and gas from shale, and the coal industry revived

(Hermann *et al.*, 2017). As of 2017, President Trump had published more than 100 tweets sceptical about climate change, repeatedly emphasising how he plans to bring back coal-mining jobs (Matthews, 2017). In addition, during the early stages of the US election, Trump had claimed several times that climate change was a hoax. As a publicity stunt, he promised to withdraw the US from the Paris Agreement, presenting potential threats to the implementation of that and other international agreements (Yong-Xiang Zhang *et al.*, 2017).

Based on his statements and policies, therefore, the withdrawal of the US from the Paris Agreement was expected. Shortly after his election, US President-elect Trump claimed that global warming was a hoax concocted by China to create a challenging situation for US policies and weaken the country’s competitive industrial power. In other words, he claimed that large developing countries, like China and India, had come to the (unfair) agreement against US interests. On 1 June 2017, he announced his decision to pull the US out of the Paris Agreement, claiming that it restricted the US while empowering other countries. He stated that the US would then begin negotiations to re-enter the agreement and make it “fair” to the US (Rubenzer, 2017).

The withdrawal of the US from the Paris Agreement received criticism from a range of countries, international organisations, city mayors and industry leaders. Shortly after Trump’s announcement, German Chancellor Angela Merkel, French President Emmanuel Macron and Italian Prime Minister Paolo Gentiloni released a joint statement rejecting Trump’s assertion that the climate deal could be redrafted:

We deem the momentum generated in Paris in December 2015 irreversible, and we firmly believe that the Paris agreement cannot be renegotiated since it is a vital instrument for our planet, societies, and economies...

(Watts and Connolly, 2017). Of the many countries that issued statements on the withdrawal, nearly all resolved to continue the implementation of the Paris Agreement. This reaction reflects a high degree of awareness of climate science findings. In response to Trump’s statement that the US might rejoin the Paris Agreement if it was “fair” to the US, many noted that the international climate regime is founded on climate justice (Zhang *et al.*, 2017).

Why Did Trump Decide to Withdraw from the Paris Agreement?

As a part of the author’s efforts to understand the reasons for this policy, the following discussion uses an analysis of the comprehensive scientific and climatic framework embodied by the Paris Agreement as a basis on which to present different criteria of Trump foreign policy on these matters. The remainder of this article uses the “analysis of factor” technique to find underlying factors in this decision, in hopes of aiding interpretation.

The US is the second country (behind China) on the list of the world’s largest emitters of GHGs and it is the largest *per capita* emitter among industrialised countries.

The US and China officially entered the Paris Climate Agreement on 3 September 2016, during the Obama administration (Nair, 2017). Given that the Paris Agreement was meant to bind the world community in the global fight against rising temperatures, President Trump's announcement that the US would withdraw from the Paris Agreement was seen as a major blow (Kumar Sharma, 2017). Hence, this article attempts to draw out the factors influencing Trump's decision. It considers various points relevant to the motivation underlying this withdrawal.

The first such factor is political party affiliation. Trump is in the Republican Party. Republicans are conservative in terms of social issues and are close to libertarians in terms of economic issues. They uphold a threefold argument in being less prone to support environmental and climatic measures – an argument that could be extended to conservative parties beyond the American context:

- i. *A more pro-business orientation.* Since the election of US President Ronald Reagan in 1980, the Republican Party has maintained a coalition that includes both populists and pro-business interests by simultaneously serving the economic interests of business and advancing the agenda of the social conservative wing of the party. Its immediate opposition to each new manifestation of social change – e.g., more sexually explicit movies, the issue of gay marriage, court limitations on prayer in schools – has served to tighten the link between populists and the Republican Party (Miller and Schofield, 2008).
- ii. *A greater opposition to the extension of governmental activities and regulations.* Most conservatives are prepared to use the government to further important social goals but only in the absence of viable private solutions. They expect government programmes to be less efficient, less effective, difficult to terminate, and more likely to have unforeseen (and possibly harmful) consequences. By contrast, although many liberals are concerned about the size and efficacy of government programmes and activities, they are either less worried about them than conservatives are, or else they feel more strongly about the need to do something.
- iii. *A less innovative and more cautious posture concerning attempts to ameliorate societal problems* (Båtstrand, 2015). It is generally believed that most Americans, conservatives as well as liberals, want to help their fellow citizens, want an end to unnecessary suffering and racial discrimination, want to see greater equality of opportunity, and recognise government's vital role in advancing these and other social goals. But compared with liberals – and here is the point – conservatives are more sensitive to the limits of government's ability to ameliorate social problems (Besharov, 2008).

Second, Trump's undue emphasis on his "America First" slogan departs significantly from Obama's foreign

policy philosophy. Economically, the Obama administration held that the Paris Agreement enhances US climate security, promotes its low carbon/renewable energy economy, and is indispensable for securing employment and maintaining the country's competitive edge. On the contrary, President Trump believes that the Paris Agreement undermines the US's competitive edge and impairs both employment and traditional energy industries (White House).

Third, President Trump has referred to climate change as "a hoax" and, as President, his actions have been consistent with that view. The transition teams he selected for federal environmental agencies and his eventual cabinet choices including Scott Pruitt, Administrator Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), were filled with those who deny the scientific consensus that humans are causing climate change (see, e.g., DiChristopher, 2017). Since taking office, both Administrator Pruitt and Secretary of Energy Rick Perry have affirmed their scepticism. Hence, the Trump administration is not only loosening Obama-era efforts to curb carbon emissions, but has also taken steps to relax controls on the release of methane – a potent greenhouse gas – into the atmosphere.¹ It is, therefore, not surprising that there have been substantial climate policy shifts during the Trump administration (Rinberg *et al.*, 2018).

Fourth, interest groups are a defining feature of American politics. The fossil-fuel industries hold powerful political clout over the Trump administration. Although not big donors to Donald Trump's presidential campaign, once he had been elected they contributed to his inauguration festivities, according to new disclosures filed at the Federal Election Commission (58th Presidential Inauguration Committee, 2017; Lavelle, 2017).² Hence, fossil fuels are a priority for the current US administration. In the first weeks of his presidency, Donald Trump announced that he would reverse his predecessor's policies in areas such as clean electricity production, the Keystone XL pipeline, reducing fuel consumption, and oil and gas drilling (Hultman, 2017). Recently, for instance, the White House took another oil-and-gas-related step to loosen environmental regulations, when it announced the repeal of the Obama administration's ban on offshore oil and gas drilling in US coastal waters, and its plans to open 90 percent of currently available offshore waters to drilling in the next five years. Keller quotes Secretary of the Interior Ryan Zinke as saying, "We're embarking on a new path for energy dominance in America, particularly on offshore.... This is a clear difference between energy weakness and energy dominance. We are going to become the strongest energy superpower" (Keller, 2018).

Fifth, withdrawal from the Paris Agreement gains more emission space and lower mitigation costs for the US, while squeezing other countries' emission space and raising their mitigation costs. This will, in turn, make it more difficult and expensive to achieve the 2°C targets of the Paris Agreement (Dai *et al.*, 2017). A 2002 analysis (quoted in Dai *et al.*) of the trend of carbon emissions in

China, the US, the EU and Japan up to 2030, finds that, if no additional efforts are adopted, the energy consumption space and carbon emissions of all regions will increase continuously. That study indicates that the US's CO₂ emissions would increase to 7.28 gigatonnes by 2030 with an annual growth rate between 2002 and 2030 of 1.1 percent per year. It also predicted significant emissions increases over that period in China, the EU and Japan. The compressing effects of the US withdrawal are noticeable on the emission spaces of this latter group of major emitters. According to calculations based on the nationally determined contributions submitted by Paris Agreement Parties, the withdrawal of the US will lead to significant increases in its emission space (14, 28 and 54 percent) at these countries' expense (*ibid.*).

Sixth, the US has been among the top donors to the Global Environment Facility, contributing around 21 percent of its total shares (UNFCCC Standing Committee on Finance, 2014). According to its earlier UNFCCC submissions, the US contributed US\$ 9.6 billion between 2011 and 2012, to address this issue (see UNFCCC, 2014). This is the largest total listed by any country. Thus, President Trump has also complained that the US contribution to the Green Climate Fund, envisioned under the Paris Agreement, is too large. In 2014, the Obama administration had pledged US\$ 3 billion (US\$ 9 *per capita*), purportedly corresponding to the US's proportionate share of accumulated GHG emissions since 1850 (29 percent), of which the US has already paid US\$ 1 billion. If the US refuses any further contribution beyond the US\$ 1 billion already paid, the contribution will amount to about US\$ 3 *per capita*, which is only slightly more than the *per capita* contribution of South Korea (Robinson, 2017). The Trump Administration decided to terminate the donation to the Green Climate Fund.

Conclusion

This study has explored the status of climate change in the Trump administration's foreign policy because he campaigned on an anti-establishment and anti-globalist ticket. Trump's climate policy has become one of the biggest uncertainties for global climate governance. The results demonstrate that the Trump administration's position is not completely clear and that this uncertainty could result in unrealistic decisions, particularly in foreign affairs. Problems it may cause at the international level could result in significant changes in the implementation of international instruments such as the Paris Agreement, affecting all global climate matters.

The Paris Agreement is a milestone in the history of climate governance. It is important that this endeavour is not derailed. It has proposed a long-term goal in which it encourages all to join. Its mechanisms of implementation and compliance emphasise transparency, non-confrontation and non-punishment. The number of ratifications to date suggest that the Paris Agreement is growing towards the goal of having the most ratifications ever received by an environmental treaty. Nearly all of the largest emitters of GHGs, notably Brazil, China, the

EU and India, have already agreed to be Party to it. Beijing and New Delhi, for instance, have reaffirmed their commitment to meeting their targets. All Parties should work together to implement the Paris Agreement.

Meanwhile, the importance and role of the US as a hegemonic power is decreasing. Despite massive acceptance of the Paris Agreement, the US president has not considered it important to his foreign policy and has stated that climate change itself and international cooperation are not issues of priority to his administration. Clearly, President Trump does not intend to comply with the Paris Agreement, not fearing that his defection or non-compliance could damage his country's reputation. In other words, his approach to the Paris Agreement was never only about reducing America's commitments regarding its own emissions. It was also about using its leadership to prod major developing countries like China, India and Brazil. As developing countries, under United Nations rules, agreed to by the US in the 1990s, those three countries also are not legally obligated to cut carbon because of their status as developing nations.

From a historical point of view, these matters echo earlier traditions of US isolationism and rejection of multilateral institutions that could influence or constrain US actions, especially on economically important issues. This was already evident in the US Senate's unanimous rejection of the 1997 Kyoto Protocol before it was even finalised – on the basis that it might harm the American economy and that developing countries would be exempt from any new commitments. In line with his slogan/goal of “making America great again”, international cooperation is not a favoured solution. As a challenge of the global commons, climate change thus sits uneasily with the Trump administration's worldview and it has the lowest status in his foreign policy.

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Notes

1 Methane is emitted from landfills and coal-fired power plants, burned as part of oil-drilling operations and routinely leaked into the atmosphere from faulty oil and gas wells. Under the Trump administration, both the EPA and the Interior Department have proposed weakening Obama-era requirements that companies repair and monitor methane leaks in wells. New rules under consideration would also loosen restrictions on "flaring" – the burning of methane from drilling operations (Davenport and Friedman, 2018).

2 More than 1,500 corporations and individuals reportedly gave a total of US\$ 107 million to the Presidential Inaugural Committee. Among the big donors were Chevron, which gave US\$ 525,000; Exxon, BP and Citgo Petroleum, which each donated US\$ 500,000; and the Ohio-based coal company Murray Energy, which contributed US\$ 300,000.



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