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Trump Team Weighs Paris Options

Throughout his presidential campaign and the early days of his presidency, US President Donald Trump has been clear that he represents a departure from the climate-driven energy policies of predecessor Barack Obama. Trump has pledged to support fossil fuels, bring back coal jobs and stop payments to the UN Green Climate Fund. Still, as the White House prepares to cement its shift on energy and environmental policy in the weeks ahead, Trump has a tricky choice to make on the Paris climate accord: either fulfill his campaign promise to walk away from the landmark pact, or stick to the agreement — however reluctantly — in part to avoid diplomatic spats.

Trump has several options in front of him. The least disruptive may be staying in the Paris Agreement, possibly revising the US pledge, or intended nationally determined contribution (INDC), to reflect changes in domestic policy. Trump has said he will toss aside the Clean Power Plan that had been a part of the US pledge under Obama, for example, and rules mandating improvements in vehicle fuel economy are up for review. The Paris Agreement lacks the force of a treaty, so revising the INDC would be relatively easy, several people familiar with the debate said. And the administration could do so right away instead of waiting for a 2018 review period under which all parties to the Paris agreement will re-evaluate their pledges. The White House could also withdraw from the Paris Agreement itself, a four-year-long process. Or, Trump could exit the underpinning UN Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC), which would only take one year. Some conservative voices, particularly at the Competitive Enterprise Institute, have suggested sending the agreement to the US Senate — where Republicans hold a majority — to be voted on as a treaty. If the US were a “reluctant participant, that of course has an impact,” says Jonathan Elkind, who was the Assistant Secretary for International Affairs at the Department of Energy under Obama and is now at Columbia University's Center on Global Energy Policy. But “it clearly would be worse if the US left the field of play. There's no question.”

Trump has taken different positions on climate change. During the campaign, Trump said he would “cancel” the cli-

mate accord — an impossible feat on a global scale, although “canceling” US participation is far more doable. In another instance, he vowed to “renegotiate” the agreement, and after winning the election, Trump said he was keeping an “open mind” on climate issues (IOD Nov.28'16). Earlier, he went as far as calling climate change a “hoax” perpetrated by the Chinese for economic gain, but later said that was a joke.

Several influential voices in Trump's administration may be pushing for continued participation in Paris. Secretary of State Rex Tillerson, the former CEO of Exxon Mobil, said he wants the US to maintain a “seat at the table” in international climate discussions. Support for the agreement from large oil companies suggests that staying in Paris won't necessarily be read as contradictory to his energy agenda, with ConocoPhillips CEO Ryan Lance reportedly saying this week it would be “good for the US to stay in the climate agreement.”

Those who support staying in Paris point out that former President George W. Bush's decision to walk away from the Kyoto Protocol in 2001, four years after it was agreed by the Clinton Administration, was disruptive and had knock-on effects on other diplomatic topics (EC Nov.18'16). “We've had experience, and not very positive experience, when we did what we did with Kyoto,” said Richard Morningstar, who served as the US ambassador to the EU at the time and is now at the Atlantic Council. “It was creating a problem in Europe, and I think it did have a spillover effect on other issues. There was a real concern among officials in Europe.”

Whether the Trump administration decides to stay in will, of course, rest on the degree to which the White House worries about the ramifications of withdrawing. Although polls show most of the US electorate favors US action on climate change, Trump's decision carries the risk of either disappointing his firmest supporters or exhausting valuable diplomatic currency. “The mopping up, after you [make] a major sudden reversal in an international engagement ... is tough,” Elkind said.

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