International Climate Policy: Trumping Trump

How global climate protection can proceed after the US withdrawal

The G20 summit in Hamburg on 7 and 8 July 2017 was the acid test at the highest level for global climate protection after the United States announced its withdrawal from the Paris Agreement. In an unprecedented act of isolating a single country, the remaining "G19" states reaffirmed their commitment to the Agreement and also clearly stated that it was "irreversible". With this, a new chapter in international climate policy has begun. Will the rest of the world succeed in coordinating an effective global climate policy despite the withdrawal of US President Trump? Might the international community even succeed in not just compensating for the American contribution, but also in seizing the momentum that has arisen following the decision by the US and perhaps in the end even defy Trump through more far-reaching measures?

How can global climate protection proceed after the US withdrawal? A team of researchers at the Wuppertal Institute has turned its attention to answering this question. In an in brief, the scientists show how those countries that are interested in protecting the climate can best come together to successfully carry forward the Paris Agreement and global climate policy. There are essentially two levels available for the further development of the global climate agenda. On the one hand, there are the activities within the context of the global climate regime, i.e. the Framework Convention on Climate Change and its "subsidiary agreements", the Kyoto Protocol and the Paris Agreement. On the other hand, climate protection can also be further promoted outside of these agreements in the event that they are significantly weakened as a result of a large-scale policy of obstruction by the US and other stakeholders. "Should this be the case, a number of possibilities present themselves. A pioneer club of ambitious states and subnational stakeholders could be formed, or individual states could take a targeted approach to certain issues through joint sectoral activities. And, in the worst-case scenario, trade measures such as punitive tariffs could also be developed to regulate trade with states that are not party to the treaty," says Professor Hermann E. Ott, Senior Advisor for Global Sustainability and Welfare Strategies at the Wuppertal Institute.

The authors have come to the conclusion that global climate diplomacy over the last 25 years has been shaped and slowed down by the assumption that no effective climate protection is possible without the United States, meaning the Americans must be involved by whatever means necessary. This assumption must now be abandoned, even though the US is responsible for around one-sixth of global greenhouse gas emissions. The Nationally Determined Contributions (NDCs) under the Paris Agreement would still require improvement even without the withdrawal of the United States, because they will not suffice if the 2 °C limit aspired to by the international community is to be met. The next round of negotiations from 2018 could therefore be used not only to offset the loss of the US but also to more than compensate for this.

"Despite the radical U-turn by the Trump administration, the fate of the United States’ energy transformation has not yet been sealed. Energy policy in the US is chiefly the responsibility of the individual federal states, and the President has no formal influence on their legislative processes," explains Prof. Dr. Manfred Fischedick, Vice-President of the Wuppertal Institute. "As was already the case during George W. Bush’s presidency, the policies of the national..."
administration have resulted in a strong backlash from subnational and non-governmental stakeholders. Moreover, this departure from previous national energy policy will not stop further price reductions and technological developments in the field of renewable energies, energy efficiency and storage technologies. The key innovations will, however, be less likely to come from the US."

In the months and years ahead, one of the main tasks for the countries interested in climate protection will be to form a strong alliance in order to continue to isolate the United States on this issue. Politically, the greatest responsibility lies with the European Union (EU) as the only power with the resources and influence necessary to fill the vacuum – especially in financial terms. This will also be an opportunity for France and Germany to deepen their cooperation with the aim of developing an environmentally and socially sustainable Europe. A great deal can also be achieved by partnering with other countries, above all China.

The Wuppertal Institute has been following and evaluating the results of international climate protection negotiations for more than 20 years. Its research investigates the options for implementing pathways to climate protection at a national and global level.

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