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DISCUSSION PAPER

The US exits Paris
Can the EU drive international climate action?

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Executive summary

The Trump administration's decision to withdraw from the Paris agreement will make its implementation more challenging. The United States (US) had been instrumental in brokering a successful deal in Paris and speeding the ratification process for an early entry into force of the agreement. While the US remains party to the agreement for the next four years, its involvement in upcoming international climate discussions remains uncertain. Meanwhile, policy developments in the country such as the "Energy Independence Executive Order" indicate that the current administration has currently no intention to fulfil the pledge made by the previous one to lower CO_2 emissions by 26 to 28% below 2005 levels in 2025.

But far from bringing international climate action to a standstill, the US government's position has, on the contrary, prompted decision-makers around the world to reaffirm their commitment to the implementation of the Paris agreement. This provides fertile ground for the European Union (EU) to play a key role in the long process to turn the pledges made in Paris into action. To lead the process, the EU must deepen existing partnerships and seek new ones. It needs to ensure that big emitters actively pursue policies aimed at lowering emissions while providing support to developing countries especially those that are most vulnerable to the effects of climate change.

In the US, the Trump administration's position on climate change is not shared by a large number of states, cities and businesses. They have voiced their opposition to the policies of the federal government and their commitment to the objectives of the Paris agreement. This should prompt the EU to increase its cooperation with subnational actors to stimulate climate mitigation actions in the US.

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Introduction – Assessing the damage

The Paris agreement loses a driving force

The US withdrawal from the Paris climate agreement comes as no surprise. President Trump has a history of climate change scepticism; he once claimed that global warming was a hoax invented by the Chinese, and vowed to revive the coal industry at numerous occasions. The man he chose to head the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), Scott Pruitt, filed 14 lawsuits during his former position as Attorney General of Oklahoma, challenging EPA regulations including the Clean Power Plan (CPP), designed to limit carbon emissions from coal-fired power plants.[1] If anything, the decision announced on 1 June 2017 to withdraw from the Paris agreement is consistent with the promise President Trump made as a presidential candidate to "cancel" the accord. During the announcement, President Trump motivated his decision by arguing that the Paris agreement would lead to the loss of 2.7 million US jobs by 2025, including in the coal and manufacturing industries and would benefit other countries at the expense of the US.[2]

This decision is in stark contrast with the leadership role the US had in the run-up to the signing and ratification of the agreement. Its alliance with China has been crucial in brokering a successful deal in Paris. Moreover, Presidents Obama and Xi's joint ratification of the agreement on 3 September 2016 prompted others to follow, including the EU, leading to a quick entry into force of the agreement.[3] On this occasion, the EU seemed to be lagging behind instead of leading the process. With its credibility at stake, it had to agree on a fast-track procedure with a final vote from the European Parliament on 4 October 2016 rather than wait for each member state to ratify the agreement individually. The agreement, now ratified by 153 of the 197 Parties, has entered its implementation phase.[4] Countries are discussing how to reach the objectives set in Paris to limit the global average temperature increase to well below 2°C above pre-industrial levels and make an effort to limit this increase to 1.5°C.

The Paris agreement was signed under the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC), the intergovernmental treaty designed to limit global warming. Under Article 28 of the UNFCCC leaving the Paris agreement would take four years, which corresponds to the end of Trump's term in office.[5] Until then, the US remains party to the agreement and can participate in these international discussions which currently aim to elaborate a rulebook for the implementation of the agreement, addressing issues such as accountability and transparency. The US position in upcoming discussions remains unclear. However, the Bonn Climate Change Conference, held in May 2017, may serve as an indication that the US might be more silent than openly obstructive. The US delegation, with a historical minimum of seven delegates, arrived at the conference with no mandate.

Even though the administration has given no signs that it would go down that route, the US also has the possibility to leave the UNFCCC itself. Under Article 28, any party withdrawing from the Convention will also be considered leaving the Paris agreement. In this case the US could leave after just one year's notice.[6]

Moreover, President Trump proposed in his 2018 'America First' budget to eliminate the Global Climate Change Initiative (GCCI), which was used by his predecessor to direct money to the UNFCCC. The US currently provides 20% of the UNFCCC's annual budget. The GCCI also contributes to financing the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), which provides policymakers with scientific assessments on climate change, its impact and future risks. The IPCC has been experiencing difficulties in attracting funding in recent years, gathering only $4.3 million from donor countries and various UN bodies, including the UNFCCC, compared to more than $7 million in 2013.[7] This raises particular concerns as the scientific information provided by the IPCC has been an important driver for political action. Lastly, the GCCI also delivers funds to the Montreal Protocol, the international treaty designed to phase out substances that deplete the ozone layer.[8] On 15 October 2016, 197 countries, including the US, agreed to cut the production and consumption of hydrofluorocarbons (HFCs) by more than 80% over the next 30 years in order to reduce temperature changes in 2100 by an estimated 0.5°C.[9] It remains uncertain whether the US will follow through on this commitment.

Bidding farewell to national climate policies in the US?

Reaching the targets set in Paris requires efforts from all countries to lower their emissions. It is particularly important that big emitters do their part, including the US which accounts for 14.36% of global greenhouse emissions, the second biggest share after China.[10] In accordance with Article 4 of the Paris agreement, countries prepared, presented and now need to implement their Nationally Determined Contributions (NDCs).[11] These are the climate actions they intend to put in place after 2020 as a means to contribute to the global effort to reach the Paris targets.

The US government has no intention of fulfilling the NDC presented by the previous administration to lower CO2 emissions 26 to 28% compared to 2005 levels by 2025.[12] On the contrary, President Trump is dismantling his predecessor's climate policies. His Energy Independence Executive Order calls for the revaluation of the CPP, with the objective of scraping it altogether.[13] The CPP, which aimed to reduce CO2 emissions from electrical power generation by 32% (below 2005 levels) by 2030, was meant to be one of Obama's main instruments to implement the NDC. The plan, currently blocked by the Supreme Court following a request from 27 states and several companies, has never been implemented. Reaching the targets set by the US would not have only required its implementation but also more sustained and ambitious climate policies.

According to Climate Action Tracker, current US policies, including the CPP, would only reduce emissions 10% below 2005 levels by 2025. If the CPP is not implemented, emissions in 2025 are likely to be even higher, only 7% below 2005 levels, halting the downward trend of the last decade.[14] Even though it is too soon to determine the exact repercussions the policies of the new administration will have on greenhouse gas emissions in the US, the targets set by President Obama will be difficult to meet.

The EU at the forefront through strategic partnerships

Far from triggering defeatism, the announcement of the US withdrawal has provided impetus for decision-makers around the world to unequivocally reaffirm their intention to implement the Paris agreement. The EU promptly reacted with numerous declarations from member states, including a joint statement from France, Germany and Italy saying that "the Paris Agreement is a vital instrument for our planet, societies and economies".[15] In its conclusions adopted on 22-23 June 2017, The European Council reaffirmed "the commitment of the EU and its Member States to swiftly and fully implement the Paris Agreement, to contribute to the fulfilment of the climate finance goals, and to continue to lead in the fight against climate change".[16] Similarly, Miguel Arias Cañete, the Commissioner for Climate Action and Energy stated that "the world can continue to count on Europe for global leadership in the fight against climate change."[17] As indicated by the Commissioner, the EU must strengthen existing partnerships and seek new ones in order to achieve this aim.

Getting big emitters and the largest economies on board

Given the US' reluctance to participate in global efforts, the EU needs to enhance strategic partnerships with other big emitters like China or India.

China, the world's largest emitter (responsible for 26.83% of global greenhouse emissions),[18] committed to reduce CO2 emissions per unit of GDP by 60 to 65% below 2005 levels by 2030.[19] The country is also set to launch its own carbon emissions trading system, the biggest in the world, this year. By joining forces with China, the EU has the opportunity to be at the helm of the global transition towards a low-carbon economy.

There are multiple possible avenues of cooperation between the EU and China. The European Commission's Joint Communication 'Elements for a new EU strategy on China' states that the EU needs to continue supporting China on emissions trading, increase dialogues in areas such as climate policymaking and emissions modelling, low-carbon cities, low carbon technologies, carbon capture and storage, adaptation, and climate resilient investments.[20]

During the EU-China Summit of 2 June 2017 both partners reaffirmed their commitment to the Paris agreement and their will to establish a closer partnership on climate action and the clean energy transition, including by fostering cooperation in their energy policies.[21] In a draft joint statement the EU and China proposed to cooperate on the formulation of long-term decarbonisation plans by 2020, work together on several elements of the energy transition, such as renewable energy, energy efficiency, energy market design, and grid development within the framework of the 2017-2018 Work Plan of the EU-China Roadmap on Energy cooperation, and to set up triangular cooperation on promoting the zero carbon transition in developing countries.[22] However, the statement was not signed due to trade-related disputes despite both partners agreeing on the content.

The EU is still reluctant to grant China Market Economy Status and the Chinese overcapacity in steel production remains a bone of contention. China has also filed a complaint with the World Trade Organization (WTO) about the EU and US' approach to calculating anti-dumping measures against Chinese exports.[23] This is all the more damaging as trade is a crucial instrument to gain access to low-carbon technologies and products.

The case of the Environmental Goods Agreement (EGA) illustrates that the shared willingness to pursue climate change mitigation objectives could lead to increased trade between both partners, thus combining environmental and economic gains. The EGA, which is currently being negotiated by 14 WTO members (including the EU, China, the US, Japan, Canada, Australia, Switzerland, South Korea and Norway) aims to reduce tariffs on a list of products that can contribute to environmental protection and climate change mitigation, such as heat pumps, wind turbines and solar panels.[24] The negotiations are currently stalled due to disagreements on the final list of products that should be included in the agreement. A closer partnership between the EU and China on climate action could serve as an opportunity to break this deadlock. The EU and the other countries involved in the talks should try to convince the US to stay in the EGA as well.

In parallel, the EU also needs to strengthen its partnerships with other big players like India. India is the fastest growing economy, accounting for 6.65% of global emissions.[25] Its emissions increased by 67.1% between 1990 and 2012.[26] In 2015, India announced an ambitious goal to increase its renewable power capacity fivefold by 2022.[27] The growth of the renewable energy sector combined with a decrease in coal development puts India on the path of overachieving its 2030 NDC emissions intensity target.[28] On 31 March 2016, the EU and India adopted a Joint Declaration on a 'clean energy and climate partnership', which envisages cooperation on energy efficiency in buildings, development of renewable energy sources, smart grids, energy research and innovation.[29]

Even though Indian energy minister Piyush Goyal said that "India stands committed to its commitments made in Paris irrespective of what happens in the rest of the world", the country made it clear when signing the Paris agreement that its involvement depended on financial assistance from other major economies.[30] This statement has been heard by Germany, which offered more than €2 billion in October 2015 for the development of a clean energy corridor and solar projects in India.[31] Chancellor Angela Merkel also promised €1 billion of development assistance on 30 May 2017.[32] The EU should also use its development policies to increase its support to decentralised renewable energy projects in informal urban settlements and rural areas in the country.

The recent G7 and G20 served as opportunities for the world's largest economies to deliver a collective call for climate action. But the G7 summit held on 26-27 May pitted President Trump against other world leaders. This split was confirmed in the final declaration of the G20 summit held on 7-8 July 2017, which reaffirmed the commitment of all members of the G20, except the US, to rapidly implement the Paris agreement, stating it was "irreversible". The declaration also took note of the decision made by the US to withdraw from the Paris deal and to cease to implement its current NDC. Leaders furthermore recognised that investments into sustainable energy sources and clean energy technologies and infrastructure are a source of sustainable growth, job creation and competitiveness.[33]

The declaration was accompanied by the G20 Hamburg Climate and Energy Action Plan for Growth, which sets out a series of actions to facilitate the implementation of the Paris agreement, including moving towards affordable, reliable, sustainable and low greenhouse gas emission energy systems, strengthening international collaboration on energy efficiency, promoting adaptation efforts and cooperation on climate resilience within the G20 and beyond, and phasing out inefficient fossil fuel subsidies.[34] This action plan shows that the G20 is a forum that the EU and its member states can continue to use to strengthen international climate governance.

However, the outcome of the G20 summit was not entirely positive. Turkey's President Recep Tayyip Erdogan announced during a press conference directly after the summit that his country would not ratify the agreement due to the US withdrawal. He also stated that the ratification would be subject to guarantees made by other countries to provide financial assistance to Turkey for the implementation of the Paris accord.[35] This decision is consistent with domestic developments, as Turkey continues to expand its coal power production.[36] President Erdogan's declaration highlights the risk of having countries that are reluctant to adopt climate mitigation measures use the US' withdrawal as a pretext to backtrack on their own commitments. The EU must do its utmost to limit the risks of contagion by ensuring that other countries do not follow in the footsteps of the US. In this context, convincing Russia to speed up its ratification process, currently planned for 2019, is important. As one of the world's largest emitters and fossil fuel producers, Russia has great potential in terms of climate change mitigation. However, its NDC to lower greenhouse gas emissions by 25-30% compared to 1990 levels by 2030, a target which takes into account the maximum absorbing capacity of its forests, is one of the weakest.[37]

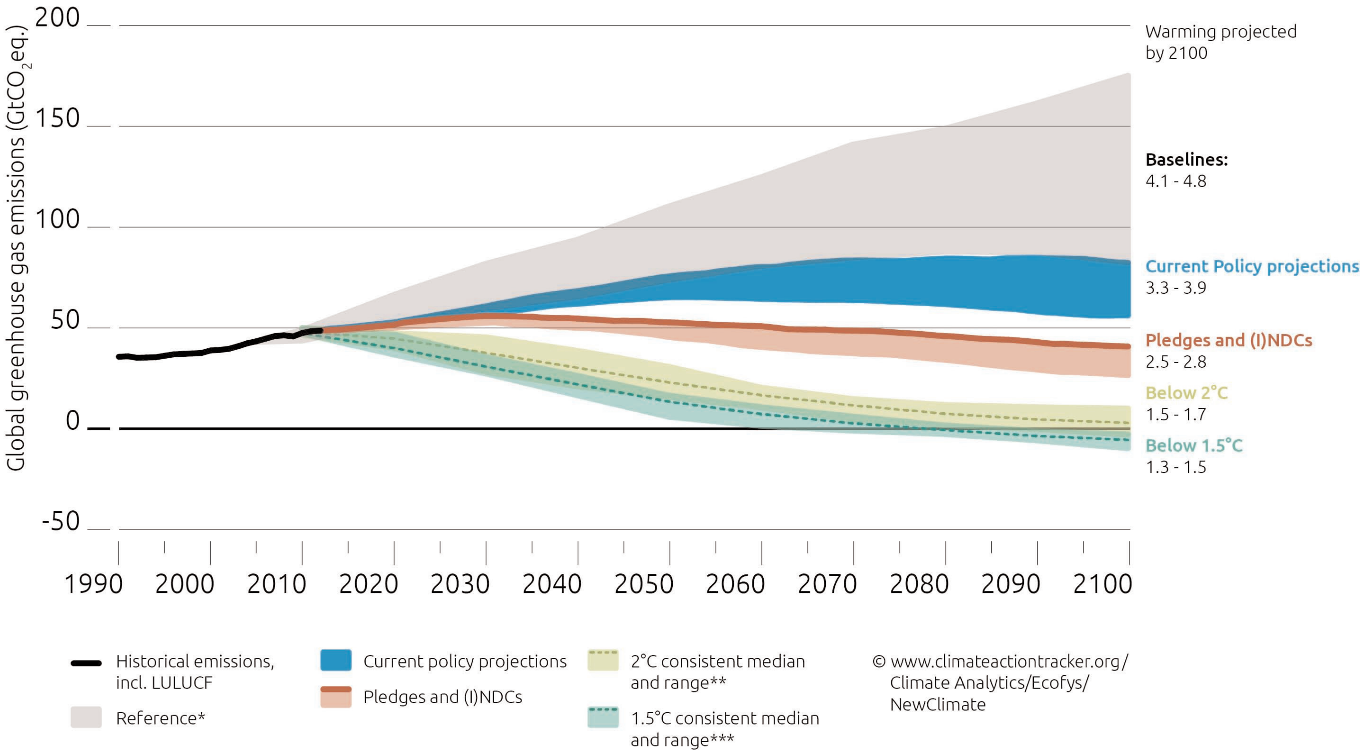
Supporting the most vulnerable

The new climate regime gives developed countries the responsibility to provide support to developing countries to put in place climate mitigation and adaptation projects. Advanced economies therefore promised to mobilise $100 billion per year by 2020 to achieve this aim. These financial resources are channelled through the Green Climate Fund (GCF). As of May 2017, the GCF has raised $10.3 billion in pledges from 43 state governments. The US pledged $3 billion, which represents the highest contribution and twice that of the second-largest pledger, Japan. The Obama administration transferred $1 billion, $500 million of which three days before leaving office. But the Trump administration has announced its decision to terminate the US contributions to the fund, leaving a $2 billion gap. This sends a negative message to developing countries, which rely on developed countries to help them implement their NDCs. As the US is no longer a reliable partner in multilateral climate politics, it is all the more important for the EU to provide consistent support to these countries.

The EU and its member states have been providing major financial support, spending €17.6 billion in 2015 along with the European Investment Bank (EIB), to help developing countries tackle climate change.[38] The EU also deserves praise for having agreed to strengthen cooperation to promote low-emission, climate-resilient development with 79 other countries at the Bonn Conference of 18 May.[39] During the conference, the EU also pledged to provide €800 million for the Pacific region up to 2020. About half of that amount is earmarked for climate action, while €3 million will go to support Fiji's COP23 Presidency.[40] COP23, which will be held from 6 to 17 November 2017, will indeed be the first COP to be presided by a small island nation.

Supporting countries that are the most vulnerable to the effects of climate change also involves advocating greater ambition. The current NDCs made by all the Parties to the Paris agreement would lead to a temperature increase of close to 3°C and are therefore not enough to meet the objectives set in Paris.[41] Scaling up ambition and strengthening the NDCs is therefore necessary to reach the 1.5 degree target that the 48 member countries of the Climate Vulnerable Forum (CVF) refer to as their 'lifeline'.[42] The Paris agreement is a dynamic process that contains provisions that allow to raise the level of ambition of its Parties. It establishes an ongoing, regular process to increase action known as the Ambition Mechanism. Countries will meet every five years for a Global Stocktake of implementation and collective progress, and be required to submit updated NDCs on the basis of this stocktake. Fulfilling its pledges to be a global leader on which vulnerable countries can rely on means that the EU needs to promote the achievement of the 1.5°C target throughout this dynamic process.

Effect of current pledges and policies on global temperature



* 5%-95% percentile of AR5 WGIII scenarios in concentration category 7, containing 64% of the baseline scenarios assessed by the IPCC

** Greater than 66% chance of staying within 2°C in 2100. Median and 10th to 90th percentile range. Pathway range excludes delayed action scenarios and any that deviate more than 5% from historic emissions in 2010.

*** Greater than or equal to 50% chance of staying below 1.5°C in 2100. Median and 10th to 90th percentile range. Pathway range excludes delayed action scenarios and any that deviate more than 5% from historic emissions in 2010.

Source: Climate Action tracker (2016), available at: http://climateactiontracker.org/global.html, last accessed on 11 July 2017.

The EU and its members should also ensure coherence between their development and climate policies. The 15 February 2016 Council Conclusions on "climate diplomacy after COP21" state that "the EU and Member States' development cooperation with third countries should fully take into account the existing synergies between climate objectives and the sustainable development goals as adopted by the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and other international agendas".[43] Under that rationale, the EU needs to support developing countries to implement Sustainable Development Goal 7 to "ensure access to affordable, reliable and modern energy for all" in a way that is consistent with the targets set in Paris, including members of the CVF that vowed to solely rely on renewable energy by 2050. The European External Investment Plan,[44] which aims to stimulate private investments in developing countries, can be used to finance renewable energy, and low-carbon and energy efficient projects.[45]

Strengthening ties with US subnational actors

The position of the US government on climate change does not reflect the position of a significant amount of American states and cities. Several states have already made efforts to use renewable energy and have taken action to reduce their emissions.

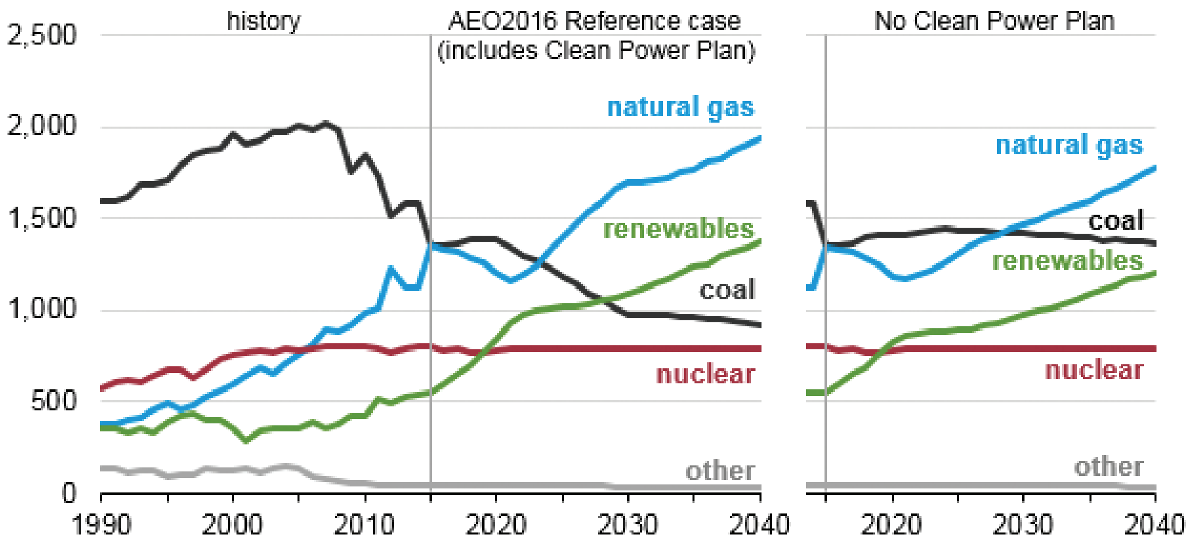
California, the sixth largest world economy, generated 25.45% of its energy from renewable sources in 2016.[46] The state passed a law in 2016 that requires state-wide greenhouse gas emissions to be 40% lower than 1990 levels by 2030, which is the same as the EU target.[47] California also set fuel economy standards exceeding federal requirements, which have then been adopted by a dozen other states. The example of Texas shows that the case for renewables transcends party lines. The Republican leaning and oil-rich state is actually the national leader in wind power generation. With its 11,592 turbines, Texas has three times more capacity than the next state, Iowa, accounting for 12.68% of its energy production.[48] It is worth noting that investments started under the governorship of two important Republican figures, George W Bush and Rick Perry, the current US Secretary of Energy.

States are also marking their opposition to decisions made by the federal executive. The Energy Independence Executive Order had already drawn backlash from a coalition of states and local governments. In reaction to the withdrawal from the Paris agreement, a group of representatives from states, cities, businesses, investors and academia presented an open letter entitled 'We are still in' to the international community, pledging to pursue ambitious climate goals regardless of the policies adopted by Washington and to remain actively engaged with the international community.[49] The group comprises cities such as Los Angeles, Atlanta and Pittsburgh, whose mayor, Bill Peduto, recently announced the city aims to make the transition to use 100% renewable energy by 2035.[50] Another initiative called the US Climate Alliance brings together thirteen states, representing 102 million people and one third of the country's GDP, with the objective of lowering CO_2 emissions by 26 to 28% by 2025 compared to 2005 levels.[51]

The example of California shows that subnational actors can establish themselves as active players in the field of climate diplomacy. The state is deepening its relations with Canada and Mexico. The partners recently signed a voluntary pact to lower greenhouse gas emissions, which could lead to cooperation in developing and aligning carbon pricing systems. California has already developed a cap and trade market that is connected to a similar one in Quebec. The Province of Ontario will link to both systems next year. California will also cooperate with China on emissions trading and is developing partnerships with Chinese Provinces. On 5 June 2017 the US state signed an agreement with the Chinese Province of Jiangsu establishing a Clean Technology Partnership to foster cooperation on research, innovation, and investment in low-carbon development and clean energy resources.[52]

Furthermore, Trump's claims that lowering greenhouse gas emissions constitutes a competitive disadvantage and threatens economic growth are invalidated by economic realities. In fact, 33 states decoupled their growth and carbon emissions between 2000 and 2014[53] and investments in renewable energy, which reached $44.1 billion in 2015, are set to continue.[54] According to projections made by the US Energy Information Administration (EIA), even if the CPP is never implemented, the share of energy from renewable sources would still increase 3.9% a year between 2015 and 2030, compared to 0.6% for natural gas.[55] This trend partly results from a decision made by the US Congress in December 2015 to extend federal tax credits for wind and solar energy projects until 2020.

U.S. net electricity generation by fuel (1990-2040) billionkilowatthours



Source: Huetteman, Thad & Martin, Laura, EIA, available at https://www.eia.gov/todayinenergy/detail.php?id=26712, last accessed on 11 July 2017.

These developments provide fertile ground for the EU to deepen its cooperation with US states and cities. Given California's position as a frontrunner, the EU could start by strengthening its ties through an agreement similar to the ones California has signed with countries like Mexico, Canada and China. The EU could also cooperate with the members of the US Climate Alliance in various areas, such as low-carbon technologies and low carbon mobility. The EU should furthermore act as a facilitator for the cooperation between subnational actors in Europe and the US. On this matter, the Global Covenant of Mayors for Climate & Energy initiative, which comprises a total of 7,453 cities and 9.39% of the world's population, constitutes an important platform to foster cooperation between American and European cities and enhance locally-led climate action.[56] The global coalition aims to promote and support voluntary action to combat climate change and move to a low-carbon economy. Commission Vice-President Maros Sefcovic stressed that the role of the organisation and local authorities had become even more important since the US withdrawal and urged other local leaders to join the initiative.[57]

Conclusion

The US government's current unwillingness to participate in the collective effort to limit the rise of global temperatures and deal with the effects of climate change constitutes an obstacle to the implementation of the Paris agreement. Yet, this obstacle can be overcome. The numerous declarations following the US' withdrawal show that there is a strong political will among world leaders to fulfil their climate-related commitments. Moreover, the transition towards a low-carbon economy has already begun with the recognition that climate change mitigation can lead to economic growth and job creation. The current dynamic for international climate action seems positive.

However, the implementation of the Paris agreement will need sustained and ambitious political action from all countries, especially now that the US has decided to put itself on the sidelines. The EU can play a leadership role in setting the right course for the implementation of the agreement by strengthening its existing partnerships and seeking new ones. It needs to cooperate with big emitters and other developed countries in order to ensure that they adopt and put in place measures to decarbonise their economies in a way that is consistent with the objectives set in Paris. To do so, the EU must use various international fora, including the G20, as platforms to strengthen international climate governance. In parallel, the EU must continue to provide financial support to developing countries to help them implement climate mitigation and adaptation projects and reinforce synergies between climate objectives and its development policies. Given that the involvement of all countries is crucial to achieve the targets set in Paris, the EU needs to ensure that countries do not follow the example of President Erdogan and use the US' withdrawal as an excuse not to fulfil their pledges.

The US withdrawal has also shed more light on the essential role subnational actors play in achieving the targets set in Paris. While it has proven impossible to convince President Trump to stay in the Paris agreement, the EU can still encourage climate change mitigation within the US by establishing partnerships with states like California or members of the US Climate Alliance and facilitate cooperation between American and European cities through the Global Covenant of Mayors for Climate & Energy initiative.

Strong leadership from the EU is all the more important in a period when the "rulebook" for the implementation of the Paris agreement is being discussed and set to be finalised in 2018. The upcoming COP23 conference later this year will give further indication on the EU's ability to really be at the forefront of the international climate agenda.

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