

China loomed large in Donald Trump's presidential campaign. He accused the country of stealing American jobs and manipulating its currency for trade advantage. He famously [tweeted](#) that global warming was a concept created by the Chinese to "make U.S. manufacturing non-competitive." At its core, Trump's argument was that China had grown strong at the United States' expense. And yet, Trump's plan to withdraw the U.S. from the Paris Agreement on climate change will strengthen China economically and politically. If he is serious about "making America great again," he should carefully consider the geopolitical ramifications of ceding global leadership on climate change to China.

The past few years have seen historic progress on global efforts to combat climate change. The world's [two largest emitters](#) of greenhouse gases—China (25 percent) and the United States (14 percent)—each played a critical role in the consummation of the historic Paris Agreement. U.S.-China joint announcements on climate change in [November 2014](#), [September 2015](#), and [March 2016](#) marked important milestones on the road to that global agreement. This cooperation was a stunning turnaround from the acrimonious relations surrounding the 2009 Copenhagen climate negotiations when Chinese representatives suggested that U.S. negotiator Todd Stern was "[ignorant](#)" and [referred](#) to the U.S. as "doing nothing" on climate change, like a "pig preening itself in a mirror." In Paris last year, observers saw China as playing a [more constructive](#) role. And at home, China has put in place a broad-based regulatory program aimed at leveling its carbon emissions by 2030. Chinese [investment](#) in clean energy technologies (wind, solar, biomass, geothermal) last year was more than investment in the U.S., the United Kingdom, and France combined. Some studies suggest that China's emissions may have already [peaked](#) in 2013-2014.

President-elect Trump has shown a markedly different attitude towards climate action. He has threatened to "[cancel](#)" the Paris Agreement, "stop all payments of U.S. tax dollars to U.N. global warming programs," kill the [Clean Power Plan](#) (an essential component of the U.S. commitment under the Paris Agreement), and [rescind](#) President Obama's [Climate Action Plan](#), which includes ambitious efficiency targets for motor vehicles. Trump's [appointment](#) of climate change denier Myron Ebell to head his environmental and energy transition team suggests that he will try to make good on his campaign promises.

U.S. retreat from the global climate change leadership forged by President Obama not only risks slowing global progress on climate change. It also leaves on the table tremendous opportunities in green development that China is all too willing to claim for itself. China has multiple incentives to do so, all aimed at strengthening its economic and political leadership at home and abroad.

- First, China's leaders are no longer satisfied with an economic model based on energy-

intensive, low-margin heavy industry and manufacturing. Climate change regulation is seen as an *economic* tool aimed at moving China's economy toward the low-carbon, high-tech, and clean energy industries of the future. China would like nothing more than to have the U.S. retreat from clean energy innovation and allow it to step into the breach.

- Second, emergency levels of pollution now cause [more than a million](#) premature deaths annually in China and generate thousands of incidents of social unrest each year. Reducing greenhouse gas emissions also helps reduce conventional air pollution, bolstering quality of life for the Chinese people *and* improving social stability.
- Third, Chinese leaders acknowledge that climate change will cause potentially catastrophic harm from increased heat waves, rising sea levels, more frequent and intense droughts, and water shortages. Stabilizing global temperatures will stave off many of these worst effects of climate change.
- Finally, climate change action offers China the perfect vehicle for demonstrating global leadership, burnishing its reputation among nations, and strengthening relations with allies old and new. This is critical for China as more of its companies "go out" to invest in other places and tensions sharpen in places like the South China Sea.

Thus, we find ourselves in unfamiliar territory. As a Trump presidency threatens to marginalize the U.S. role in global climate change action, China's leadership role is ascendant. Earlier this month, China's special representative on climate change, Xie Zhenhua, criticized Trump's proposal to back out of the Paris Agreement, calling it out of step with "[global trends](#)."

America is now at a crossroads. China has placed a clear bet on a prosperous low-carbon future. President-elect Trump still has time to pull back on his rhetoric and keep America in the game.

A senior Chinese environmental researcher told one of us over the summer that he hoped for a Trump victory because it would "allow China to overtake the U.S. more quickly." We are concerned that his words will prove prescient. In sacrificing the tremendous potential of green development for [quixotic coal country job gains](#) even Republicans do not believe will materialize, Trump's proposals on climate change will only weaken American prospects and Make *China* Great Again.