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How could China react to Trump on climate change?

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COP22 has been overshadowed, inevitably, by the shock election of Donald Trump. While negotiators have stuck reasonably well to the task of elaborating the technical decisions needed to implement the Paris Agreement, the corridors have buzzed with one and the same conversation. One the most frequent questions that has been asked is: how will China react? Will they dial down their ambitions? Will they fill the diplomatic void left by the outgoing Obama administration? What leverage would they be will to exercise on the Trump administration?

Firstly, all Chinese interlocutors affirm that a less proactive administration in the White House will not induce a reversal of domestic Chinese policy. This is the sea change that has taken place since the Copenhagen climate summit in 2009, where China viewed the climate agenda with suspicion and defensiveness. Now, Chinese domestic action is firmly anchored in a robust perception of its own interests.

Numerous very senior officials and researchers have voiced confidence in the fact that China will significantly overachieve its 2020 emissions targets, and is well on the way to overachieving its 2030 emissions targets (recent [IDDRI research](#) has reached similar conclusions). Zhou Dadi, Director Emeritus of the public research institution the Energy Research Institute, affirmed confidently that Chinese coal consumption had peaked already in 2013. Coal production is down 10% in China in the first seven months of 2016, and coal demand is on track for another fall of 3-4 percentage points, as noted by energy market think tank [IEEFA](#).

We can therefore expect that domestic drivers of local air pollution, energy security, and China's huge stake in the clean energy game will continue to drive Chinese engagement in the climate change issue. Where a US slowdown might have an impact is on clean energy innovation, with the US being, still, one of the most innovative economies in the world including in the green energy space (witness the rise of Tesla). If this innovation slows down, then it may have a negative effect on the pace with which China can manage its energy transition. But the direction is clear. On the international front, only time will tell how China reacts. Already it is signalling that it is positioning itself to [move into the void](#) left by the very probable scrapping of the US-led Transpacific Partnership (TPP) on trade under the Trump administration.

China, by promoting its own trade pact, will step in and take over the role of rule-making in the Asia Pacific region. This shift represents a diplomatic coup for a country which, only a few years ago, had a much more isolationist foreign policy stance. Could this trend be pursued on climate too? Already the Chinese head of delegation to the climate talks taking place in Marrakech this week, Vice Foreign Minister Liu Zhenmin, took the unusual step of directly calling out the US, [stating yesterday](#): "We hope that the US will continue to play a leadership role in the climate change process as people are worried about a repeat of the experience of the Kyoto protocol..." This needs to be seen in the context of the long history of non-intervention in other countries' domestic affairs in Chinese foreign policy. China's strong domestic interest in climate policy will likely mean that it will remain a key defender of the international political consensus enshrined in international law under the Paris Agreement.