

China Poised for Leadership on Climate Change After U.S. Reversal

By Christina Nunez / Mar 28, 2017

President Trump's executive order to dismantle Obama-era climate policy is unlikely to stall global momentum on the issue, as China's growing role comes into focus.

Flip this into...
2 likes
Leave a comment
Share on



Workers install solar panels on a rooftop in Wuhan, China, in a country where renewable energy is booming. Photograph by Giulia Marchi, The New York Times; Redux

China may soon fill the leadership vacuum that President Donald Trump leaves on the world stage as he is expected to sign a new executive order Tuesday that seeks to dismantle much of the work on climate change enacted by his predecessor. That work was aimed at helping the United States meet its carbon emissions targets in the [landmark Paris climate agreement](#).

Trump's order is expected to begin the process of rescinding the Environmental Protection Agency's Clean Power Plan, an Obama-era regulation of U.S. power plant emissions. It also likely takes steps to downplay the future costs of carbon emissions, walks back tracking of the federal government's carbon emissions, rescinds a 2016 moratorium on coal leases on federal lands, and strikes down Obama-era executive orders aimed at helping the U.S. prepare for climate change's worst impacts.

"The executive order has been described as saving coal jobs—is that right? In short, yes," says [Scott Segal](#), director of the [Electric Reliability Coordinating Council](#), a coalition of pro-coal energy companies. "The executive order is focused around reliable and affordable baseload power production, and policies which stress baseload production will continue to have a role for coal."

At the same time, China's leadership has taken steps to move away from coal and has renewed calls to continue global action on reducing carbon emissions.

"The Paris Agreement is a hard-won achievement," Chinese President Xi Jinping [told the World Economic Forum](#) in Davos, Switzerland, in January. "All signatories should stick to it instead of walking away from it, as this is a responsibility we must assume for future generations."

At least 195 countries agreed to the climate pact in 2015, promising to act on planet-warming carbon pollution. Under President Barack Obama, the U.S. promised to reduce greenhouse gas emissions by up to 28 percent over 2005 levels by 2025. As every day brings [fresh evidence](#) of how the planet is warming and what the effects could be—from [rising sea levels](#) to [stronger storms](#)—countries are recognizing the imperative to act. The Paris agreement is based on non-binding targets, and as such Trump is not prevented from steering the country away from meeting those targets, as his new executive order would appear to do.

While Trump's order casts uncertainty over U.S. efforts to rein in emissions, China, the [world's largest](#) emitter of greenhouse gases, has not paused in its drive to ramp up renewable energy and curb its use of coal. It just [halted](#) the construction of 103 new coal-fired power plants, and its energy agency at the start of the year [announced plans](#) to pour more than \$360 billion into renewable energy by the end of the decade.

As part of the Paris agreement, China [aims](#) to peak its carbon emissions and get a fifth of its energy from non-fossil sources by 2030. Some reports suggest it is already [ahead of schedule](#) on the former.



Masks are common sights on the streets of Beijing due to serious air pollution—a big motivator for a switch to cleaner technologies. Photograph by Kevin Frayer, Getty Images)

Remaining steadfast on the Paris goals isn't just about being a good global citizen. "A lot of these targets in China are very much mixed up with other objectives in the country—including, most importantly, pollution control," says Chris Nielsen, executive director of the Harvard-China Project on Energy, Economy and Environment. "China has a lot to gain from staying in."

The country's smog problem is hurting its economy, adding to health costs, hampering productivity, and [discouraging tourism](#), so there is strong incentive to clear the air by cutting coal use.

China's Paris targets still allow it to keep growing emissions through the next decade, Nielsen notes, so the country's progress shouldn't be overstated. Still, he points to a diverse array of measures the country is taking to cut pollution, from massive hydropower growth to stricter fuel-efficiency standards. Overall, he says, there is an effort to steer the economy away from heavy industry and toward services—less energy-intensive activities such as banking, tourism, and tech.

STAKES IN THE GROUND

U.S.-China leadership was crucial to how the Paris agreement took shape in the first place. The 2014 joint statement on climate change from Obama and Xi Jinping was a "watershed moment," says [Andrew Light](#), distinguished senior fellow at the environmental think tank World Resources Institute. "We'd never seen these two countries actively, publicly cooperate on an announcement like that."

The effective dissolution of that partnership will, inevitably, create questions about which direction other countries take from here. Trump's avowed interest in promoting fossil fuels has already prompted [Saudi Arabia's oil minister to say](#) the country may boost its oil investments in the U.S. Light points to this as a worrying example of a "softening effect" on climate targets that could result from Trump's actions. However, he says, "If China sticks in and says, we're not wavering from our commitment to the targets we put down in Paris, that will definitely help a lot."

But even as China cancels coal power plants on its own turf, it [continues to finance new ones](#) in regions such as southeast Asia. There was U.S. pressure to move away from those investments, but now that might disappear, Light says, begging the question: "If the Chinese really do step into a power vacuum ... are they going to be consistent across the board on what that means?"



President Barack Obama, left, and China's President Xi Jinping discussed climate policy at the UN's conference on the subject in Paris in November 2015. A historic deal was struck, but what happens next? Photograph by Stephen Crowley, The New York Times; Redux

The U.S. also argued for stricter accountability and transparency in terms of monitoring countries' progress in meeting their targets, but Light says negotiators in Paris "left a lot of homework on the table" in that regard.

"I'm quite worried that you might see some of the more recalcitrant parties from Paris kind of gang up and actually begin to weaken" some of the accountability rules, he says. "I don't know to what extent the Chinese would step into that role that the U.S. had of trying to push for a lot harder accountability."

The decision to turn away from greenhouse reduction commitments also has larger implications for the U.S., says [Jules Kortenhorst](#), chief executive officer of clean energy nonprofit the Rocky Mountain Institute. In doing so, the U.S. would be turning away "from its leadership role in handling the biggest issue that we face as humanity," he says, ceding it to China and other countries. "That is a decision you can only make once."

LEAVING MONEY ON THE TABLE?

Regardless of climate change politics, renewable energy is gaining favor as a way to buffer against price shocks with fossil fuels, create resilient power grids, and clean up the air. Nearly \$8 trillion will be invested in renewable energy globally between now and 2040, according to [Bloomberg New Energy Finance](#).

In fact, the United States fought to keep a piece of that market when it initiated, [and won](#), a trade dispute over India's attempts to set targets for locally sourced solar components. After all, India's goal to add 100 gigawatts of new solar power by 2022—nearly three times the current U.S. capacity—represents a huge opportunity for solar companies.

U.S. businesses and jobs currently serve export markets such as India that are much bigger than the domestic market, Light says. "If walking away from Paris also means walking away from all that, then we are definitely undercutting our competitiveness and undercutting many sectors of the economy that are actually doing really well in the U.S. right now," he says. "That is incredibly short-sighted."

Here again, the spoils could fall to China, which is home to some of the world's biggest wind and solar manufacturers. "If the U.S. backs out of the energy transition," Kortenhorst says, China will think, "it's time to double down, because the market opportunity has just fallen even closer into their lap."

On Twitter: Follow [Christina Nunez](#).

[View on news.nationalgeographic.com](#) | [Report](#)

MORE STORIES



RELATED TOPICS

