

Climate Diplomacy

A Strategy for American Leadership



American Security Project

Perspective

—
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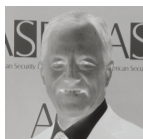
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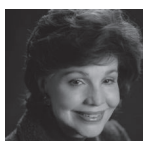
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Lieutenant General Norman R. Seip, USAF (Ret) served in the Air Force for 35 years. His last assignment was Commander of 12th Air Force.

In this Report:

In December, 2015, the world will gather in Paris in an attempt to finally address the challenge of climate change. The stakes are high: failure would only make addressing climate change more costly and difficult and could have repercussions on broader national security goals. But “Climate Diplomacy” is not just about a single conference in Paris: it must be a bipartisan, long-standing priority for the U.S. government. This paper lays out why climate diplomacy is important and a strategy to deploy it.

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IN BRIEF

- Climate change is a global problem, requiring a global solution. The atmosphere does not recognize national borders. Climate diplomacy, therefore, can be far more powerful and effective than any domestic climate policy.
- Leadership by the United States is necessary to build a global regime to reduce emissions. The United States, as the largest economy in the world (and second-largest emitter of greenhouse gases), is uniquely suited to build consensus from the diverse nations.
- American leadership is needed in three areas:
 - 1) as the “Hub” of interlocking bilateral and multilateral climate agreements,
 - 2) to buttress the UN’s responsibility to measure and verify that nations are meeting their commitments, and
 - 3) to create and enforce a norm that nations should move toward a lower carbon economy.
- If climate negotiations are perceived as a failure, the U.S. will be blamed, and that could have broader geopolitical impacts around the world. Failed climate negotiations would harm American interests in issues as seemingly unrelated as trade, counterterrorism, and rule of law.
- Action on climate change is now as central to diplomatic engagement as human rights, international trade, nonproliferation, or military might. How a country is perceived to be acting on climate change is a key part of “soft power.”

About the Authors

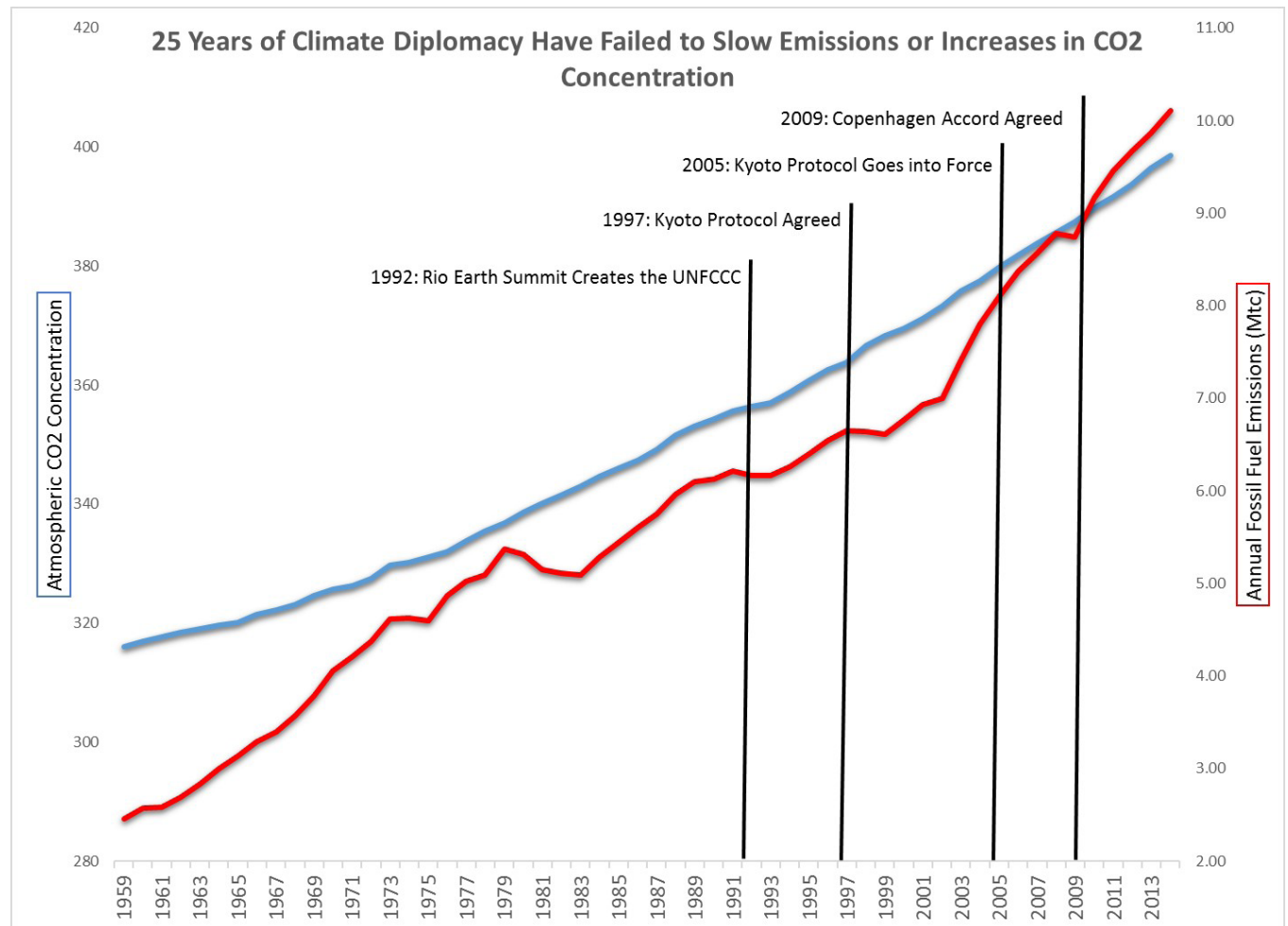
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25 Years of Climate Negotiations

Every year since 1995, diplomats from around the world have gathered in an effort to address climate change. These conferences, held under the auspices of the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) were given the objective at the 1992 Rio Earth Summit of stabilizing greenhouse gas concentrations “at a level that would prevent dangerous anthropogenic [human induced] interference with the climate system.”¹ Diplomats were tasked with finding a way to begin to reduce the growth of global greenhouse gas emissions, and ultimately agree to a system that would reduce total emissions to the point where the concentration of greenhouse gases in the atmosphere does not lead to dangerous climate change.

Under these basic criteria, the twenty years of climate diplomacy can only be judged as a failure. Since the first Conference of the Parties (COP) in 1995, atmospheric concentration of CO₂ has risen from 360 parts per million (ppm) to 399 ppm in 2014.² Over that time, total annual greenhouse gas emissions have risen from 6,398 million tons of carbon (Mtc) to 10,107 Mtc, an increase of 58 percent.³ Greenhouse gas emissions are only rising, and the atmosphere could be approaching some dangerous tipping points beyond which we could not return.



Source: NOAA's Earth System Research Laboratory

This is not simply abstract: temperatures are rising and weather is changing. As of the end of 2014, the world had warmed about 0.88 degrees Celsius.⁴ 2014 was the warmest year on record, and 2015 is expected to smash that record. World leaders have agreed that a temperature increase of 2 degrees Celsius above pre-industrial levels would be dangerous. Unfortunately, many experts already believe 2 degrees of warming is nearly unavoidable, and without significant changes away from the global emissions path, it will only get worse.⁵ NASA, for instance, predicts that the warming could reach 6 degrees Celsius by the end of the century, but even just reaching a 4 degree threshold could have catastrophic impacts on the natural systems that we rely on for water, food, and our infrastructure. It is not an exaggeration to say that maintaining U.S. security interests in a 4 degree world is an unrealistic prospect.⁶

Effective Climate Diplomacy is a Force Multiplier

Climate change is a global problem, requiring a global solution. The atmosphere does not recognize national borders. If emissions are reduced at home, but increased abroad, there are no benefits. Perversely, some actions to reduce emissions could even result in a net increase of emissions, as the regulations force carbon-intensive activity from a clean country to a lower-regulated country—a concept called “carbon leakage.” Too often these sentiments are stated as a reason for not taking domestic action to reduce emissions. Instead, we should see climate diplomacy as a force multiplier.



Image Source: UNFCCC

We know that while even the most ambitious domestic climate action will only reduce emissions marginally, relatively easy actions – if agreed by the whole world – could reduce emissions effectively, and at little cost to Americans.

Global action on climate change is difficult, for several reasons. First, it is a “collective action” problem. Even if every country shared the high-priority goal of preventing dangerous climate change, the short-term incentive for every country is to shirk responsibility and call for action from others. Indeed, that has long been the model for many states concerned about stymieing economic growth.

Additionally, there is a perception that costs and benefits of climate action are not aligned: the impacts of climate change will be felt most by those who can do the least to stop it, while the cost of mitigating emissions is borne by wealthy nations who will be able to adapt to warming. Some small island states and Least Developed Countries are existentially threatened by sea level rise, extreme weather, and changes in water supplies. On the other hand, some wealthy nations have perceived themselves as less vulnerable to climate change—even seeing it as a positive. Russian leadership, for instance, has long perceived climate change as mildly positive for their country, especially seeing an opportunity in an opening Arctic and improving agricultural productivity.

Finally, there is the challenge of historical responsibility for the emissions already in the air. An argument often used by Chinese leadership (the world's largest emitter) and other large developing countries is that reducing emissions within their country is unjust because the majority of emissions were caused by the already developed Western countries. For them to now ask still poor developing nations like China to sacrifice economic growth is clearly unfair.

The result of the sum of these arguments is that little of consequence has happened in twenty years of climate diplomacy. While the Kyoto Protocol was agreed to by 1997, and went into effect in 2005, it has failed to actually reduce global emissions. It enshrined the divide between developed and developing nations—making future agreements that much harder, and driving the United States away from the process.

Two things have changed in recent years to give hope to ongoing negotiations. The first is that events are making the old arguments untenable. The costs of renewable energy have dropped enough that it may no longer be costly to take climate action. Rapid recent growth by developing countries, coupled with stagnation in Europe, Japan, and the United States means that there is no way to actually address climate change without meaningful emissions reductions from large developing nations like China or India.

Climate-related incidents like the drought in California, wildfires in Russia, or Superstorm Sandy have proved that wealthy nations may actually be more vulnerable to the effects of climate change because there is so much of value on the line. Around the world, a global environmental movement has emerged that prioritizes climate action—and will enforce the agreement with their governments.

The second change, related to the collapse of these arguments, is that the United States has gradually re-engaged with climate negotiations. Starting in the second half of the Bush Administration, there has been a slow growth in American involvement in climate policy. From the 2007 Bali Roadmap, through the 2009 Copenhagen Accord and beyond, the United States became more engaged and vocal in pushing for measurable, reportable, and verifiable action from all nations. By the time John Kerry was confirmed as Secretary of State in 2013, it became clear that the U.S. was ready to take a real leadership role.

American Leadership on Climate Change

As the world's only superpower, the U.S. is the indispensable player in addressing global climate change. American leadership can galvanize partnerships, overcome adversaries, and quiet critics of a global deal. This is not an issue that is exclusive to Democrats or Republicans – this is about national interest and minimizing the domestic costs of action.

There are three interrelated principles that will allow American diplomacy to effectively build a global climate regime. To varying extents, American diplomacy has followed these principals for years, through both Democratic and Republican administrations. First, climate diplomacy cannot simply be about negotiations within the UNFCCC; action on climate change must be a part of every diplomatic engagement. In a sense, this makes the United States the “hub” of a global network of overlapping, interrelated climate agreements. Second, the UN is indispensable as a validator: only the universal nature of the UN's membership can give the legitimacy to deals, even if they are negotiated outside its auspices. Third, the U.S. should seek to establish and reinforce norms related to climate, creating a “climate regime” similar to what is seen with other global issues such as human rights and nuclear security.

The Hub Strategy of Climate Change

The Kyoto Protocol's objectives were never met, and key nations, like the U.S. and Canada, have withdrawn their commitments, while others remain within the protocol but go without sanction for missing their targets. The world's largest emitter, China, has absolutely no commitments under the protocol. The failure of the Kyoto Protocol is a lesson though, which is that broad overarching climate agreements are unlikely to succeed, and a new approach to addressing climate change will be needed.



Image Source: U.S. Department of State

States are the two largest economies (and greenhouse gas emitters), they can drive momentum towards a global deal. Importantly, the deal is not expected to be based upon targets and numbers negotiated by diplomats at the UN, but based upon each country's Intended Nationally Determined Contributions (INDCs)—a voluntary statement of intentions. These INDCs, then, are based upon bilateral agreements made outside the UN process.

The other benefits of a hub strategy come through versatility. While the UN negotiations are almost entirely focused on the end-goal of emissions reductions, the U.S. could establish sector-specific agreements focused on issues like reducing coal consumption, developing carbon sinks in forests, cooperation on renewable energy, or others. This method allows the U.S. to tie climate to other foreign policy issues, such as trade or security. This is preferable in a way, since it will allow the U.S. to offer something other than its emissions as a bargaining chip in climate negotiations, getting progress on reducing global emissions without necessarily having to uproot its own fossil-fuel reliant infrastructure.

The need for a leading nation to address climate change goes beyond the functions of a coordinator though, it also requires an actor which has the capability to influence other nations to make commitments that they would not otherwise make. As the world's only superpower, America is the only viable choice to fulfill this role. A collective action problem where the incentives to free ride are as high as they are with climate change is too risky to address without serious bargaining power to improve cooperation.

Climate change is too important to leave solely to a UN body with a history of middling progress. As the world's superpower, with global connections and interests around the world, the U.S. will be able to create new climate agreements bilaterally, using itself as a hub. The first steps towards such an approach can already be seen in the climate agreement with China from November, 2014.

This is a simple example of what bilateral climate agreements can do for the U.S., making global efforts more likely to succeed. Because China and the United

UN as the Impartial Validator of Climate Action

When the world gathers in Paris for the 21st Conference of the Parties (COP), there are high hopes for a new climate agreement. But we must see this as another stepping stone rather than a final destination.

As the UNFCCC moves away from being a forum for negotiations, it should transition to become the impartial validator of each country's commitment to address climate change. As planned now, every country will make a voluntary commitments to address climate change—but one of the most delicate tasks will be to report, measure, and verify annual emissions. Only the UN has the non-partial reputation among all countries to play this role. They will have to verify that the measured and reported emissions of a country are enough to meet their agreed upon commitments. This role will test the UN, but there is no other body that can provide the needed legitimacy.

For example, the bilateral agreement between the U.S. and China was negotiated outside of the UNFCCC, but both nations have submitted their commitments under that agreement to the UN as a part of their INDCs. Importantly, it will not be up to the U.S. to determine whether or not China is cheating on its agreement, it must be the UNFCCC who makes such a determination – a body perceived as impartial.

The UNFCCC, as a single interested party, would have more freedom to coordinate climate action. Keeping track of emissions, coordinating funding, and determining the most cost effective methods to curbing climate change would all be made easier under an umbrella organization. The UN serves a very important role in international relations as a validator. Only the universal nature of the UN's membership can give the legitimacy to deals, even if they are negotiated outside its auspices.

Norms and a Climate Regime

The U.S. taking a position that failing to address climate change threatens security is an important step towards one of the simplest ways of getting involvement on climate change: international norms. Norms are the expectations of states to function in a manner which is confluent with international laws and global ideals.⁷

The power of established norms is clear with global issues such as human rights and nuclear proliferation. States which violate the norms of a “regime” suffer repercussions on other global issues, creating a situation where the costs of violating norms outweigh the benefits of whatever it is to be attained. A similar approach to climate change would help to keep countries involved in climate action, and all at a minimal cost to the United States.



Despite the similarity of climate change to other global issues, there are not yet any established norms around it. Partially that is because it has been wrongly categorized as purely an environmental problem. This allows national leaders to place it in a policy ghetto that only environmental campaigners like Greenpeace or the Sierra Club care about. Instead, leaders must realize that climate change affects all areas of society—national security, economic growth, energy production, natural disasters, development, migration or agricultural production. It is not an exaggeration to say that, if climate change is not addressed, solving each of these problems could become nearly impossible. That means that every government ministry in every country has an interest in addressing climate change, not just those tasked with environmental protection.

Norms will be especially important for dealing with countries that withdraw their commitments or offer none at all, and the Kyoto Protocol suffered from the lack of established norms. The United States signed but never ratified the treaty, and pulled out in 2001. Canada signed, ratified, and then pulled out of the treaty in 2012 when it became clear that it would not meet its agreed emissions targets. Australia only joined in 2007, and has not met its agreed targets. China acceded to the protocol, but never had to implement any limits, and its emissions have more than doubled since 1997. None of these countries have suffered from their failure.

That may be changing though. Australia, for instance, has faced censure from the Pacific Islands Forum for its lack of action on climate change, and may even be asked to leave the group.⁸ In the past, the countries most likely to be harmed by climate change, like small island states and least developed countries, have stood in solidarity with large developing countries like China, India, and South Africa in opposing binding emissions reductions from developing countries. Now it is more widely understood that all nations have some responsibility to prevent climate change.

Institutions must be nurtured that can help create and enforce these norms. Nuclear proliferation, human rights, and free trade all have strong institutions, NGOs, and watchdogs that serve as a part of the international community. These create the basis of law, commonality of understanding, and transparency that are needed to have accepted norms in the international community as well as an ability to know when they are violated. While there are numerous advocacy groups focused on climate change, there are very few organizations that can function in a capacity such as the IAEA on nuclear issues, Council of Europe on human rights, or WTO on free trade.

The UNFCCC, and its supporting body, the IPCC, are valuable to international efforts, but they lack the necessary support from the international community. When the IAEA says that Iran is enriching uranium to be used in a bomb, or the WTO says that the U.S.' tariffs on steel are unlawful, there is an expectation that some action by the international community will be taken to curb that behavior. Meanwhile the IPCC notifies the world of numerous doomsday scenarios that we are steadily headed towards, but international response is minimal.

For the U.S., or any other country, to call upon another to change its climate posture, it must have reliable and trustworthy evidence to support its claims. In a sense, the U.S. and other major powers should attempt to create a climate equivalent of the Bretton Woods system.

If such a system of standards and norms become widespread, it would become clear that countries which fail to make efforts at resolving climate change are instead contributing to a worsening security environment.

Conclusion

Effective climate diplomacy means granting climate change the same level of concern in foreign policy as other security issues. Climate change poses too great a risk for the U.S. and the world to treat it as a secondary issue, and the U.S. should begin connecting it to other areas of foreign policy, similar to how human rights, nuclear proliferation, counterterrorism, and other global policy issues are addressed. Failure in this will result in a continually warming world, increased global threats, and a U.S. which is isolated from the solutions rather than a global leader.

The benefits to the U.S. will also be in the implied soft power gains of the U.S. from using itself as a focal point for numerous climate agreements. Since climate change will impact so many nations, there will be a great deal of interest on the part of others to see the U.S. succeed in its agreements. This will allow the U.S. to call on other nations to contribute, which will incidentally make forging climate related agreements easier.

The U.S. has opportunities to enhance its own security by using its position as a superpower to forge an international climate regime with contributions from all powers around the world. This would not be very costly to the U.S., all it requires is a political will to treat the threat of climate change as it does other global policy issues that impact its security and economy.

In addition, the costs of inaction and failure on climate policy are likely to be felt far outside this area. For example, over more than two decades, American policy towards China has been to draw the country into a rules-based international legal system. This policy has been largely successful, but is threatened by rising nationalism within the Chinese government. If the Chinese government's recent climate commitments are undercut by a failure in Paris, it would embolden nationalist elements within China to ignore its legal commitments, whether in the UN or in the South China Sea.

A further consequence of failure in Paris would be to undercut many of the smallest, most vulnerable nations to climate change. The moral leadership from small island states like the Marshall Islands has been critical in pushing laggard nations, both developed and developing, to take a stronger position. If Paris is perceived as a failure, these countries will be forced to find other ways to prepare for rising seas; including mass relocation of citizens.

Effective leadership on climate is something that requires only marginal investment on the part of the U.S., especially when comparing the fiscal costs to the potential costs of climate change through infrastructure damage and political instability. It is clear that the current United States Administration has the will to act on climate change, though support from Congress is lacking. With this three-pronged strategy of climate diplomacy, the United States could effectively address the challenge of climate change, at low cost. If the world fails in this effort, the costs could will be felt in the climate and in geopolitics.

Endnotes

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The American Security Project (ASP) is a nonpartisan organization created to educate the American public and the world about the changing nature of national security in the 21st Century.

Gone are the days when a nation's security could be measured by bombers and battleships. Security in this new era requires harnessing all of America's strengths: the force of our diplomacy; the might of our military; the vigor and competitiveness of our economy; and the power of our ideals.

We believe that America must lead in the pursuit of our common goals and shared security. We must confront international challenges with our partners and with all the tools at our disposal and address emerging problems before they become security crises. And to do this we must forge a bipartisan consensus here at home.

ASP brings together prominent American business leaders, former members of Congress, retired military flag officers, and prominent former government officials. ASP conducts research on a broad range of issues and engages and empowers the American public by taking its findings directly to them via events, traditional & new media, meetings, and publications.

We live in a time when the threats to our security are as complex and diverse as terrorism, nuclear proliferation, climate change, energy challenges, and our economic wellbeing. Partisan bickering and age old solutions simply won't solve our problems. America – and the world - needs an honest dialogue about security that is as robust as it is realistic.

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