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A Foreign Policy for the Climate

How American Leadership Can Avert Catastrophe

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In September 2019, after a two-year drought and some of the hottest days on record, wildfires broke out across eastern Australia. The fires raged for seven months and consumed 75,000 square miles. They displaced tens of thousands of people and destroyed almost 3,000 homes. In Melbourne, the air quality was 30 percent worse than in famously toxic New Delhi. Researchers estimate that more than one billion animals died in the conflagration. And the total economic damage is expected to exceed the previous \$4.4 billion record set by the Black Saturday fires in 2009.

The Australian fires were a particularly harsh reminder of the effects of climate change, but they were hardly the only one to make the headlines recently. Between 2010 and 2019, natural disasters cost the world approximately \$2.98 trillion, making the last decade the costliest one on record. And in the first half of 2019, extreme weather displaced

seven million people, setting a new midyear high. The situation will only get worse: in the next few decades, climate change threatens to cause shortages of food and water, render coastlines that are home to hundreds of millions of people unsuitable for habitation, and unleash a stream of refugees that will dwarf the flow during the recent European migration crisis.

Tackling the climate emergency will require decisive action. In 2018, the UN's Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change made it clear that to avoid significant risks to planetary health and human well-being, the United States and other significant emitters must cut their carbon emissions to "net zero" by 2050, a daunting task, well beyond what most thought necessary at the time of the 2015 Paris agreement on climate change. Even if countries increase the amount of carbon dioxide they can capture and sequester, they will still have to radically decarbonize their energy, transportation, and manufacturing systems in the next 30 years, while also transforming agriculture and arresting deforestation.

The United States, in particular, will require both a full mobilization at home and an unhesitating commitment to leadership abroad. A president ready to take on climate change must organize the government to meet this challenge and work with Congress to enact a broad program of investments and incentives for the development and dissemination of clean technology. Abroad, the United States must devise a climate-centered foreign policy that uses the country's political capital and economic resources to drive the decarbonization of the global economy. Several changes are needed—starting at the White House and extend-

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ing to key bilateral relationships, international forums, and financial institutions—to accelerate a global clean energy transformation and galvanize the political will necessary to confront climate change. The tools to spur clean technological innovation, promote sustainable investment and job creation, and confront environmental injustices are within political leaders' grasp. Heads of state and government need only be willing to employ them.

CHANGE BEGINS AT HOME

To reach net-zero emissions by 2050, the United States' executive branch will have to undergo structural changes. The next president should create a national climate council, overseen by an assistant to the president for climate policy. Modeled after the National Security Council and the National Economic Council, the National Climate Council would boast a specialized support staff capable of directing and delivering quantifiable results across the federal government. It would spearhead executive action and legislation and coordinate between actors at the state and local levels. And in conjunction with top members of the National Security Council, the proposed council would develop and execute a diplomatic and security strategy to propel rapid clean energy deployment, build resilience against climate-change-induced disasters, and pressure reluctant actors to achieve the net-zero goal. What's more, the president should direct the Pentagon and the intelligence community to expand their treatment of the climate threat out to 2050 and beyond. To date, both institutions have included useful comments on climate change in their

major threat assessments, but more could be done to articulate the profound risks from climate change to U.S. interests abroad—risks that include state failure, migration, and conflict.

The United States should also resume its historic leadership in climate science and climate data collection. In the past, it has made information from American satellites, sonars, and other remote-sensing technologies available to decision-makers around the world as they planned for the impacts of climate change. But the priority given to climate science has withered under the Trump administration.

To achieve the country's sustainability goals, the United States should triple its investment in climate science and data collection. And the country should once more give science pride of place in decision-making, appoint scientists to key advisory positions, and establish rigorous scientific standards across agencies. New funds would also help the country quickly rebuild the U.S. science workforce after losses during the Trump years, bringing in new talent that can tackle the challenges of the coming century.

That said, officials need to be aware that a return by the United States to a position of leadership on climate change would be greeted by some skepticism on the part of the international community. The other major players know that they need the United States, but they have been burned twice: first when President George W. Bush refused to sign the Kyoto Protocol, in which only developed countries promised to reduce their greenhouse gas emissions, and then when President Donald Trump announced the United States' withdrawal from the Paris agreement. This under-



In the heat of the moment: fighting brush fires in Cathcart, Australia, January 2020

scores the pressing need, as the country moves forward, for Republicans to start joining Democrats in recognizing the reality and urgency of climate change so that Washington can move past the start-and-stop pattern of U.S. climate engagement. A climate-centered foreign policy would go a long way toward rebuilding trust. It would go even further if the United States, in word and deed, chose to abandon gradualism and embrace the net-zero goal; after all, if the country lacks the political will to combat climate change at home, it will be unable to earn the bonafides it needs to lead internationally.

THE PRODIGAL SON RETURNS

To convey its renewed commitment, the United States should promptly announce its intention to rejoin the Paris agreement. The agreement is a crucial component of the global effort to

contain climate change. The deal brings countries together each year, urges them to ramp up their action and build resilience, takes stock of their progress toward the 2015 goals, scrutinizes the provision of financial assistance, and provides a platform for joint engagement. The agreement is also the symbolic embodiment of the world's commitment to combat climate change.

Beyond rejoining, the United States will need to prepare new emission targets that are both consistent with the net-zero imperative and credible. In addition, the United States and its allies should push all countries, especially the major emitters, to submit their own strategies for getting to net-zero emissions by 2050, as called for in the Paris agreement.

The Paris agreement is not the only institution that the current administration has been neglecting. In 2009, the United States launched the Major

Economies Forum on Energy and Climate (MEF), a group of 17 economies representing some 80 percent of global emissions that gathered at the ministerial level to facilitate the climate negotiations. The next administration should revive the MEF and recommend that its members' leaders meet every two years to review where the world's largest economies stand on climate change and what new forms of joint action they should undertake. (Government ministers should meet twice a year to prepare for the meetings.) The focus of this new MEF would be the challenge of global decarbonization, and its first order of business would be to secure agreement on the net-zero goal. The body could also promote the development and dissemination of sustainable technology, become a venue for sharing policy ideas and best practices, and support the efforts of multinational businesses to set clean energy standards. Argentina, Saudi Arabia, and Turkey should be invited to join in order to provide additional representation for important regions and so that the MEF and the G-20, which would then share the same membership, could coordinate the timing of their meetings.

The United States should also work with key European allies to reinvigorate the High Ambition Coalition—which was the fiercest champion of bold mitigation measures at the Paris negotiations—so that the organization can advocate both within the Paris regime and outside it for measures to achieve net-zero emissions by 2050. The members of the High Ambition Coalition include the United Kingdom and the EU, a group of progressive Latin American and Caribbean countries, and many

vulnerable states from Africa and Asia, most of whom are not big emitters. But they are strong proponents of the net-zero goal and have the moral standing to put salutary pressure on all the important players.

GREENBACKS FOR A GREEN EARTH

Developing economies badly need investment in low-carbon energy systems and in infrastructure that can withstand climate change. The United States, together with key allies in Europe and Asia, should bring together a coalition of international financial institutions, such as the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund, and regional development banks—such as the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank, which the United States should join—to encourage lending practices in line with the net-zero goal and quickly direct substantial investment toward sustainable infrastructure and development. In addition, the United States should build a coalition to press the major coal-financing countries—China, Japan, and South Korea—to put a moratorium on coal investments around the world, all the while ensuring that funds will be available for clean alternatives.

Washington must also step up its own climate assistance to poor countries. In 2014, Obama pledged \$3 billion over a four-year period to the new Green Climate Fund and secured \$500 million from Congress for each of the next two years. But the Trump administration cut this funding off. The next president should prioritize getting the remaining \$2 billion out the door and should follow the lead of such countries as France, Germany, Norway, and the United Kingdom, which doubled their 2014 pledges in 2019.

Of course, the existing money is not yet being used properly. Huge amounts of funding are perversely protecting fossil fuels at the very moment when the world needs to start breaking the dirty habit. Direct subsidies amount to well over \$500 billion per year globally, and total subsidies stood at over \$5.2 trillion in 2017. Washington should pressure other governments to eliminate these subsidies, an effort Obama began in the G-20 in 2009.

The next president should also enact carbon tariffs on imports from countries with inadequate climate policies. Such “border adjustment mechanisms” were part of the Waxman-Markey cap-and-trade bill, which was approved by the House of Representatives in 2009 but never voted on in the Senate. Ursula von der Leyen, the president of the European Commission, has called for carbon tariffs in the EU, as well. Washington should embrace such tariffs and support other governments doing the same.

Additionally, the United States should push for an agreement to facilitate trade in environmental goods—such as products that produce renewable energy or improve energy efficiency—an effort the World Trade Organization pursued during the Obama years but never completed. And it should make sure that all bilateral trade agreements include environmental and labor standards as enforceable components.

The next administration should also capitalize on the work of the Task Force on Climate-Related Financial Disclosures (TCFD), a body set up in 2015 by the Financial Stability Board, itself an organ of the G-20, to help public and private actors worldwide make informed emission decisions. The task force is

designed to push companies to disclose the risk that climate change poses to their businesses so that markets can price that risk. But its recommendations lack impact because disclosures are voluntary. The U.S. Securities and Exchange Commission and other financial regulators around the world should commit to adopting and enforcing the TCFD’s protocols.

FRIENDS, NEW AND OLD

A climate-centered foreign policy would also shape the United States’ bilateral relations with both partners and rivals. The United Kingdom and members of the EU have been leaders in the fight against climate change for decades, and they would remain essential U.S. allies in the pursuit of a net-zero world. Together with the United States, these countries represent more than a third of global GDP and an equal share of both China’s and India’s export markets. This kind of clout gives them the leverage to influence Chinese and Indian climate behavior. Other developed countries, such as Japan and New Zealand, have also been important U.S. partners in the past and would be again. Canada and Mexico should also be close allies, both in driving strong climate action across North America and in joining a global coalition for low- or no-carbon economic transformation. The U.S. government will need to collaborate with all these players on a number of fronts, including synchronizing policy approaches to rapidly scale up the production and use of clean and efficient energy.

But the United States will also have to work with more challenging partners. China, in particular, has such an enormous carbon footprint (it accounts for around 29 percent of global carbon

emissions) and so much influence in the developing world that there is no way to reach global climate goals without it. During the Obama years, both the U.S. and the Chinese governments recognized the potential for climate change to serve as a positive pillar of the two countries' often fractious bilateral relationship. This culminated in a joint announcement in 2014 in which both governments pledged to curb their emissions, with China agreeing for the first time to stop its total emissions from growing by 2030.

Today, the challenge is even greater, given the tensions with China over trade, regional security, and human rights. But not only must the United States continue to work with China on climate change; it must also put progress toward a net-zero world in 2050 at the very center of the relationship. There will be plenty of U.S.-Chinese competition in the future, given the two countries' diverging interests, but the setting of priorities matters. The harsh reality is that if the United States and China don't get climate change right, the fallout from that failure will dwarf most other issues, including those stemming from U.S. competition with China.

Early on, the next president should organize a meeting with Chinese President Xi Jinping to collaborate on climate change. At the meeting, both leaders should attempt to establish parameters regarding the scale and speed of decarbonization globally and in their two countries. No adequate progress is possible if the United States and China are working from fundamentally different assumptions about what needs to be done and when; but if they could come to a genuine meeting of the minds, it would move the world.

The United States will also have to deal with India, the third-largest emitter, behind only China and the United States. The country's use of renewable energy is increasing impressively; New Delhi has worked effectively—with support from the U.S. government and the private sector—to develop green buildings and electric vehicles, yet the country is still forging ahead with plans to build ten new major coal installations. The United States should propose to Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi a larger-scale, more dynamic clean energy partnership than ever before, focused on policy as well as technological research, development, and dissemination.

Brazil will also need to be the target of American climate diplomacy. Under President Jair Bolsonaro, the country has gone from being a constructive player on climate change, substantially reducing deforestation in the Amazon River basin, to a first-order threat. Bolsonaro is implementing policies that risk tipping the region into an ecological death spiral that could cause the release of hundreds of billions of tons of carbon dioxide into the atmosphere, wipe out ten percent of global biodiversity, and destroy a forest system that is essential to regulating the entire region's rainfall. The next U.S. president will need to work urgently with Latin American allies—including progressive friends such as Chile, Colombia, and Peru—to urge Bolsonaro to abandon the catastrophic course he is steering for the Amazon basin. There is no road to global well-being without Brazil.

Some countries will inevitably resist change because they have so much at stake in the global fossil fuel economy.

The United States itself, on the strength of the fracking revolution, has become the largest oil and gas producer in the world, so it, too, must plan for the decline of the fossil fuel sector with the rise of clean energy. But the United States has the advantage of a fully diversified economy, whereas many fossil fuel producers do not. There is no easy answer here, but Washington will need to work closely with its allies to help producing countries find a path forward consistent with the necessary emission reductions.

Finally, climate change will prompt a large-scale movement of people that will threaten stability and democratic politics. Indeed, the migration crises in Europe and on the U.S.-Mexican border will likely seem minor compared with the global exoduses prompted by rising temperatures. As severe climate change displaces more people, the international community will be forced to either change the legal definition of refugees to include climate migrants or create a new category altogether. (The current definition is focused on political persecution rather than environmental degradation.) The United States' ambassador to the UN should take up this cause in the Security Council, and the United States should collaborate with its partners in the worst-affected regions to explore the best ways to support internal refugees and outline the legal rights of those fleeing climate change, along with practical plans for helping them.

The United States' relative absence from climate mitigation and adaptation efforts under the Trump administration has been highly problematic. U.S. resources, influence, and expertise—not

to mention the United States' enormous carbon footprint—make the country an indispensable player in such discussions and actions. Pull the United States out of the equation, and the energy and focus dedicated to fighting climate change dwindles from Beijing to New Delhi to Brasília. In spite of the recent lull, however, the United States' policy toward climate change could be rapidly transformed, especially with a new president in the White House. We have sketched out what the changes could look like if climate were made the central organizing principle of U.S. foreign policy. The public, for its part, is increasingly eager to be led, as are large swaths of the business community. The international community will doubtless remain a bit wary of the sharp turns that U.S. politics can produce, but other countries are hungry for the United States to lead again. A new president who sees the climate threat for what it is could make a game-changing difference. It is late in the day, but not yet too late. 🌍