

Project-Syndicate, 19 février

Tackling Climate Change in the Age of Trump

Since returning to the White House, Donald Trump has withdrawn the United States from the Paris climate agreement, rescinded emissions-reduction targets, and ended climate-related initiatives. But a range of potential initiatives that are consistent with the Trump administration's priorities could still slow climate change.



NEW YORK – There is no denying the reality of global warming. Each year is hotter than the preceding one. Last month alone was the hottest January on record. Recurring natural disasters – floods, fires, droughts, and hurricanes – are becoming more extreme and frequent. The world has blown through the goal of limiting warming to 1.5° Celsius above the pre-industrial level. At this rate, climate change could define the second half of this century.

National and international efforts to stem climate change are not succeeding. The Global South views the problem as one that ought to be fixed by richer countries that developed sooner. Many countries, including China, prioritize near-term economic growth over reducing greenhouse-gas emissions, and freeriding on other governments' efforts is widespread, partly owing to public opposition to taxes that could curb energy use or encourage climate-conscious behaviors.

Since returning to the White House, Donald Trump has led the United States swiftly into this camp, withdrawing from the Paris climate agreement, rescinding emissions-reduction targets, and ending climate-related initiatives. His administration is focused on increasing fossil-fuel production, even though the US is already the world's leading producer of oil and gas and has only modest potential to increase output.

The reasons are not only economic but also cultural and political, with many Americans resenting or rejecting experts' climate warnings. The good news, though, is that a range of potential initiatives that are consistent with the Trump administration's priorities could still slow climate change.

Those who acknowledge the seriousness of the climate crisis can repeat the same arguments, attend the same global conferences, and advocate for the same policies in the hope that at some point what has mostly failed will mostly succeed. But they would be better off trying a different approach, one that reflects political realities in the US and around the world but could still make a meaningful difference.

Such an approach must begin with realistic goals. Climate change can be managed, not stopped or solved. Global emissions continue to rise, fossil fuels still account for 80% of world energy use, and talk of a transition away from them is mostly just that: talk. And energy use will only continue to increase as the global population increases, Africa develops, electrification expands, and new data centers required for artificial intelligence are built.

Given this, embracing energy coexistence is unavoidable. Fossil fuels will be here for decades to come. While developed countries are abandoning coal (albeit not completely), its use in the developing world continues to increase, where the goal should be to accelerate the shift toward cleaner natural gas. The same holds for practices that limit methane emissions. Renewables are growing in importance and should be encouraged

through public-private partnerships. There is no reason that a US president prepared to be tough on China should allow it to dominate green technological innovation. The private sector, which has made enormous investments and stands to gain from future ones, should weigh in.

Policymakers should also emphasize adaptation and resilience at the national, state, and local levels. Building codes and zoning regulations need to be rethought to limit vulnerability to climate-related extreme heat, fires, storms, and flooding. Investment in such infrastructure could create jobs and make it possible for people to live where they want. Solutions that increase the efficiency of the energy grid, water systems, and household appliances should also be adopted. Here, Elon Musk's "Department of Government Efficiency" (DOGE) should weigh in.

Likewise, a feasible climate-change policy must treat nuclear energy as indispensable for achieving reliable clean power. This can only happen by streamlining permitting processes to accelerate deployment of new reactors. China is building nuclear plants in under five years; there is no good reason the US cannot match this. Similarly, roadblocks to much needed renewable projects, mining of critical minerals, and development of energy infrastructure ought to be reduced. Here, too, DOGE could have a role to play.

The federal government and states (together with companies) should also invest in technologies like direct air capture, better scrubbing systems for coal plants, and carbon capture, utilization, sequestration, and storage. Again, there is no reason that economic growth must be sacrificed.

A greater focus on what communities and cities can do to reduce their vulnerability to fires, floods, and the like can help manage the effects of climate change without engaging the ideological debate. It would also help to engage new climate allies, including religious leaders, educators, and business leaders. Many young people are already there.

At the same time, global efforts should be restructured. The annual United Nations Climate Change Conferences are falling short. What is needed are smaller groups (what some call "minilateralism") focusing on specific aspects of the climate challenge and involving the governments and companies that matter most. Trade offers a model here: whereas global efforts have failed, regional and other small clusters have flourished.

Nature-based climate stewardship of the oceans and forests is also needed, because it preserves and expands the most powerful carbon sinks. Assistance of all sorts should be channeled to encourage forestation and halt or slow deforestation. Trump [considers](#) himself an environmentalist. Here is a way he can act on it.

Lastly, solar geoengineering, or reflecting solar radiation back into space, deserves more exploration. Federal investment through US national labs could ensure responsible development and governance. While controversial, it represents the kind of bold, game-changing initiative that should appeal to Trump. If successful, solar geoengineering could one day meaningfully slow or stop additional climate change and even offset some existing effects. And even if its promise proves to be less dramatic, the technology could complement existing and planned mitigation and adaptation efforts.

There are no doubt other ideas that are both desirable and feasible. What is certain is that we cannot address the climate crisis effectively by insisting on an approach that is not succeeding. Stopping climate change might well be beyond our reach, but managing it in a cost-effective way need not be.