PARIS ACCORD

A race against the clock to keep the planet cool

Joe Biden, who is on the cusp of U.S. presidency, could take the country back to the leadership position in the fight against climate change

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The U.S. could become the leader in the world's quest to avert dangerous climate change under a Joe Biden presidency, marking a return to global cooperation and reversing President Donald Trump's isolationist rejection of efforts to cut carbon emissions.

On November 4, a year after serving notice, and three years after expressing its intent, the U.S., under Mr. Trump, formally exited the UN's Paris Agreement on Climate Change. This concluded the repudiation of the vision outlined by President Barack Obama in the French capital in 2015 to over 150 country leaders at the UN climate conference. He had assured them that "the United States of America not only recognises our role in creating this problem, we embrace our responsibility to do something about it." Mr. Biden, who worked with Mr. Obama to win acceptance for the climate accord, has vowed to return to the Paris Agreement on his very first day in office.

Pressure from civil society is mounting on all countries to act on carbon emissions, in order to keep global temperature rise well within the goal of 2°C from pre-industrial levels, and to try and limit it to 1.5°C, as mandated by the Paris Agreement. The global compact works on the principle of voluntary national contributions to reduce greenhouse gas emissions, and came into force on November 4, 2016. So far, 188 out of 197 parties to the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) have ratified it, but the U.S. is no longer a party after Mr. Trump's move.

Under the Agreement, developed countries are required to help raise funds for developing countries, aid in efforts to mitigate and adapt to climate change, and help transfer clean technologies. But out of $100 billion dollars targeted to be raised for such climate funding by 2020, the latest assessed figure in 2018 was $78.9 billion, an OECD study says.

As countries have opened up after lockdowns, emissions have begun to rise after a temporary fall, turning the focus back on longer-term clean energy solutions

Fund flows slowed after the U.S. decided to withdraw.

The Paris Agreement also lays emphasis on transparency, requiring all parties to submit national emissions sources and removals of carbon dioxide, using good practices outlined by the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC). These reports are to be technically reviewed, and the performance of countries compared with the emissions reductions they have pledged. As the second largest emitter of CO_2, and a superpower with a wide body of research on climate issues, the U.S. has a major role in advancing global goals.

Mr. Trump has spent a great deal of time undoing the measures taken by his predecessor to cut greenhouse gas emissions, focusing on high-pollution sectors such as outmoded coal plants and fossil-fuel-powered ground transport, and defunding enforcement. Over the past four years, Mr. Obama's rules created impact, with the International Energy Agency estimating the fall in U.S. energy-related carbon dioxide emissions in 2019 at 2.9%, or 140 million tonnes, the highest for any country. The COVID-19 pandemic produced the temporary effect of sharply reducing emissions in all countries, including the U.S., exceeding even the years of the Second World War. The fall in emissions in the first half of 2020 globally may be of the order of 8.8% compared to the previous year, coinciding with the lockdowns, researchers report in *Nature Communications*. But as countries have opened up again, emissions have also begun to rise, turning the focus back on longer-term clean energy solutions envisaged in the climate accord.

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The Biden Plan

This is where the Democratic leader hopes to make a mark. The Biden Plan for a Clean Energy Revolution and Environmental Justice, which he articulated during the presidential election campaign, vows to steer the U.S. back to its leadership position, after re-entering the Paris Agreement. The process requires only a notification to be sent to the UN.

Within 100 days, he's also promised to host a world summit on climate at which the leaders of the nations with the highest emissions [which would include China, the European Union and India] would be engaged, to collaborate and raise ambition on cutting greenhouse gases. Under the Paris pact, updated plans aimed at achieving enhanced goals are expected to be filed by ratifying countries every five years, and they are due in 2020, although the pandemic has slowed progress.

If Mr. Biden gets the opportunity to put U.S. policy back on track, it will mean a return to the UN system's scientific consensus on climate change and a progressive plan to come up with enforceable targets that will take America to net zero emissions by mid-century and achieve measurable progress on this goal by 2025.

The Democratic plan also adheres to the vision of a Green New Deal, with its promise of good jobs. Mr. Biden sees a "huge opportunity to revitalise the U.S. energy sector, boost growth economy-wide, and reclaim the mantle as the world's clean energy leader and top exporter". His emphasis on multilateralism, which underpins the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change and the Paris Agreement, implies strong emphasis on arrangements to increase funding and transfer of clean technologies that innovation makes possible. These objectives are part of Articles 10, 11, and 13 of the accord.

Mr. Biden would have to forge a difficult consensus on using prices and levies to move to a low carbon business path. In his climate plan, he has spoken of preventing other countries, including China, becoming "destination economies" for polluters. He also favours adjustment fees or quotas for carbon-intensive goods from other countries, aligned with steps to make domestic polluters pay.

Policy rollback

The opposite scenario, of continued policy rollback launched by the Trump administration, is expected to lead to a massive increase in emissions. One assessment by the Rhodium Group, cited by climate analysts, says1.8 gigatonnes of carbon dioxide equivalent could be added by 2035 by weakening regulations found in the Clean Power Plan, vehicular fuel efficiency norms and those on greenhouse gases from refrigerants and air-conditioning. So far, favourable market conditions for better fuels such as natural gas, solar and wind power, and efforts by State, city and municipal administrations to cut emissions have blunted the effects of Mr. Trump's policy measures. For context, climate analysts say the world had a budget of 570 gigatonnes left to limit warming to 1.5°C in 2018.

A wide chasm separates the two U.S. leaders on the climate question, with staggering implications. Leaders in all countries are under pressure to act on carbon emissions, in order to keep global temperature rise well within the Paris goals. Without far-sighted U.S. policy, which acknowledges the responsibility of the industrialised world to help developing nations, and its legacy of carbon emissions, valuable momentum to create a safer planet will be lost over the next four years. COVID-19 has come as a reset moment for development pathways, and the future course crucially depends on who leads the U.S.

In Focus

- The Paris Agreement came into force on November 4, 2016, and works on the principle of voluntary national contributions to reduce greenhouse gas emissions
- It seeks to keep global temperature rise well within the goal of 2°C from pre-industrial levels, and to try and limit it to 1.5°C
- So far, 188 out of the 197 parties to the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change have ratified it, but the U.S. is no longer a party after Donald Trump pulled the country out