

Climate change a Chinese hoax? Beijing gives Donald Trump a lesson in history

China points out to global warming denier and president-elect that Republicans under Reagan and Bush actually put global warming on international agenda

Tom Phillips in Beijing

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China has rejected Donald Trump's claims that climate change is a Chinese hoax, urging the US president-elect to take a "smart decision" over his country's commitment to the fight against global warming.

Trump, who is the first self-declared climate change denier to lead one of the world's top emitters, has dismissed global warming as "very expensive ... bullshit" and claimed the concept "was created by and for the Chinese in order to make US manufacturing non-competitive".

But speaking at UN climate talks in Marrakech on Wednesday, China's vice foreign minister, Liu Zhenmin, pointed out that it was in fact the billionaire's Republican predecessors who launched climate negotiations almost three decades ago.

"If you look at the history of climate change negotiations, actually it was initiated by the IPCC [Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change] with the support of the Republicans during the Reagan and senior Bush administration during the late 1980s," Liu was quoted as saying by Bloomberg.

The IPCC was set up by the UN Environment Programme and the World Meteorological Organisation (WMO) in 1988 in a bid to better understand and respond to the risks of climate change. It received the 2007 Nobel peace prize for helping build "an ever-broader informed consensus about the connection between human activities and global warming".

Less than three months ago climate campaigners were celebrating after China and the US, the world's biggest greenhouse gas emitters, agreed to ratify the Paris climate agreement during a meeting between the Chinese and US presidents, Xi Jinping and Barack Obama.

Signatories to the deal, which came into force at the start of November, committed to limiting global warming to no more than 2C above pre-industrial levels, after which scientists believe its effects will become irreversible.

"We have a saying in America that you need to put your money where your mouth is. And when it comes to combating climate change that is what we are doing ... we are leading by example," Obama said during the announcement in China in September.

But the shock victory of Trump threatens to undo much of that work. The president-elect has pledged to pull out of the Paris climate deal and scrap Obama's Clean Power Plan to slash US carbon emissions.

“A Trump presidency might be game over for the climate,” Michael Mann, a prominent climate researcher, told the Guardian last week.

Fears over the environmental cost of a Trump presidency have been heightened by reports that Myron Ebell, a notorious climate change skeptic, has been appointed to head his Environmental Protection Agency transition team.

Such concerns have dominated the UN Climate Change Conference in Marrakech, the first such meeting since the historic 2015 talks in Paris. The Morocco talks began on the eve of the election and conclude on Friday.

With some fearing Trump’s victory could embolden other fossil fuel-rich countries to step back from their commitments under the Paris deal, China’s vice foreign minister told reporters it was “essential” the US continued to back the agreement.

“We hope that the US will continue to play a leadership role in the climate change process as people are worried about a repeat of the experience of the Kyoto protocol,” which Washington never ratified, Liu told reporters.

“We shall have to wait and see what position they will take ... [But we] expect that they will take a right and smart decision to live up to the world’s expectations,” he added, according to Xinhua, China’s official news agency.

John Kerry, the outgoing US secretary of state, has sought to reassure politicians and activists in Marrakech while conceding that Trump’s victory had left the international community “feeling uncertain about the future”.

“While I can’t stand here and speculate about what policies our president-elect will pursue, I will tell you this: in the time I have spent in public life, one of the things I have learned, some issues look a little bit different when you’re actually in office compared to when you’re on the campaign trail,” Kerry told delegates at the talks.

He added: “No one, no one should doubt the overwhelming majority of the citizens of the US who know climate change is happening and who are determined to keep our commitments in Paris.”

But with the American commitment to fighting climate change suddenly in doubt, activists have urged Beijing to continue leading the international effort.

“Not only is climate change no Chinese hoax, but Chinese seriousness may be our best hope,” Deborah Seligsohn, an expert in environmental governance from the University of California at San Diego, argued in an article on the China Dialogue environmental website.

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