

On climate, the world moves on without the U.S.

Trump can't stop the international community from taking action.

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Angela Merkel, chancellor of Germany, and Donald Tusk, president of the European Council. [Some rights reserved](#) by David Plas / European People's Party.

For months, the Trump administration has been attempting a U-turn on climate action, reversing or undermining or simply ignoring whatever pro-climate policies it inherited. Some of these efforts won't amount to much. The coal industry's fortunes aren't going to return, for instance; renewable energy is here to stay. Other actions—such as the administration's review of protected land designations with an eye toward oil and gas development—may have serious consequences for American places and people.

The world's attempts to forestall climate catastrophe will continue without the U.S.

Whatever hurdles the president faces on this ill-advised path, they weren't placed there by the Paris climate accord. The international agreement is a voluntary one,

requiring only that its signatory nations set their own climate goals and then report on their progress. It would have been easy for the administration to remain notionally a part of the accord while going its own way on the policy details. There was no substantive reason to proactively pull out.

Nor was the American electorate clamoring for the change. Only 13 percent of registered voters supported the withdrawal; this didn't amount to a majority even among Republicans or within any single state. While Trump may still have opportunities to broaden his political support, this isn't one of them.

No, pulling out of Paris was a symbolic action, nothing more. It's an appeal to the core of Trump supporters who don't like being told what to do by a gathering of global leaders in a European cosmopolis. It's an expression of nationalistic feeling, "America first" as mere emotive gesture.

While the president's actions can do real harm to the climate, many U.S. businesses, cities, and states have made it clear that he won't stop their efforts to the contrary. Nor will he stop the international community from moving forward. The world's attempts to forestall climate catastrophe will continue. The big change is that the United States will be on the sidelines, not calling the plays.

Maybe being sidelined presents an opportunity. For decades, a dominant theme among American foreign policymakers has been national hubris: we are the most important nation, the only one able to lead the world. Trump's alternative—the isolation of "America first" nationalism—is no solution. But being forced to stand by as other countries take the reins may help global-minded Americans unlearn the notion that we're the only one that can.

The world is working together to confront a major threat—without the leadership or even participation of the U.S. government. It will be instructive for Americans to recognize that the world can and will move forward without us. Then, when our current crisis of governance is over, perhaps we will reengage the international community with a new dose of humility. Perhaps we'll learn how to follow as well as lead.

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