

The silver lining in Trump's Paris pullout: A chance for the EU and China to take the leadership mantle

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Donald Trump's decision to pull the United States out of the Paris Climate Agreement produced a strong reaction from European leaders. [Charles F. Parker](#) argues the decision may provide an opportunity for the EU to strengthen its climate change leadership by forging an alliance with China. He suggests that there were several silver linings to the US withdrawal, but the EU will have to translate its rhetoric into concrete action if it is to reclaim leadership over the issue.



What does the US withdrawal from the Paris Climate Agreement mean for the world and specifically for the EU's goal to protect Paris and safeguard global action against climate change? The US decision to abandon the agreement and abdicate its role as a leader in international climate cooperation is a loss for the global effort to combat catastrophic climate change. But under Trump a constructive US climate policy, inside or outside of Paris, was never on the cards.

In fact, there are a number of silver linings in Trump's withdrawal from Paris and how he opted to do it. For the EU, the question is whether it can take up the leadership mantle and fill the void left by the US exit, as it did in 2001 when the US rejected the Kyoto Protocol under George W. Bush, and forge a leadership alliance with China to champion the successful implementation of the Paris Agreement.

Trump waves goodbye to Paris

Donald Trump's [withdrawal](#) from the Paris agreement was all about domestic political theatre, throwing red meat to his anti-globalist base, and the sham symbolism of putting 'America first'. It allowed him and his climate sceptic Environmental Protection Agency chief, [Scott Pruitt](#), to brag that Trump had fulfilled 'one more campaign [promise](#) to the American people'.

Trump, in his statement justifying the withdrawal, which was filled with [falsehoods](#) and misleading statements, claimed Paris was 'very unfair' to the US. In fact the Paris Agreement was, as former US chief climate envoy [Todd Stern](#) has pointed out, tailor made with US preferences in mind. The deal's non-binding nationally determined contributions (NDC), flexibility, and its requirement that the emerging economies also needed to take meaningful action all conformed to long standing US negotiation [positions](#).

Trump even took the opportunity to yet again troll his European allies, saying that the 'same nations asking us to stay in the agreement are the countries that have collectively cost America trillions of dollars through tough trade practices and, in many cases, lax contributions to our critical military alliance'. Despite the insults, there is reason for the EU to be pleased with Trump's withdrawal and how he did it.

The bright side to the US departure

Had Trump not chosen to exit Paris, there were two likely [scenarios](#) for US participation within Paris: to 'remain and abstain' or to 'remain and obstruct'. Either could have been highly damaging for the aggressive implementation of Paris. With Trump's executive [order](#) to rescind Obama's Climate Action Plan and begin the process of trying to reverse the Environmental Protection Agency's Clean Power Plan, the first scenario would have been a virtual certainty.

Even if Trump had not formally withdrawn from Paris it would have been difficult for the US to meet the goals of a 26 to 28 per cent reduction in emissions by 2025, laid out in its NDC pledge, in the absence of the Clean Power Plan.

In all likelihood, the US would have submitted an amended and less ambitious NDC pledge. This would have set a bad precedent.



Protesters at a climate action demonstration in Washington DC. Credits: Julia DeSantis / Climate J20 (CC BY 2.0)

Had the US opted to 'remain and obstruct', this might have been the worst case scenario from an EU point of view. Negotiators are presently [working](#) on a 'rulebook' on how to operationalise the Paris Agreement and much needs to be accomplished including the details for setting up the committee to facilitate implementation and promote compliance, the arrangements for the official stocktaking reviews, which will take place every 5 years, and the details for the new rounds of national plans, which are required to become more ambitious every 5 years. A hostile US determined to water down or subvert these complicated negotiations could have created havoc if it so desired.

Finally, the way Trump decided to leave Paris also has a silver lining. It did not include leaving the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC), which would have been a faster process, taking only one year to exit both the UNFCCC and Paris instead of four years, but would have been a more extreme and likely permanent way to withdraw from the international climate regime. The UNFCCC was approved by the Senate and if the US were to withdraw from the full convention, any future re-entry into the UNFCCC and its Paris Agreement would be subject to the approval of two-thirds of a potentially hostile Senate. The upshot is that now the US won't be completely out until 4 November 2020, the day after the next presidential election, making it possible, if a new administration wins, for the US to return to the Paris Agreement.

Can the EU step up?

As my colleagues and I showed in a [recent study](#) and [blog post](#), although the EU's perception of itself as a world leader on climate change was not shared to the same extent outside of the EU, it was still perceived to be one of the key leaders alongside China and the US. The EU's instrumental leadership and its ability to forge leadership alliances with the US and China on key issues was important to the successful outcome in Paris. Nonetheless, the so-called 'G2' [cooperation](#) between the US and China was the [partnership](#) that most shaped the institutional design of the Paris Agreement. The question is, now that the US has ceded its leadership role, can the EU step in to be the new 'G2' developed country partner with China?

Rhetorically, the EU has responded robustly and with a unified voice to Trump's departure from Paris. Commission President [Jean-Claude Juncker](#), Climate Commissioner [Miguel Arias Cañete](#), German chancellor [Angela Merkel](#), and French President [Emmanuel Macron](#) all reaffirmed the EU's support for Paris and said the world could count on

Europe for global leadership in the fight against climate change. In a joint [statement](#), the leaders of France, Germany, and Italy described the momentum generated by Paris as ‘irreversible’ and rejected Trump’s red herring offer of renegotiating the deal.

The challenge will be for the EU to go beyond rhetorical leadership to delivering on its leadership goals. There is already reason to wonder if America’s retreat from global and climate leadership will be replaced by an effective EU-China alternative. Although the EU and China expressed their [support](#) for Paris and vowed to cooperate in tackling climate change at the conclusion of the EU-China summit, which took place the day after Trump’s announcement, the summit was a rocky one and due to [disagreements](#) in other areas, a much ballyhooed joint EU-China statement on climate and energy cooperation, which had been [leaked](#) prior to the meeting, was never formally released.

If the strategic partnership between the EU and China is to truly make a difference for the climate, it will have to move beyond words and deliver strategic action, such as agreeing to strong transparency and reporting rules for Paris and other collaborative actions, or agreeing to regulatory arrangements to link the EU Emissions Trading System (ETS) with an emerging Chinese ETS.

Another challenge for EU climate leadership is delivering on its own climate commitments. In Paris, the EU28 promised a 40% reduction in their emissions by 2030, based on 1990 levels. As shown in a recent [blog post](#) on this site, the effects of Brexit could make this more difficult and the departure of the UK will force other member states to make up the difference. The latest emissions [data](#) released from the European Environment Agency also contained bad news. Although the EU has cut emissions 22.1 per cent from 1990 to 2015, while at the same time enjoying economic growth of 50 per cent, in 2015 emissions actually rose by 0.5 per cent. The EU’s leading by example strategy requires that it delivers on its emission reduction pledges.

As my colleagues and I have argued previously, effective leadership requires [credibility](#) and the ability to persuade prospective followers that one is acting for the common [good](#). In the wake of Trump’s rejection of Paris, the EU has said the right things and expressed the will to exert climate leadership, but time will tell whether the Union is up to the challenge and is able to deliver on this promise.

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Note: This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of EUROPP – European Politics and Policy, nor of the London School of Economics.

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