Institute for Public Policy Research

PROPHET, SPOILER, OR FREE RIDER?

THE UNITED STATES AND CLIMATE CHANGE

DISCUSSION PAPER

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SUMMARY

The Trump administration has been ambitious in its international engagement, seeking to shape other countries' choices in everything from security and trade to free speech and individual prosecutions.

It is doing so not only in pursuit of a narrow definition of US interests. As the recent US national security strategy makes clear, it is also seeking to advance a nationalist-populist world view, and to oppose to what it sees as a prevailing liberal progressive orientation of many countries, particularly its traditional allies.

Global climate action sits firmly in the crosshairs of the administration. In Trump's first term, withdrawing from the Paris Agreement was his main aim. In his second, he has larger ambitions – not simply to withdraw from collective climate action, but to prevent it; not only to favour fossil fuels and oppose clean technologies at home but to promote these objectives abroad.

Recent efforts to derail the adoption of maritime emission standards at the International Maritime Organisation were a clear success for the administration and appear to suggest that a MAGA derailing of the adoption of cleaner technologies and the global transition may be at hand.

But that may be a misreading of what is going on. A clear assessment of how and why the US is seeking to reverse global climate action, and the likely impacts of those efforts is critical for those seeking to encourage the uptake of clean technologies and prevent dangerous climate change. This paper examines the following questions.

1. How might the US seek to knock global climate action off course?
2. Is it likely to succeed?
3. What should policymakers do to reduce the impact of a disruptive US?

Addressing the first question, on the ways the US might seek to derail global climate action, we identify three roles it could play:

- **a 'prophet'** – demonstrating primarily through domestic action why other countries should abandon climate action
- **a 'spoiler'** – acting to wreck others' efforts to tackle climate change
- **a 'free rider'** – benefitting from the efforts of others to maintain a stable climate while maximising returns from fossil fuels and externalising costs.

On the second question – the likelihood of success - we argue that the impact of two roles seems clear and limited.

- As 'prophet', the United States is unlikely to have a significant effect. Country policies are motivated by domestic rationales - economic, security and political. These will be only marginally affected by any 'example' set by the United States.
- US status as a 'free rider', meanwhile, seems assured. However if other countries continue to seek to stabilise the climate for the common good, the effects of its free-riding can be minimised.

In one role – that of spoiler - there is potential for impact. How extensive a spoiler effect the US has in practice depends in turn on three things.

- The US's own determination. Current signs are mixed. The US played an effective wrecking role in international negotiations on maritime emissions but has not mobilised significantly on other issues. Whether the recent US national security strategy presages a renewed focus on undermining climate action or simply states US aspirations is unclear.
- Countervailing pressures which might be applied by other states – eg China.
- The willingness of others to continue to prioritise climate goals, and to go in to bat for them and organise accordingly.

And what should 'going in to bat' look like? The paper recommends four responses.

1. Stay the course including by more clearly focussing funding where it is most effective and prioritising economic and security arguments in communicating about clean technologies.
2. Build 'coalitions of the willing', with a particular focus on practical and focussed partnerships to accelerate the deployment of clean tech.
3. Work with and around China, cooperating in multilateral organisations, mobilising coalitions to put pressure on it, and diversifying clean technology supply chains beyond it.
4. Cooperate with the United States where possible, most obviously at state level, but at federal level where relevant for example on critical minerals, nuclear technology, nature and potentially geoengineering.

As with many issues, policymakers are adjusting to a shifting set of US objectives, seeking to understand their real priorities in order to address the impact on issues that matter to them. In climate, as in other areas, neither hunkering down nor catastrophising are useful responses; and focussing on the US as a central problem in climate action may be mistaken. This paper seeks to give policymakers a framework to consider the likely real-world effect of the Trump administration, and to indicate how they might best respond in order to achieve their own objectives in this new geopolitical era.

1. PRESIDENT TRUMP'S SECOND TERM: A BREAK WITH THE PAST

Under President Trump the US is withdrawing from, or rewriting the terms of, many of its international obligations. Its early measures included the following.

- Announcing its withdrawal from the World Health Organization (WHO) on the grounds that it is under Chinese influence (The White House 2025a).
- Introducing wide-ranging tariffs inconsistent with its World Trade Organization (WTO) commitments.
- Significantly reducing its international development assistance programmes and in March 2025 formally rejecting the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) as a framework for policy.
- Persuading its European partners to commit to increase defence and security spending to 5 per cent of GDP by 2035, partly due to concerns that the US may no longer be a reliable partner in European security.

And at the start of 2026, President Trump issued an executive order (The White House 2026) withdrawing the US from the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change – among other organisations – which underpins the Paris Agreement.

The effect of these and other policies is that countries other than the United States carry more of the burden of maintaining collective goods, or that fewer collective goods – such as health and education provision in developing countries – will be provided.

On climate and energy, the return of President Trump has marked a clear break with the approach of previous administrations and, in pace and determination, a step change from his first term (past approaches are summarised in box 1). The administration has doubled down on fossil fuels, ending support for and seeking to slow the deployment of most clean technologies, while pressing other countries to roll back climate-related measures both domestically and internationally (The White House 2025b).

BOX 1: A BRIEF HISTORY OF US INTERNATIONAL CLIMATE POLICY

The US approach has seesawed between engagement and withdrawal. The administrations of George HW Bush and Bill Clinton were strong supporters of the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) and the Kyoto Protocol. President George W Bush broke with this approach and announced that the United States would not implement Kyoto on the grounds that it disadvantaged the US by placing obligations on it but not on major developing countries, particularly China and India (The White House 2001).

The Obama administration sought but struggled to accelerate the development of clean energy domestically. The American Clean Energy and Security Act failed to pass Congress in 2009, and the Clean Power Plan was blocked by the Supreme Court in 2016 (Supreme Court of the United States 2016). Internationally, the administration played an active role and, shortly before the end of President Obama's second term, an agreement was reached in 2015 at COP21 in Paris. This was due in part to US diplomacy and its bilateral climate agreement with China in 2014 (The White House 2014).

During the 2016 presidential campaign, Donald Trump argued that the US was being exploited by allies and constrained by multilateral institutions. Following his election, his administration implemented an 'America First Energy Plan', rolled back nearly 100 Obama-era environmental regulations, and expanded approvals for pipelines and drilling (The White House 2017a). In 2017, President Trump announced that the US would withdraw from the Paris Agreement because it undermined US economic interests (The White House 2017b). This had less impact on COP and on other countries' climate policies than initially feared.

The arrival of President Biden in the White House in January 2021 restored US engagement on international climate issues. His administration announced its intention to rejoin the Paris Agreement on its first day in office and subsequently introduced landmark legislation on clean technologies through the Inflation Reduction Act (IRA) and Bipartisan Infrastructure Law. Internationally, the Biden Administration re-integrated climate into diplomacy, development finance, and export-credit policies (USAID 2023).

While the approach of successive administrations has differed, there has also been some continuity. The George W Bush administration, despite downplaying climate change, advanced energy policies which included provisions to support renewable energy and vehicle efficiency (US Congress 2005, 2007). And the Obama administration promoted an 'all of the above' energy strategy, lifting the crude oil export ban and authorising LNG exports. Under President Biden, the US remained the world's largest producer of oil and gas, even as it invested heavily in clean technologies (EIA 2025, IEA 2025a, Rhodium Group 2025).

Successive administrations have also sought to resolve what they see as the 'free-rider' problem in global climate cooperation by rebalancing responsibility between developed and major emerging economies. The Paris Agreement's principle of 'common but differentiated responsibilities and respective capabilities' reflected the Obama administration's desire to move beyond the binary developed/developing division of Kyoto. The Biden administration continued to seek to address perceived imbalances, particularly with respect to climate finance. At COP29, parties agreed on a new global climate finance goal which for the first time enabled multilateral development bank contributions (including from China) to count toward collective goals. This partially addressed long-standing US concerns that emerging economies should share financial responsibility for supporting developing countries' transitions.

At home, the administration is unravelling the measures introduced by its predecessors, removing most of the Biden era's Inflation Reduction Act (IRA) tax credits and grants. It is rolling back federal climate and environmental legislation and constraining states such as California from pursuing independent climate and clean technology policies. It is cancelling planned and existing renewable energy projects (DOE 2025a). Staffing and funding for federal climate science programmes have been reduced, including emissions monitoring and research programmes, and official communications now downplay the impacts of climate change (Science 2025, FT 2025b).

This is even as the impacts of climate change increasingly affect the US itself – recent events such as California's wildfires and flooding in Texas, both exacerbated by climate change, may have cost the US hundreds of billions of dollars (Atlantic Council 2025). The effects are now filtering into insurance and mortgage markets, where risk exposure in climate-affected regions like California is reshaping markets and policy.

The administration is pursuing instead what it calls 'energy dominance', the objective of which is to maintain domestic and global demand for fossil fuels and, as the recent intervention in Venezuela suggests, to seek a greater role for the US in shaping oil markets. Where the Biden administration sought to join the race with China in clean technologies, the Trump administration takes the view that the US should instead capitalise on its strengths in oil and gas.

While the regulatory reversals will impact US clean technology development and deployment, plans to increase oil production may prove less successful. US producers will expand output where it makes commercial sense but are facing rising costs due to tariffs on key materials, including steel (Reuters 2025a). Producers note that President Trump aims to keep domestic fuel prices low, limiting profitability. Industry consolidation continues, staff numbers are being reduced, and the US rig count – a key indicator of future production – has fallen in 2025 (Reuters 2025b).

Although both the Biden and Trump administrations have championed nuclear energy, no gigawatt-scale nuclear plants are currently under construction in the US, and small modular reactors are not yet cost-effective because it is not clear how modular they can be (which is key to reducing costs). Costs for new gas plants are rising, with long waiting lists for turbines (Bloomberg 2025a). Electricity prices are increasing, and while clean energy remains the fastest route to expanding capacity, nearly $30 billion worth of projects were cancelled in 2025 (E2 and Atlas Public Policy 2025).

The net result of these policies is likely to be that the United States will produce less energy at higher cost than it would otherwise have done, as demand – driven partly by energy-intensive data centres – rises. These policies will inevitably slow US decarbonisation. The previous administration had committed to reducing greenhouse gas emissions by 50–52 per cent by 2030 and 61–66 per cent by 2035. Even with the Inflation Reduction Act and other measures, the US was on track to fall short of its 2030 target. It is too early to assess the full effects of President Trump's reversals, but a recent study found that US emissions may now decline only 26–35 per cent by 2035 compared with 2005 levels – down from a prior forecast of 38–56 per cent (Rhodium Group 2025).

2. THE UNITED STATES AS PROPHET?

Politics in many developed economies is in turmoil. There is growing public scepticism in many countries about the capacity of centrist governments to govern effectively. Citizens face serious and ongoing cost-of-living pressures. And there is evidence of some waning in public support for climate policies.

In this context, the Trump administration may believe its hostility to climate action is increasingly shared internationally, and that the example of its domestic leadership can draw others away from climate action. However, the administration risks mistaking policy recalibrations in some countries for full reversals. It also risks misreading domestic political drivers as reactions to US policy.

CLIMATE POLICIES IN THE EU

Climate scepticism has long been a feature of nationalist populist movements in Europe, influencing mainstream parties, particularly on the centre-right, including in the UK, France and Germany. The Trump administration's approach has emboldened hard-right sceptics and fuelled concerns about the costs of EU climate measures.

The European Union has begun to roll back elements of the European Green Deal, agreed during the first term of commission president Ursula von der Leyen. This began in late 2023 under pressure from centre-right parties and major member states including France and Germany. It accelerated in late 2024 when the new Commission proposed an 'Omnibus Green Regulation' to simplify several sustainability requirements, which had generated a backlash among member states and business.

The EU was also forced to postpone agreement on its 2040 emissions-reduction target due to differences between its member states. The delays damaged the EU's credibility and weakened its ability to encourage other parties, including China, to bring forward NDCs aligned with the Paris Agreement and was one of the factors behind the underwhelming outcome of COP30.

Although the Trump administration may have strengthened these trends, the US is not the cause of European climate scepticism. Populist opposition to climate regulation in Europe did not arrive with this US administration. The drivers of deregulation relate primarily to concerns about the competitiveness of European industry. And the causes of concerns over EU emissions targets have been largely internal.

CLIMATE POLICY IN MAJOR EMERGING ECONOMIES

Similar drivers of policy apply in other major emitters. Whether climate policies are accelerating or slowing reflects internal politics more than US influence. China views the transition to a net zero economy as both an economic necessity and a source of competitive advantage. Its 'new three' industries – solar PV, batteries, and EVs – are expanding rapidly. China now dominates global production of clean-energy components including solar panels, EVs, wind turbines, critical minerals, and electrolysers (IEA 2025a). Exports of Chinese solar panels to Africa rose 60

per cent in 2024 (Ember Energy 2025a), and emerging markets are overtaking Europe as the main destination for Chinese EV exports (FT 2024).

India continues its own energy and industrial transition reflecting its determination to provide universal access to energy, to promote industry and reduce its reliance on imported energy. Renewables and storage provide the quickest route to new generation capacity, reduce energy import dependency, and offer export opportunities in supply chains for advanced economies seeking to diversify from China (IEA 2025a). So while India has nearly 30GW of coal power under construction, for only the second time in 50 years, India's power sector emissions fell in 2025 as clean power generation increased and fossil-fuel output declined (Carbon Brief 2026).

FINANCE AND AID

The financial sector presents a more direct example of US influence. Since mid-2024, major US financial institutions have begun withdrawing from net zero alliances, responding to political pressure in some US states and associated regulatory uncertainty. US insurers have exited the UN Net-Zero Insurance Alliance, and banks have withdrawn from the Net-Zero Banking Alliance, prompting the NZBA to end operations (Reuters 2025c). Some corporations have scaled back their net-zero targets, particularly in energy-intensive sectors, though the overall number of companies globally setting science-based targets continues to rise reaching over 23,000 by December 2025 (SBTi 2025). And while investment in renewable energy fell in the first half of 2025 in US, it increased in the rest of the world (Bloomberg 2025).

The US has also revised its export credit and development finance policies, cutting most overseas aid and shifting support toward fossil-fuel projects while ending backing for renewables. While other advanced economies – including the UK, Germany, and France – have also reduced overseas aid (OECD 2024), these decisions pre-date President Trump's return and are driven by domestic fiscal constraints and declining political support for aid spending.

Overall, while the example and pressure of the Trump administration have influenced some sectors, particularly finance, there is little evidence that US policy has been a major driver of global reversals in climate policy. Most national shifts continue to stem from domestic economic, social, or political factors. And in some cases association with the policies of the US Administration has not proved a political advantage – in recent elections in Canada, Australia, and Greenland issues or candidates associated with the Trump administration did not prosper.

3. THE UNITED STATES AS SPOILER?

If the US is not proving to be the prophet of climate recidivism, it does have the ability through persuasion, inducement and coercion to influence other countries' and international organisations' energy and climate policies: it can be a 'spoiler'. How successfully does it perform this role?

US PRESSURE ON MULTILATERAL INSTITUTIONS

At the boards of the multilateral development banks (MDBs), the US is pressing for policy changes to encourage support for upstream gas exploration in particular. It is also pressing the World Bank to drop its commitment to allocate 45 per cent of its finance towards climate-related projects (UST 2025a). The US is also pressing the bank and other MDBs to diversify suppliers in its financed programmes, including by excluding SOEs which do not operate on a commercial basis (a measure aimed at China in particular). At the 2025 spring meetings of the international financial institutions (IFIs), treasury secretary Scott Bessent said: "mission creep has knocked these institutions off course", and that the administration would work with them "so long as they can stay true to their missions" (UST 2025b).

The US has also put pressure on the International Energy Agency (IEA) over its forecasts relating to the peaking of fossil fuel demand. Of the agency's forecast that global oil demand may peak by the end of this decade, energy secretary Chris Wright said in July "that's just total nonsense" and that the IEA must change: "We will do one of two things: we will reform the way the IEA operates or we will withdraw. My strong preference is to reform it" (Politico 2025a). The US has reportedly pushed for the replacement of the deputy executive director of the IEA, a US diplomat appointed during the Biden Presidency (Politico 2025b).

But the ability of the administration to bring about significant changes in lending practice among the IFIs is limited by the fact the US is only one (important) board member among others. And as the administration does not wish to withdraw from either the World Bank or IMF (which would lead to pressure for the seat of the institutions to move from the US), its ability to pressure other board members or the institutions may be constrained.

Nevertheless, given the importance of the US in these organisations, they appear to be seeking to respond to pressure without fundamentally changing course. Ajay Banga, World Bank executive director nominated by the Biden Administration, has started to talk of an "all of the above" energy strategy and said that the bank is open to supporting nuclear power following a decision of the board earlier this year (Reuters 2025d). The IMF managing director Kristalina Georgieva, an advocate of the IMF incorporating climate considerations into its core business, has been cautious in her public references to climate change and the fund has merged climate and gender units into a broader unit covering structural policies (Bloomberg 2025b, UST 2025a).

In its latest *World Energy Outlook*, the IEA reintroduced the 'current policies' scenario, previously dropped in 2020, which is based on a stalling of the energy

transition. The scenario was dropped because it was so at variance with the real-world pace of clean technology deployment. Other adjustments include placing less emphasis than previously on the fact that no new upstream fields would be needed in a net zero-consistent pathway (IEA 2025b).

OBSTRUCTING CLIMATE COOPERATION AND NEGOTIATIONS

Where international negotiations related to climate change are happening, the US is seeking to prevent agreements which would curtail fossil fuel demand or strengthen market signals for clean technologies. In the August round of negotiations for a new international agreement on plastics, the US joined other major fossil fuel producing states in opposing measures to reduce the production of plastics (FT 2025a). The opposition of the Trump administration was a factor in, but not the overriding cause of, the failure of negotiations.

In negotiations in the International Maritime Organisation (IMO) on greenhouse gas emissions standards and levies, the US went further with multiple media reports of US threats to countries, companies and negotiators of retaliation, including tariffs, visa and port restrictions (Mongabay 2025, Politico 2025c). A framework agreement had been reached in April after China changed its position from opposition to support. The Trump administration objected because IMO agreements are binding and the US would have been affected by other parties' application even if it did not apply the measures itself.

At the organisation's meeting in October, parties narrowly adopted a proposal tabled by Saudi Arabia to postpone discussions for a year. It is now unlikely that this landmark agreement will be adopted while President Trump is in power. The negotiation was a test of the capacity and willingness of the US to use a wide range of measures to prevent international agreement on climate measures which would directly affect it; and the exceptional threats made were effective in overturning a majority supporting the agreement. Europeans, including the EU, were divided and ineffective; while China, despite its support in April, did not attach sufficient importance to the issue to work actively against the US.

This activist approach does not appear to extend to the UNFCCC and meetings of the COP. Unlike the IMO, COP agreements are largely indirect in their effect on national policies and so confronting COP does not appear to be an administration priority. The withdrawal of the US from the Paris Agreement and the UNFCCC will limit its ability to influence outcomes.

The role of the US has in fact been in decline since the Paris Agreement as its commitment has fluctuated under different administrations, while China's influence has grown. No countries followed the US withdrawal from the Paris Agreement as was feared at COP29. Even Argentina, which was rumoured to be considering withdrawal, appears to have concluded that the costs of doing so (likely rejection of the EU-Mercosur trade agreement) outweighed any benefits. Whatever their frustrations, parties have preferred to remain part of the COP process.

This was reflected in the outcome of COP30. This broke limited new ground because of failures of preparation and policy by climate action supporting states; effective organisation by fossil fuel producers; China's desire to avoid external pressures on its domestic policies; and choices made by the Brazilian presidency. But the fact of the outcome and (limited) advances in some areas such as adaptation finance showed that parties remain committed to multilateral climate cooperation despite the departure of the US.

FOSSIL FUEL DIPLOMACY AND TRADE STRATEGY

The Trump administration is also using its bilateral relationships to encourage countries to reject clean technologies. A wave of US liquefied natural gas (LNG) is entering global markets, with US LNG exports projected to grow significantly in the coming years (IEA 2025a). As a result, the administration is pressing countries to sign long-term LNG contracts for 'commercial and strategic' reasons, according to the CEO of ExxonMobil (Reuters 2025e) – commercial in terms of markets for US gas, strategic for the geopolitical leverage which long-term contracts can provide.

In its recent trade agreement with the EU, the US secured undertakings to increase imports of US oil and gas. This may be a case of the EU appearing to concede what was likely to happen in any event. US supply is growing and Europe needs to import more LNG both to replace Russia pipeline gas and because, at least in the short to medium term, hydrogen alternatives to gas are struggling to scale.

Under the trade agreement the EU also gave imprecise undertakings to examine its green regulations. US energy secretary Chris Wright made clear that the US view is that EU environmental measures such as the Carbon Border Adjustment Mechanism (CBAM), methane regulations, and corporate due diligence laws amount to non-tariff trade barriers. He warned in September that "the whole trade talks would fall apart if Europe doesn't hold up its end" (FT 2025b). In practice, the reasons for changes to green regulations in the EU are largely internal, as discussed in chapter 2, and there is little evidence that US demands have materially affected the EU's decisions around its Omnibus Regulation or dissuaded the EU from implementing its CBAM.

President Trump has publicly urged the United Kingdom to reverse its decision to end new North Sea oil and gas licences, arguing that wind power is driving up costs. But the adjustments to the UK government's oil and gas licensing regime announced at the time of the November budget have been motivated more by domestic political pressure – including from Scotland, the opposition, trade unions and within the Labour party.

In the wider world, the administration is also pressing governments in Africa, East Asia, and South Asia to purchase more US LNG through long-term contracts. It has also encouraged governments including OPEC+[1] countries to increase production. But the impact of this pressure on the fundamentals of national decisions or the transition is at best unclear. OPEC's decisions in 2025 to unwind output restrictions appear mainly driven by internal factors. And where the US is effective in pressing partners such as Japan, South Korea or India to buy more of its LNG or LPG, that is, as in Europe, likely to displace other producers and to be limited by the additional costs (Reuters 2025d).

THE FUTURE OF THE US AS A 'SPOILER'

While the results of US international pressure may be limited to date, they have options for escalation. The US National Security Strategy (The White House 2025d) says that efforts to address climate change are a threat to the US: "We reject the disastrous 'climate change and net zero' ideologies that have so greatly harmed Europe, threaten the US and subsidise our adversaries. But how far would the US go in confronting this alleged threat?

1 OPEC is the Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries. The current OPEC members are Algeria, Equatorial Guinea, Gabon, Iran, Iraq, Kuwait, Libya, Nigeria, the Republic of the Congo, Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates and Venezuela. OPEC+ is a larger loose group that also includes other oil-producing countries such as Azerbaijan, Bahrain, Brunei, Brazil, Kazakhstan, Malaysia, Mexico, Oman, Russia, South Sudan and Sudan.

As the IMO negotiations show, the US is capable of deploying a range of measures to influence others' choices. The US National Security Strategy (ibid) describes as one of the goals of US policy 'Cultivating resistance to Europe's current trajectory within European nations'. The administration has argued that renewables pose a national security threat and is reported to have raised concerns about Chinese involvement in offshore wind farms in the North Sea on security grounds (FT 2025c). The Administration could escalate this argument and demand, for example, the exclusion of Chinese components from allied countries' energy systems (as it did in relation to Huawei in 5G networks). This could be accompanied by the threat of export restrictions or tariffs if they do not comply. It could put pressure on US headquartered asset owners and managers to eschew investments in clean technologies. Or it could promote climate-sceptic narratives and disinformation in third countries, or task intelligence agencies with undermining support for climate action internationally.

The point here is not to list the coercive measures the US could take if it wanted to prioritise attempting to stall the net zero transition. Rather it is to note that – compared to what it could in principle choose to do – there is limited evidence that it is running such a coordinated, determined campaign. Whatever the intentions of some officials, it is not clear whether this is a sufficient priority to the president that he is willing to expend significant political capital to reverse clean energy transitions internationally.

It is also unclear how effective the US would be if it chose to do so. The muted responses of key allies to US demands to date suggest that, while they want to avoid open confrontation, they are not materially changing their policies on clean technologies as a result of US pressure. Even among close partners dependent on US security guarantees, such as the UK and EU, the US's ability to shape allies' clean technology strategies or international cooperation frameworks has limits.

4. THE UNITED STATES AS 'FREE RIDER'?

For 30 years following the end of the Cold War, the 'free rider' problem preoccupied many Western governments' international thinking. 'Free-riding' takes places when one or more actors receive the benefits of collective action without contributing proportionally to the effort or costs (Olson 1965).

The possibility of climate-related 'free riding' has long shaped the United States' approach to international climate action. It was one of the reasons that President George W Bush abandoned the Kyoto Protocol, and it motivated the Obama administration to seek a new division of responsibilities between developed and developing countries in the Paris Agreement. It also lay behind the Biden administration's focus at COP29 on involving non-traditional donors in climate finance. This focus on addressing free riding within institutions reflected, at least in part, a belief in the value of international institutions and action and that addressing collective problems required collective effort.

President Trump does not share this belief and so has not continued the efforts of previous administrations, whether by increasing the obligations of others or reducing those of the US. The administration could have done this within existing international frameworks by, for example, slowing implementation of or revising its 'nationally determined contribution' (NDC) under the Paris Agreement, or by scaling back contributions to international climate funds.

Nor does the administration feel any responsibility to address the impacts of climate change. It is not the case that the US has formally rejected the fact of anthropogenic climate change. Although President Trump has repeatedly questioned the reality of climate change, the administration has not relied on this as a basis for action. For example, the administration's attempt to overturn the Environmental Protection Agency's 'endangerment finding' (that greenhouse gas emissions threaten public health) relied on a panel of scientists who did not deny human influence. Instead they downplayed its impacts and highlighted possible benefits, such as increased plant growth (DOE 2025b). As the costs of climate impacts globally and in the US increase, the administration has proposed to cut US climate science capabilities (Science 2025a) with implications for international programmes (FT 2025b).

The Trump administration therefore has stepped away from the previous US approach which focussed on rebalancing the international division of labour in climate action. Rather it argues that the US bears no responsibility to address it. This leaves other parties to shoulder greater costs and to contend with the challenge of the world's largest historical emitter becoming what it has long criticised others for – a free rider.

5. HOW TO RESPOND?

While the US wishes to be the prophet others follow in rolling back climate and clean technology policies, there is little evidence to date that other countries are following the path it has set. But it is clear that the US will free ride on the work of others to address a collective problem. And it will oppose global efforts to reduce emissions and disseminate clean technologies. Experience to date suggests that it can do so effectively in organisations of which it is a member, but less successfully elsewhere, including in its bilateral relations. And it is possible, if the adoption of clean technologies by the rest of the world continues, that the US will put efforts to reverse this trend more clearly at the centre of its external policies.

This poses dilemmas for countries, such as the UK, who remain committed to addressing climate change. The US remains a critical economic and security partner willing to take measures against those, including allies, who cross it. Given President Trump's dominance of US politics there are few constraints on him, at least until the mid-term elections in November 2026 and potentially beyond. But there are four broad responses which could enable countries such as the UK to manage the pressures and continue on its clean technology pathway, while recognising the difficult context for international climate cooperation.

Recommendation 1: Stay the course

Governments in many countries are concerned by a backlash against climate and clean energy related policies, including some decline in the salience of climate change as an issue to the public (Pew Research Center 2025, DESNZ 2025). Some figures, such as Tony Blair, have argued that current approaches to climate change are being exploited by populists and need to be subject to a pragmatic reset (TBI 2025).

There is both truth and hyperbole in these concerns. Nationalist populist parties are on the rise in many advanced economies and oppose climate action. If such groups take power, they are likely to promote fossil fuels, be sceptical about climate regulation and slow the deployment of clean technologies. However, while many of their supporters may be more sceptical of climate policies than other voters, climate change is not a primary motivation of their support; immigration, economic insecurity, and cultural issues tend to rank higher in their list of concerns (More in Common 2024).

Among the wider public, support for climate action has declined slightly and the issue has become less salient (DESNZ 2025, More in Common 2024). This however is in the context of major shocks such as the Covid-19 pandemic and Russia's invasion of Ukraine, which in turn have had major fiscal and social consequences, including greater political polarisation.

Staying the course in this more difficult context requires sharper focus in policy choices, and clearer communication.

Analysis for multiple countries shows that most of what needs to be done to decarbonise the energy, road transport, and built environment sectors is generally clear; while industrial processes, agriculture and aviation remain less clear as technologies are generally less mature (IEA 2025a, CCC 2025, Ember Energy

2025b). With high debt levels in many advanced economies, governments will need to be more selective by deprioritising technologies that will clearly not play significant roles whatever their domestic lobbies (eg hydrogen for domestic heating or road transport), and put in place rigorous benchmarks for continuing public support for nascent or unproven technologies (such as gas power with carbon capture and storage or small modular reactors).

In terms of communication, governments no doubt need to take an approach grounded in pragmatism, but there is a risk of overreacting to political headwinds and overcomplicating the messaging. In most countries – including the UK – most citizens recognise that rising emissions threaten the environment and are aware that inaction carries costs (More in Common 2025). All of the major arguments for clean technologies – relating to economic competitiveness, security, and sustainability – remain important. In the current context, the economic and security arguments (including the costs of inaction) should be prioritised but sustainability arguments should not be jettisoned. Messages about the impacts of climate change on clean air and water for example continue to resonate with the public.

Internationally, the US will seek to block or reverse climate action in institutions where it remains active. Those who support climate action – including the UK, the EU and China – will need to do better in building coalitions within and leveraging influence outside formal settings. This will be particularly important in the MDBs. The US has targeted them for reform while their role in financing the deployment of clean technologies and response to climate change will become more important as sources of bilateral funding stagnate.

The UK and the EU will also need to stick with their plans to implement and link emissions trading systems and carbon border measures. These are important market signals domestically and are doing more than any other measure to encourage the adoption of carbon pricing in other countries. But as COP30 showed, the measures are controversial and the EU and UK should show greater understanding of the concerns of developing countries by recycling some revenues from carbon border measures to support clean industries in emerging and developing countries. Failure to adjust their approach may see opposition grow, and make emerging and developing economies more receptive to the arguments of others, including the US, against carbon pricing and carbon border measures.

It is also important that COPs continue to provide a forum to assess progress and set targets. Frustrations with the COP process have grown in recent years, prompting proposals for reform (Carbon Brief 2025c). COPs will need to evolve and give space to new issues, such as recently in relation to trade. However, while there is an increasing focus on the role of COPs in implementation, the role of the formal, country-led process will inevitably be limited by the comprehensive, consensus-based nature of COPs. And despite growing criticism of targets as unrealistic or counter-productive, COPs are the only global forum for setting such targets which have an important role in motivating the design of coherent policies, mobilising a broad range of actors, and helping hold the public and private sectors, however loosely, to account.

More generally, a focus on procedural reform may deliver limited returns. Criticisms of COPs sometimes target the wrong problem: the main issues are the pace of action, insufficient climate finance, and the ability of pro-climate coalitions to organise effectively. Procedural reforms cannot solve these issues. Rather, the politics that impedes implementation would likely also constrain attempts at institutional or procedural change.

Recommendation 2: Build new coalitions

Staying the course will be critical in the ability of the UK and like-minded countries to build coalitions within international negotiations. But given the limits to cooperation in universal membership organisations such as the UNFCCC, many countries have recognised the merit of smaller groupings pursuing climate-related goals collaboratively. An increasing number of such coalitions has developed, whether under the broad COP umbrella or independently. Cooperation takes many forms, from developing clean technology pathways to exchanging experience on standards and regulations to, in some cases, cooperation in specific technologies.

In this latter area there is scope for more practical partnerships to develop and deploy clean technologies cost-effectively, reduce supply dependence, and support industrial development in emerging economies. To be effective, such partnerships would involve a small number of countries – those needing affordable access to clean technologies and inputs, and those with low-cost clean energy or raw materials capable of producing and exporting these technologies. Governance, political alignment, and reliability would also be factors.

For example, a group of steel producers may decided that they cannot produce green iron cost-effectively but still wish to retain domestic steelmaking, leading them to form partnerships for green pelletised iron supply to feed electric arc furnaces. Another partnership might aim to expand the production of critical grid components, while others might link fertiliser producers with emerging economies capable of producing green ammonia.

These partnerships would involve both governments and the private sector, differing from existing country platforms or clean energy partnership models by focussing on specific technology sub-sectors where mutually beneficial cooperation is possible and where governments can help shape markets through regulation, de-risking, offtake agreements, or technical assistance.

As major centres of demand, coordination between the UK and the EU would be important to these partnerships. While they would typically not involve the US at this point given the views of the administration, there is no reason in principle why the US could not be involved in financing specific projects where it shares objectives.

Recommendation 3: Work with and around China

China's role in the multilateral climate system will be boosted by the withdrawal of the US, but its role will fundamentally be driven by its own interests in expanding global markets for clean technologies while avoiding external pressures on its domestic choices. As the US seeks to reverse international cooperation, China is likely to promote it, positioning itself as a defender of multilateralism in climate governance. Statements of commitment to climate and clean technology cooperation from organisations where China is active are multiplying – at their leaders' summit in July, the BRICS countries reaffirmed their commitment to address climate change (BRICS 2025), as did leaders of the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation in September.

One of the objectives of the clean technology partnerships set out above would be to diversify the supply of clean technologies and material. So while China would not typically be involved in these partnerships, there may be cases where European countries are better partnering with China to build domestic capability in Europe (eg in batteries). In such cases, a similar approach by the UK and the EU to the conditions for Chinese investment or joint ventures would reduce the risk of a race to the bottom to attract Chinese investment.

There are a number of obstacles to deeper cooperation between Europe and China, not least the latter's support for Russia over Ukraine. But the UK and the EU share

with China an interest in advancing climate action and the energy transition at a time when their closest historical partner, the US, is working against their climate and industrial interests.

Cooperating more with China in some areas does not preclude diversifying away from China in some clean technologies; nor does it mean abandoning other alliances, particularly with climate-progressive and vulnerable countries. These will remain important, including in balancing negotiating blocs and countering regressive actors in COPs.

Recommendation 4: Cooperate where possible

As far cooperation with the US remains possible, it should be pursued both on the merits of the case and to keep channels of cooperation open. This applies most clearly at the sub-federal level, even if the administration's efforts to constrain state action make this harder than during President Trump's first term.

At the federal level, the administration views securing supplies of critical materials as a matter of national security, given the role of rare earths and batteries in military supply chains. Cooperation should therefore continue through existing platforms such as the Minerals Security Partnership, and new initiatives could be developed around critical minerals for defence and energy security.

On nuclear power, there remains scope for cooperation on advanced nuclear technologies, even if these will contribute at best marginally to global energy supply in the near term. Given the potential interest of US companies in technologies such as stratospheric aerosol injection, geoengineering may also under the right conditions be an area of cooperation.

CONCLUSION

The Trump administration may seek to be a prophet of energy dominance, but it is better seen as a free rider and would-be spoiler.

The uptake of clean technologies and countries' energy choices are determined by their domestic economic, policy and security imperatives. The US can shift the costs of securing the collective good of a stable climate onto others. It can make the task harder for those who want to promote clean technologies at home and climate cooperation abroad. But it cannot reverse the fundamentals.

For countries like the UK, pragmatic determination at home and flexible cooperation abroad can ensure that the impacts of the US campaign against clean technologies, while harmful, are ultimately marginal.

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