

ISAS Insights

No. 376 – 9 January 2017

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Climate Change: An Early Trump Inflicted Wound

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Donald Trump is set on reversing President Obama's approach to climate change. The current president used all the executive authority at his disposal to constrain the development of the hydrocarbon sector in the United States. His successor, by nominating for his cabinet people such as Rex Tillerson, Exxon Mobil's Chairman, and former Texas Governor Rick Perry as Energy Secretary, has set the course towards increasing reliance on domestically produced oil and gas. If that was the outcome of his presidency, it would seriously compromise international attempts to contain global warming. The Asian continent would be one of the most seriously affected world regions. Rising seas will seriously damage the economies of the area's numerous islands, concentrated mostly in the continent's southeast. This was one reason why these countries pressed the Paris summiteers to agree on a lower target – 1.5 degrees Celsius rather than 2 degrees – as the

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limit not to be crossed by the world community. Some of Asia's largest cities that are on the coast will also face serious consequences. In South Asia and China, rapid melting of glaciers in the vast mountain ranges will produce first massive floods followed by sharp reductions in the flow of water through their large rivers. Climate change will also have social consequences as millions of displaced people will seek safer grounds to live. Once again Asia will be seriously affected.

The impression that some of what Donald Trump said as a candidate may not get translated into public policy was dispelled quickly two days after he formally became the “President-elect.” His transition team included Myron Ebell, who it was believed might be called upon to lead the Environment Protection Agency (EPA). He was the head of the business-backed group, Competitive Enterprise, and had asserted that whatever warming is caused by greenhouse gas pollution is modest and could be beneficial. A *Vanity Fair* profile of Ebell called him an “oil industry mouthpiece.”² But the ultimate choice for the job was Oklahoma’s Scott Pruitt, who, as his state’s attorney general, had sued the EPA. The new EPA chief comes from a state that has seen rapid development of horizontal fracturing or fracking for bringing out oil and gas trapped in shale rocks. Oklahoma ranks fifth in the nation in onshore crude oil output in 2014. The state’s natural gas output accounts for 10 percent of the nation’s total. The state has also become subject to periodic man-induced earthquakes caused by deep drilling and fracking for oil and gas.

President Obama’s Approach to Climate Change

The EPA was given the lead by the Obama administration to implement the commitments the United States had made at the Paris talks held in December 2015. The Paris commitment became possible as a result of a historic understanding President Obama had reached with President Xi Jinping, his Chinese counterpart. Earlier in the summer of that year, the two leaders agreed to speed up their efforts to slow down the rise in global

² Michael Shnayerson, “Letter from Washington: A convenient untruth,” *Vanity Fair*, April 17, 2007.

temperatures to exceed no more than 3.6 degrees Fahrenheit, the point at which many scientists say the planet will be locked into an irreversible future of extreme and dangerous warming. The trend is already moving in that direction. The World Meteorological Organization said that it was 95 percent certain that 2016 would be the warmest year since records began to be kept in the 19th century. 2014 and 2015 were also the hottest years, each breaking the record set in the previous year. With that as the background, it was gratifying how quickly the global community moved to ratify the Paris accord. It had to be endorsed by 50 countries accounting for 55 percent of total carbon emissions. That goal was met in October when India and the European Union ratified the agreements in November 2016.

President Obama used the authority that the Congress has given the EPA to reduce the amount of carbon emissions into the atmosphere. “The Clean Power Plan is the ambitious centerpiece of Mr. Obama’s climate change legacy and the key to his commitment under the Paris accord,” wrote Coral Davenport in an assessment for *The New York Times* of what the Trump presidency may result in. “At its heart is a set of Environmental Protection Agency regulations intended to curb planet-warming pollution from coal-fired plants. If enacted, the rules could transform the American electricity sector, close hundreds of coal-fired plants and usher in the construction of vast new wind and solar farms. The plan is projected to cut the United States power plant emissions by 32 percent by 2030 from 2005 levels.”³ This was the central element in the agreement that Obama reached with Xi in the summer of 2015.

Reducing dependence on coal for power production was not the only initiative promised by President Obama and his administration. America’s 250 million cars together with other modes of transport now emit more carbon dioxide than any other carbon-burning segment of the country’s economy. President Obama intended to reduce auto-pollution and drive up gas mileage, one of the single most important steps that any nation had taken to fight global warming. Fuel economy and emissions rules have been set to become progressively more stringent starting with the cars manufactured in 2017. Those rules were deigned to deliver

³ Coral Davenport, “Climate policy faces reversal by new leader,” *The New York Times*, November 11, 2016, pp. A1 and P5.

a new-car fleet average consumption of 54.5 miles per gallon compared with only 36 miles per gallon in 2016. Automobile manufactures, sensing an opportunity in Trump's skepticism about climate change, have begun to campaign for the loosening of Obama's standards. "These possible easing of federal emissions rules throws a wrench in good news from scientists at the Global Carbon Project, an international science policy advisor group, which projected on November 14, 2016 that carbon emissions would grow by just 0.2 percent this year concerned, compared with levels in 2015, the third consecutive year emissions have stayed flat." ⁴

The China Factor

Under the understanding that the Chinese reached in Paris, the country's emissions will drop after 2030. Keeping with its commitments, China took a number of steps to meet the Paris obligations. Even though it's total output of coal is set to increase to 3.9 billion tons in 2020 up from 3.75 billion tons in 2015 and consumption will rise from 3.96 billion tons to 4.1 billion tonnes in the same period, domestic production would have been 300 million higher. The reduction will be concentrated in the north-eastern regions of Inner Mongolia and Xinjiang. These two are China's West Virginia, poor places dependent on coal production. These production adjustments had consequences for world commodity prices. For instance, international price of coal increased sharply, doubling in Asia to \$110 a ton.⁵

Reducing the country's dependence on coal was not the only policy-action taken by Beijing after the Paris Agreement. In early January 2017, the country's National Energy Agency laid out a plan to invest large amounts of resources in developing renewable sources of energy. China intends to spend \$360 billion through 2020 on renewables. The program would create more than 13 million jobs. Greenpeace "estimated that China installed an

⁴ Hiroko Tabuchi, "Climate advocates fear a rolling back on emissions," *The New York Times International Edition*, November 16, 2016, p. 11.

⁵ Tom Hancock, "China to reduce overall coal capacity," *Financial Times*, January 4, 2017, p. 13.

average of more than one wind turbine every hour of every day in 2015 and covered the equivalent of one soccer field every hour with solar panels.”⁶

The Trump Approach to Climate Change

During the campaign, Trump had ridiculed the Paris accord, promising to shred it into bits once he was in office. His pledge was taken seriously by the residents of the state of West Virginia where he polled one of the highest proportions of the votes cast. It became the most Republican state in the nation after Wyoming.

The liberals continued to press the President-elect to change his stance on climate change. “At the same time, please understand, if you appoint a climate-change denier to head the Environmental Protection Agency and walk America away from the Paris accord, which committed 190 countries to reduce their emissions of carbon dioxide pollutants that warm the planet, you will trigger a ferocious reaction from within America and across Europe. The backlash in Europe will totally undermine your ability to lead the Western alliance,” wrote Thomas L. Friedman, an articulate advocate of a strong role by the state in managing climate change. He also worried that the United States could lose out to those countries that had accepted technological advances in new low-carbon technologies. He quoted Hal Harvey, an advisor to major companies on energy and climate policies, saying that “the cost of solar energy has dropped more than 50 percent since 2008, wind costs dropped more than 70 percent since 2008, and LED lighting costs dropped more than 90 percent since 2008. As a result, a clean future now costs less than a dirty one.” Friedman urged Trump to take the lead than be a follower in this energy revolution.⁷

⁶ Michael Forsythe, “China plans a big increase in spending on renewable energy,” *The New York Times*, January 8, 2017, p. 5.

⁷ Thomas L. Friedman, “Mr. Trump, help heal the planet,” *The New York Times International Edition*, November 17, 2016, p. 15.

Is the World Moving Towards a Catastrophe?

How will the world react if the United States indeed pulled out of the Paris accord? China will go ahead, promised Xi in a meeting with Secretary of State John Kerry. “Tackling climate change is not something anybody asked us to do,” Xi told Kerry. But the Indian response might be different. Interest in controlling climate change was an important part of the special relationship that had developed between Obama and India’s Prime Minister Narendra Modi. “I think most certainly it will affect the momentum in negotiations because it throws up a lot of questions,” said Arunabha Ghosh, chief executive of the Council on Energy, Environment and Water, a New Delhi policy group. The Paris accord had promised \$100 billion a year to be provided to developing nations to move towards cleaner energy. The Trump administration is not likely to abide by that pledge. “The chances of public funds coming from climate finance are much more dismal now,” continued Ghosh, “Right now I don’t feel very optimistic.”

Since intended global action on climate change is kept under international review, a meeting to assess the situation was held in Marrakesh, Morocco as President-elect Trump began the process of assembling his team. Several large US companies began an effort to force Trump to reverse the position he had taken while he was campaigning. Matt Patsky, chief executive of Trillium Asset Management, the US investment firm, said business support for policies to address global warming “cannot be ignored by the Trump administration. That train has left the station, and to stand in its way is folly.”⁸

While global action to control warming may slow down the process, the developing world is being hit by another crisis: air pollution. Lahore was blanketed by a lung-choking smog in early November. The situation in New Delhi was even worse. Air pollution is the fourth top cause of death globally after poor diet, high blood pressure, and smoking, with more than one in ten deaths linked to it in 2015, according to the Global Burden of Disease, a vast data trove compiled by more than 2,000 researchers led by the Institute of Health Metrics and Evaluation at the University of Washington. The group estimates that roughly

⁸ Pilita Clark, “UN summit clouded by threat to dismantle Paris accord,” *Financial Times*, November 17, 2016, p. 2.

6.5 million died in 2014 from both indoor and outdoor pollution. Two million died in India alone. Deaths from outdoor pollution have risen to 4.2 million in 2015 from 3.5 million in 1990.⁹ In other words, developing countries have to work doubly hard to protect their citizens from environmental degradation.

Conclusion

The Donald Trump presidency is set to shake the world in several different ways. He is likely to opt out of using well-established international institutions to settle disagreements and conflicts among nations. He is not likely to conduct international trade in the context of agreed rules of exchanges of goods and commodities. He may restrict migration of people into the United States, depriving the country of the much-needed workforce. But the most significant consequence of the policies he and his administration are likely to pursue concerns climate change. If what he has said repeatedly about global warming gets to be translated into public policy, the result will be nothing short of a catastrophe for planet earth.

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⁹ Sabrina Tavernise, “Lessons for India from London smog,” *The New York Times International Edition*, November 16, 2016, p. 13.