

The world would be better off if Trump withdraws from the Paris climate deal

The US administration could do more damage from inside the Paris Agreement than outside it. Australian National University's Luke Kemp explains why a US withdrawal is not the end of the world.



By Luke Kemp

Tuesday 23 May 2017



The conventional wisdom that the United States should remain under the Paris Agreement is wrong. A US withdrawal would be the best outcome for international climate action.

With Trump set to decide on the matter after this week's G7 meeting, his aides are split on the issue. Chief strategist Steve Bannon heads the faction pushing for an exit. Secretary of State and former ExxonMobil chief executive Rex Tillerson has argued for the US to retain a "seat at the table".



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It is within the [president's power](#) to withdraw from the Paris Agreement and perhaps even the [United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change](#) (UNFCCC), which has overseen global climate diplomacy for some 25 years.

In a [commentary published in Nature Climate Change](#) today, I argue that a US withdrawal would minimise risks and maximise opportunities for the climate community. Simply put: the US and the Trump administration can do more damage inside the agreement than outside it.

There are four key, interconnected risks related to US participation in the Paris Agreement: that the US will miss its emissions target; that it will cut climate finance; that it will cause a “domino” effect among other nations; and that it will impede the UN negotiations.

Money and emissions are all that matter

The first two risks are unaffected by withdrawal. The Paris Agreement doesn't require the US to meet its current emissions reduction pledge, or to provide further climate finance to developing countries. The agreement is procedural, rather than binding; it requires a new, tougher climate pledge every five years, but actually hitting these targets isn't mandatory.

The US will probably miss its climate target regardless. It would [need more than just Obama's Clean Power Plan](#) to hit its goal of reducing emissions by 26-28 per cent on 2005 levels by 2025. And now that Trump has decided to [roll back those policies too](#), US emissions are set to [increase through to 2025](#), rather than decrease.

The same goes for international climate funding, which will be cut under the “America First” budget plan. That includes funds previously earmarked for the [Green Climate Fund](#), which has so far raised US\$10 billion in climate aid. The US was to provide [US\\$3 billion](#) but has donated just [US\\$1 billion so far](#). The remaining money is almost certainly not coming.

Domino effect?

The third risk is the domino effect: that US actions could inspire others to delay climate action, renege on their targets, or withdraw. But there is little evidence to suggest that the US dropping out will trigger other nations to follow suit.

The closest historical parallel is the Kyoto Protocol, which the US signed but never ratified. When President George W. Bush announced that the US would not ratify the treaty, others rallied to the protocol's aid and pushed through the [Marrakech Accords](#) in 2001, to strengthen Kyoto's rules.

What's more likely to cause a domino effect is US domestic behaviour, rather than any potential withdrawal from the Paris deal. Other countries are more likely to delay or free-ride on their pledges if they see the US miss its target, revealing how weak the Paris Agreement really is.

Paris has little aside from inspiring public pressure and long-term low-carbon investment patterns. Neither pressure nor the “investment signal” is likely to work if a renegade US shows that Paris is an empty global show-and-tell regime. Investors and the public are likely to lose faith in an agreement that can visibly do nothing to constrain a climate laggard.

The fourth risk is that the US will act as a spoiler in international climate talks. This requires membership. If the US remains in the agreement it will retain a veto in the negotiations.

The negotiations are at a crucial juncture. The so-called “Paris Rulebook”, which details how exactly the agreement will be fulfilled, is being negotiated, with plans for it to be adopted in 2018.

The US could use its voice and veto to water down the rules. It might even stall and overload negotiations by demanding amendments to the Paris Agreement, as Energy Secretary Rick Perry has [suggested](#). A US that has credibly threatened to withdraw may have even more diplomatic clout going forward.



Considered in this light, giving the former head of ExxonMobil a “seat at the table” is a terrible idea.

New opportunities

A US withdrawal, on the other hand, could create new opportunities, such as renewed European and Chinese leadership. In the wake of the 2016 US election, former French presidential nominee Nicholas Sarkozy raised the idea of applying a carbon tax of 1-3 per cent on US imports. In a time of rising protectionist policies, particularly in the US, carbon border tariffs may become more politically palatable.

A US dropout would also be an ideal opportunity for a rising China to stamp its mark on an international issue. It would give both China and the European Union a chance to jump even further ahead of the US in the renewable energy markets of the future.

The EU previously showed leadership in the absence of the US to revive the Kyoto Protocol and forge ahead with renewable energy. This time Europe [could do so](#) with the support of another great power.

Such cooperation could take numerous forms. One simple way would be for the two to put forward a stronger joint [climate pledge](#). This could be strengthened by uniting their respective carbon trading schemes and applying a common border carbon tariff.

Trade measures and an EU-China [climate bloc](#) will be far more effective than Paris ever could have been. Yet none of these possibilities is likely to become reality without the diplomatically drastic move of US withdrawal. On balance, it is clear that a US climate exit is preferable to remaining.

It is worth stressing here the difference between pulling out of the Paris Agreement and withdrawing from the UNFCCC. The latter is far more dramatic, and more likely to trigger a domino effect. It would also mean the US would no longer be legally bound to report on its emissions and actions to the international community. It would become a complete climate pariah.

A future president could easily rejoin Paris through an executive agreement. In contrast, re-ratifying the UNFCCC might require a vote in the US Senate, which has become more partisan and divided since the convention was first ratified in 1992. However, withdrawal from the UNFCCC would lessen the threat of US obstruction, as it would lose its veto in the wider negotiations and be even more politically ostracised.

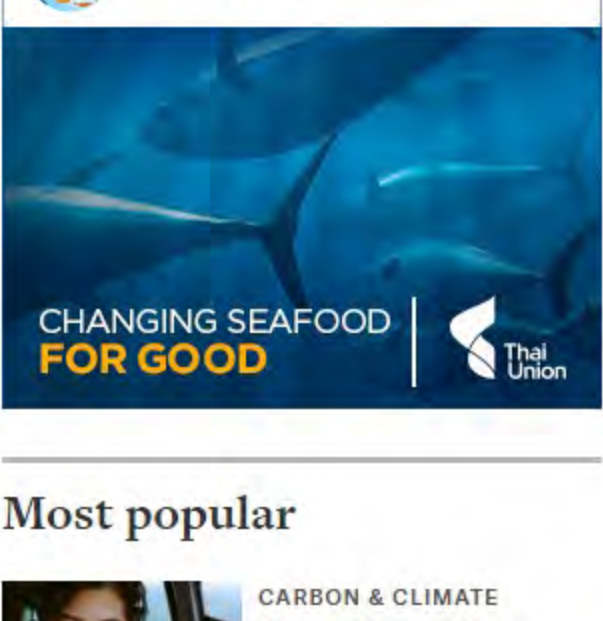
Despite this, the same basic risk-opportunity calculus applies. The domino effect may be more likely, but overall a withdrawal is still preferable.

Participation is a red herring

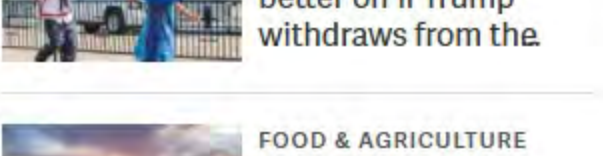
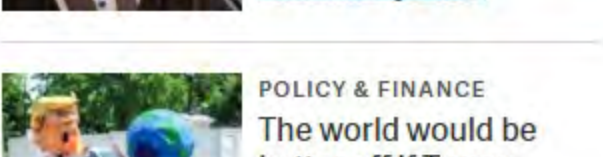
Wanting the US to remain is a short-sighted, knee-jerk reaction. The international community should be much more worried about the real domestic actions of the US, rather than whether it is symbolically cooperating internationally.

The international community appears to be [mortally afraid](#) that the US will make the largely symbolic gesture of quitting Paris. Yet there was less concern when Trump rolled back domestic climate measures.

EU Climate Commissioner Miguel Arias Cañete [recently stated](#) that Paris allows for the continued use of fossil fuels and provides the flexibility for a “new US administration to chart its own path”.

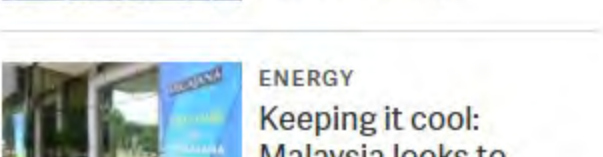


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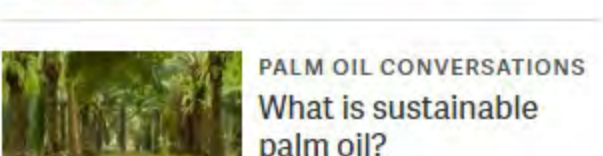
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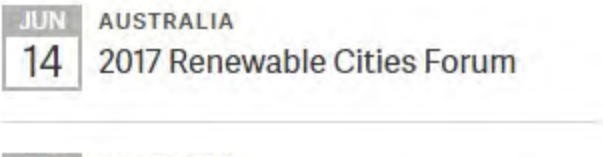
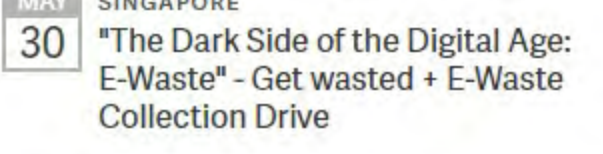
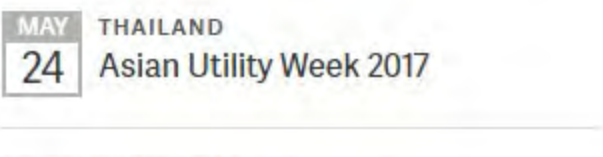
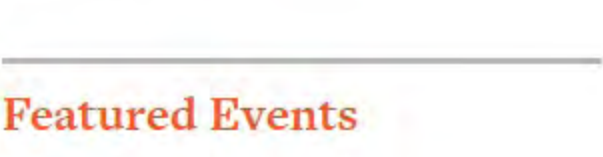
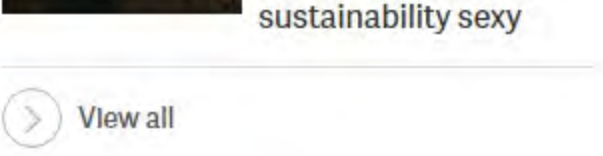
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The US and the Trump administration can do more damage inside the agreement than outside it.

Is this really a worthwhile message to send to the White House: that blatantly violating the purpose and spirit of the Paris Agreement is fine, as long as you are still cooperating on paper? It is disturbing that symbolism has apparently become more important than action.

Policy, not participation, needs to be the focus of criticism. Otherwise Paris will prove itself to be nothing more than a diplomatic fig leaf.

While Paris may be weak, international climate action can still be strong. The shock of Trump's withdrawal could make international action stronger by allowing emboldened leadership to blossom elsewhere.

Luke Kemp is Lecturer in International Relations and Environmental Policy at Australian National University. This article was originally published on [The Conversation](#).

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Is it just me or does this sound to anyone else like a commentary on the last in a long series of mouse conventions held to determine what to do about the cat?

Don't get me wrong. I applaud Mr Kemp's desire to see how Paris could evolve into some more enforceable accord that could have a greater impact on reducing global polluting activities. But exactly how many toothless accords does the international community have to come up with before one realises that this is not the path to making a global difference?

I like his risk analysis approach: it makes sense. I just suggest he applies those excellent brain cells of his to subject matter which has a better chance of actually making a difference in the real world.

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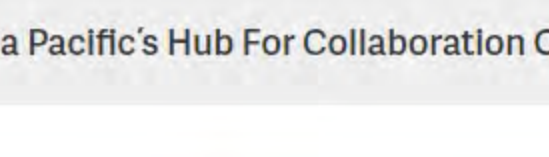
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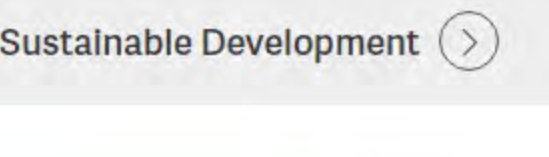
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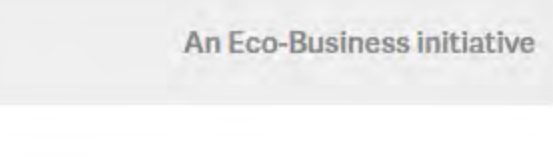
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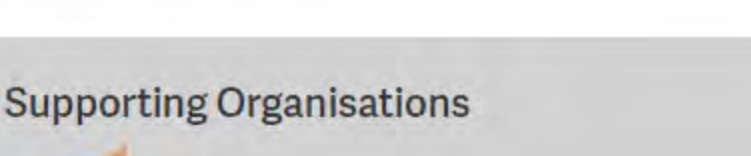
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