A key issue is missing from the list of topics for tonight's debate. Climate change is a global problem with global impacts, ultimately requiring a global solution. Climate change is a threat multiplier from the point of view of national security, intensifying the risk of international conflict and terrorism. (See here for more.) It has been a subject of U.S. diplomacy for more than twenty years, and it fully deserves a place in tonight's foreign affairs debate.

The United States has been committed to international action on climate change for the past twenty years. In 1992, the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) was signed by President George H.W. Bush and ratified by the United States Senate. The UNFCCC recognizes that climate change is a "common concern to humankind" and commits to further negotiations. As summarized by the Congressional Research Service, the UNFCC requires the United States and other nations to:

1. Gather and share information on GHG [greenhouse gas] emissions, national policies, and best practices;
2. Launch national strategies for addressing GHG emissions and adapting to expected impacts; and
3. Cooperate in preparing for the impacts of climate change.

Since 1992, negotiations have continued about a follow-up agreement setting specific emission limits. The Kyoto Protocol, which the U.S. did not join, was intended to be such a treaty. An informal agreement on targets was created in Copenhagen, but it isn't legally binding. So an enforceable agreement on limits remains to be created.

Although climate change isn't listed as a topic for the debate, it could still become part of the discussion. One of the listed topics is "The Rise of China and Tomorrow's World." China and U.S. are the two key parties in climate negotiations, being the world's largest emitters of greenhouse gases. After years of resistance, China has now indicated that it may be open to legally binding emissions limitations.

It would be entirely appropriate if the discussion of "The Rise of China and Tomorrow's World" turned toward consideration of climate change.This issue is clearly on the U.S.-China agenda. And it relates to "tomorrow's world" — the other half of the topic — in a uniquely powerful way. Let's hope that tonight's discussion takes this turn rather than overlooking one of the key issues facing the world today.