

Biden's America To Rejoin The Paris Climate Accords - Will It Help The Environment?

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Among the numerous Executive Orders that President-Elect Biden has indicated he will issue during his opening few days as President is an Order that will reverse President Trump's withdrawal from the Paris Climate Accords. This pleases the environmental community but raises one big question – will rejoining be good for the world environment?

While often referred to, few actually understand the Paris Climate Accords, which were reached in 2016. Under the auspices of the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) which deals with greenhouse gas emissions mitigation, adaptation and finance, the Accords were approved by all 196 countries that negotiated them. 189 of those countries became parties to them (Turkey and Iran being the most significant countries that did not), and only the United States has withdrawn, which it did formally just last week.

The long term goal of the Accords is to limit the increase in global temperature to 2 degrees Celsius above that in pre-industrial times. By doing so, it is thought we can reduce the risks of global climate change.

But while the goal of the Paris Climate Accords is clear, the mechanism for achieving it is not. Under the Accords, each country was left to itself to put together its own climate action plan (called "Nationally Determined Contributions"). Each country's NDC was supposed to go beyond what it had previously committed.

Some countries, like the United States, made strong commitments (committing to reduce greenhouse gas emissions by 26% to 28% by 2025 from the baseline of 2005). Some countries, like Pakistan, made little practical commitment to reduce emissions.

Most important was China, the world's largest emitter of greenhouse gases, now equaling 10.06 billion metric tons annually. China's greenhouse gas emissions are so huge, they exceed those of the United States and Europe combined.

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In its NDC, China hedged its bets. China agreed over time to lower CO2 emissions by 60 to 65% from 2005 levels. Many climate scientists agree this would be significant. But China refused to do so in a way that would stop any increase in emissions until 2030. For the next decade, China will be fulfilling its pledge even as it increases its CO2 emissions.

There are many in the Democratic Party who have sounded the alarm about climate change. President-Elect Biden made it a pillar of his campaign. He mentioned it in his victory speech in Wilmington on Saturday night November 7.

Others in the Democratic Party are more hawkish on the issue. New York Congresswoman Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez famously stated that the world will end in about a dozen years unless we take drastic climate action now.

In order to make the type of climate action Congresswoman Ocasio-Cortez and others want, it is difficult to see how it will help rejoining a climate agreement that allows the world's largest polluter to keep increasing its emissions for another decade. By remaining outside of the Paris framework, President Biden would seem to have more leverage to use against increasing Chinese pollution. Once inside, he can push all he wants, but the pushback will be the United States rejoined a treaty that commits each country to do certain things, and China will continue to follow that to which what it previously agreed.

As with many things, climate issues can seem simple in the abstract but are devilish in the details. Donald Trump's withdrawal from the Paris Climate Accords has been vilified by the environmental community. It will be up to President Biden to explain how rejoining them actually will benefit the world's environment.

ATTORNEYS MENTIONED

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