



U.S. withdrawal from the Paris Agreement: Reasons, impacts, and China's response

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Abstract

Applying qualitative and quantitative methods, this article explains the driving forces behind U.S. President Donald Trump's decision to withdraw from the Paris Agreement, assesses the impacts of this withdrawal on the compliance prospects of the agreement, and proposes how China should respond. The withdrawal undercuts the foundation of global climate governance and upsets the process of climate cooperation, and the impacts are manifold. The withdrawal undermines the universality of the Paris Agreement and impairs states' confidence in climate cooperation; it aggravates the leadership deficit in addressing global climate issues and sets a bad precedent for international climate cooperation. The withdrawal reduces other countries' emission space and raises their emission costs, and refusal to contribute to climate aid makes it more difficult for developing countries to mitigate and adapt to climate change. Cutting climate research funding will compromise the quality of future IPCC reports and ultimately undermine the scientific authority of future climate negotiations. China faces mounting pressure from the international community to assume global climate leadership after the U.S. withdraws, and this article proposes that China should reach the high ends of its domestic climate targets under the current Nationally Determined Contributions; internationally, China should facilitate the rebuilding of shared climate leadership, replacing the G2 with C5. Meanwhile, China needs to keep the U.S. engaged in climate cooperation.

Keywords: U.S. withdrawal from the Paris Agreement; Compliance; Global climate governance; China

1. Introduction

The U.S. President Donald Trump announced on 1 June, 2017, that the U.S. would withdraw from the Paris Agreement and immediately cease implementing the agreement including implementing the Nationally Determined Contributions (NDCs) and financial contributions. Mr. Trump's decision to back out has drawn strong criticism both at home and abroad, with world leaders, international organizations, civil society,

and media voicing disappointment and protest. On 4 August, 2017, the U.S. State Department sent a formal communication to the United Nations that the U.S. would be leaving the agreement, and three questions have been raised about the withdrawal decision: Why did Mr. Trump eventually decide to back out when he was staying on the fence about the deal, knowing that his withdrawal decision would be subject to extensive criticism both home and abroad? What is the prospect for compliance with the Paris Agreement after the U.S. leaves? How should China respond? Answers to these questions abound. First, it is suggested that the withdrawal decision was a victory for Stephen Bannon, Mr. Trump's ex-chief strategist, and Scott Pruitt, the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) administrator, but the decision brings no

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benefits to either the U.S. or global climate governance (Stavins, 2017). Second, the withdrawal decision makes it almost impossible for the U.S. to achieve its mitigation goals, rendering the compliance prospects for the Paris Agreement bleaker (Haas, 2017). Third, the U.S. withdrawal decision leaves a large gap in the climate aid that the developed countries have promised to developing countries on the one hand, and it creates opportunities for China and the European Union (EU) to exert their leadership on the other hand (Kemp, 2017). Fourth, the biggest impact lies in the U.S. absence from future negotiations (Schreurs, 2017). Fifth, the U.S. can no longer single-handedly dismantle an international institution, and China is expected to emerge as the global leader on climate change (Hilton and Kerr, 2017). Sixth, preliminary quantitative studies argue that if other countries follow the U.S. lead in postponing their mitigation efforts for eight years or substantially defunding their research and development of renewable energy, the cumulative CO₂ emissions in the 21st century will increase by 350–450 Gt—the 2 °C goal of the Paris Agreement will become unattainable (Sanderson and Knutti, 2017). Seventh, the bottom-up global climate partnership and civil society's participation in climate governance are strong and determined, and neither will be disrupted by the withdrawal (Brookings, 2017). Eighth, global climate governance may enter a transitional era that features shifts in leadership (Chai et al., 2017). These analyses tend to speak in generic terms and are often short of quantitative analysis and concrete policy suggestions. With this respect, we seek to approach the three questions both quantitatively and qualitatively at a more in-depth level.

2. Why did Trump decide to withdraw from the Paris Agreement?

On his 2016 presidential campaign trail, Donald Trump talked skeptically about or even denied climate change, and he vowed to pull out from the Paris Agreement once he was elected. Following his win in the election, Trump softened his position, stating that he had “an open mind” (Milman, 2017) toward climate change. He put off deciding what to do with the Paris Agreement, indicating that he knew very well that the decision to exit would draw strong criticism both at home and abroad. Despite being on the fence briefly, Trump eventually chose to back out of the agreement. In Section 2, we explain the driving forces behind Trump's withdrawal decision.

First, the Trump Administration is closely tied to the fossil fuel industry, and interest groups are a defining feature of American politics. The fossil fuel industries hold powerful political clout over the Trump Administration and the Republican Party: It has been reported that Trump himself, Vice President Pence and EPA Administrator Pruitt are all personally closely associated with the petrochemical mogul Koch Industries (Mayer, 2017). Once the U.S. withdraws from the Paris Agreement, the Trump Administration will seek to repeal climate regulations to benefit energy companies including Koch Industries. EPA Administrator Pruitt, who led the legal fight against former President Obama's Clean Power

Plan, repeatedly denied anthropogenic causes of global warming, and insisted withdrawing from the Paris Agreement, and on May 25, 2017, twenty-two Republican senators wrote a letter to the President urging him to leave the agreement. It is reported that the campaigns of these 22 senators have collected more than US\$ 10 million in oil, gas, and coal since 2012 (McCarthy and Gambino, 2017).

Second, current political and social polarization embolden Trump's withdrawal decision; the partisanship, social tension, and ideological antagonism that define today's U.S. leave little room for bipartisan cooperation (Jonathan and Sam, 2015), and the Charlottesville riot on 21 August, 2017, is just the latest incident that testifies to the current polarization. Seeing that his constituency was not going to react negatively to his withdrawal decision, Trump was emboldened to announce the exit, hoping that it would help him in the next election.

Third, Trump is skeptical of climate change, and he refuses to acknowledge the fundamental principle of common but differentiated responsibility in global climate cooperation. He has also never publicly acknowledged that climate change is happening and is mainly caused by human beings, a consensus shared by most U.S. scientists. In his withdrawal speech, Trump stated that “the Paris Accord is very unfair at the highest level to the U.S. and compared China and India's mitigation obligations with U.S., taking no notice of the common but differentiated responsibility principle. It would be extremely difficult to change Trump's unyielding ideas on climate change and international affairs.

Fourth, Trump's undue emphasis on America First departs significantly from Obama's foreign policy philosophy. Economically, Obama believes that the Paris Agreement enhances America's climate security, promotes America's low-carbon economy and renewable energy industry, and is indispensable for securing employment and maintaining the U.S. competitive edge (Obama, 2017). On the contrary, Trump believes that the Paris Agreement undermines U.S. competitive edge and impairs both employment and traditional energy industries (TWH, 2017). Politically, Obama believes that the Paris Agreement strengthens the U.S. leadership in international affairs, whereas Trump believes that the agreement weakens the U.S. sovereignty. A climate skeptic, Trump puts overwhelming weight on mitigation's economic costs and belittles its ecological and economic benefits, which is consistent with his nationalistic and isolationist America First world view.

Fifth, Trump holds personal acrimony against Obama (Liptak and Jones, 2017) and relishes destroying Obama's political legacy; during the 2016 Presidential campaign, Trump and Obama openly attacked each other with a high degree of animosity. “There have been instances in the past where the current President and a former President do not get along at all,” said Timothy Naftali, a historian at New York University; “What's different this time is that the two are showing it. That the animosity is so clear” (Liptak and Jones, 2017). Known for a strong personality, Trump takes an anything-but-Obama stance and decided to roll back most of Obama's policies after he took office, including acceding to the

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