



THE DEBATE

How Can the U.S. Lead in Paris to Achieve a Climate Agreement We Can Live With?

In a few weeks, the 21st Conference of the Parties of the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change will convene in Paris to hammer out for the first time an accord that will have binding targets for nearly all nations, industrialized and developing alike.

The United States is a party to the climate convention, but it famously flamed out on the Kyoto Protocol, an enforceable mandate for rich nations alone, which Al Gore signed but the Senate failed to approve under those grounds. Even the signatory status was withdrawn by the Bush II administration, leaving the United

States, then the biggest emitter, with no commitments.

Now, the United States has a chance to lead again. Many of its concerns have already been resolved in the negotiating framework, particularly the commitment of developing countries.

We polled some of the leading thinkers and activists involved in the climate change negotiations, asking them what the United States needs to do to realize an agreement that we can live with — one that protects the environment and also wins favor in the Senate and among the American public.



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A Balanced, International Approach

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The president and his climate negotiating team seem most like the high-wire artist Philippe Petit, who improbably strung a wire between the towers of the World Trade Center and mustered reserves of guts and grace — leavened by intense focus, preparation, and a mild amount of lunacy — to walk between the twin towers.

In order for there to be a successful Paris climate outcome, the administration must likewise achieve a magnificent balance. It must demonstrate aggressive U.S. leadership and commitments to inspire other nations to join suit, so that there will be a truly global solution to this global problem. Yet it cannot be so tough that it deters other nations from similarly following suit.

The United States must promote a bottom-up system that flexibly accommodates the circumstances of individual countries, yet it cannot allow so much flexibility that there is no realistic hope of actually bettering the climate situation. It must accomplish an agreement that is legally binding to be meaningful, yet not prove to be so rigid that it falls of its own weight.

Our negotiators must commit to a robust and comprehensive international program addressing emissions mitigation, adaptation to the already locked-in effects of climate change, and assistance for climate-impacted poor nations, yet not do something that is seen domestically as foolhardy by taking on too great a comparative burden, given the level of growing emissions in countries such as China and India and the degree to which that approach doomed the Kyoto Protocol. It must seek a solution now, even if the trajectory may need

to grow more stringent over time.

And it perhaps may try to do all of this within the confines of existing legal authority, so as to avoid the need for implementing legislation that could doom participation by the United States — and the prospect for a meaningful global agreement — if there were a ratification fight before an impossibly divided Congress.

There are three tests by which I suggest we evaluate the success of any agreement:

First, does it prove to be enduring? Can the administration build enough momentum globally, domestically, and with private-sector companies, who see cost-effective compliance options and new clean energy business opportunities, so that its continuance remains inevitable and that it is just too damaging for a new administration to back away from?

Second, does it embrace a common global vision — the stabilization of greenhouse gas concentrations in the atmosphere at a level that would prevent dangerous anthropogenic interference with the climate system — and give a directional sense to the emissions goal. This all needs to be bounded by meaningful science, and a process for updating individual national commitments, with sufficient transparency around individual country goals and their implementation that there is a realistic hope that these goals can be met over time and the worst climatic impacts avoided.

This process of continuous refinement is akin to the Clean Air Act's long-standing process for continuously updating the fundamental National Ambient Air Quality Standards and is a structure with which U.S. lawmakers and regulated industries should be very comfortable. It is more like what John Dingell once referred to — on the domestic front — as a “glorious mess” than would be the top-down, more predictable, streamlined, rigid, and compulsory approach of the ultimately unsustainable Kyoto Protocol.

Third, is it truly international, with shared commitments that seem equitable given the world's growing energy demands?

Few could have foreseen, just months ago, the enormous progress that U.S. negotiators have made in the ramp up to the Paris Conference of the Parties. The enrollment of national goals by the major emitting nations already demonstrates that there can be a global response to this challenge. The idea that China will implement a cap-and-trade program, that it has committed to a green energy dispatch approach, and that it has committed to the growth of renewables equivalent to the entire existing electricity market in the United States is breathtaking.

Likewise, U.S. negotiators come armed with an ambitious and finalized utility-sector Clean Power Plan, aggressive vehicle fuel efficiency standards, and much progress in reducing building-sector emissions — thereby demonstrating the depth of the U.S. commitment to progress across all of our major sources of greenhouse gas emissions.

All of this is not to say — just as Philippe Petit had to contend with the initial challenge of how to string the wire — that this magnificent balance will be achieved with ease or grace. Senate Foreign Relations Committee Chair Bob Corker recently questioned the State Department's approach to Senate consultation over any Paris agreement. And the overall enterprise seems to be coming up short on commitments. Success should not be judged alone by what happens in Paris, but by the degree to which that balancing act inspires even further and enduring efforts.

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