

Weekly Climate *Review*



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Europe looks, with trepidation, to China for climate leadership

In this second week of Donald Trump's U.S. presidency, more hints emerged about his administration's intentions regarding climate change. Hints alone have been dire enough to drive the European Union further toward embracing China—albeit with some reluctance—as the world's leader on the issue.

"Can we just fill the gap? No, because we will be too fragmented and too inward looking," one E.U. official [told Reuters](#), regarding the U.S. exit from primacy. "Europe will now be looking to China to make sure that it is not alone." Others doubt China's ability to rally the world the way the United States could. "We will make a lot of noises [about allying with China], but let's be honest, we lost an ally—a major one," said a senior E.U. diplomat who requested anonymity. At the same time, Donald Tusk, president of the

European Commission, released an open [letter](#) naming an "increasingly assertive" China as a threat to the E.U., "particularly... with the new [Trump] administration seeming to put into question the last 70 years of American foreign policy."

China's official *Xinhua* news agency [issued](#) a "commentary" in response the next day. "China is an opportunity for Europe, not a threat," read the headline. "A senior E.U. politician said recently that China represents an external threat to Europe—an accusation which is groundless as well as outrageous. As a matter of fact, China's development provides an enormous opportunity for Europe, and both sides benefit from strong and stable bilateral ties." It named climate change as part of that opportunity. "With the Paris Agreement having entered into force, China and the E.U. will need to trust each other more than ever to help ensure that these critical measures are being implemented fully and correctly," it said.

On Thursday, Swedish Prime Minister Stefan Löfven [expressed](#) concern about climate change skeptics in the White House. "The position we hear from the new administration is worrying," Löfven told the *Associated Press*, after [introducing](#) a law that would ensure all future governments of Sweden have "credible climate policy" and pledging a national target of zero net greenhouse gas emissions by 2045. Climate Minister Isabella Lövin, who was by his side, urged Europe to lead on climate change now that "the U.S. is not there anymore to lead." She lamented "climate skeptics really gaining power in the world again" but said she found hope in China and India reiterating their commitments to the Paris Agreement.

As of January 24, 127 countries representing 81.39 percent of global carbon emissions had [ratified](#) the Paris Agreement,

including the United States with its 17.89-percent share. To date, no government other than the U.S. has indicated an intention to leave the U.N. pact.

Climate context

Only removing carbon dioxide from the atmosphere can keep global warming under the 2°C cap set down by the Paris Agreement, scientists warned in a [study](#) published Monday in *Nature Climate Change*. "The rapid deployment of wind, solar and electric cars gives some hope," lead author Glen Peters of the Center for International Climate and Environmental Research in Norway [told](#) *Agence France Presse*. "But at this stage, these technologies are not really displacing the growth in fossil fuels or conventional transportation." Therefore, the researchers concluded, "the continued lack of large-scale carbon capture and storage [CCS] threatens 2030 targets and the longer-term Paris ambition of net zero emissions." Dozens of CCS facilities could be online by 2020, but thousands would be required by 2030 to keep warming to safe limits, they said.

A [special edition](#) of the *Bulletin of the American Meteorological Society* published this week presents some of the strongest evidence yet that humanity's greenhouse gas emissions exacerbated heat waves in India, Pakistan, Europe, East Africa, East Asia and Australia in 2015. More than 100 scientists in 18 countries helped [link](#) human activities to killing heat waves, decimated snowpacks, Arctic sea ice melting at shocking speed and wildfires turned runaway infernos. "With this report, we continue to document scientists' growing ability to identify how climate change influences today's weather," [said](#) Editor-in-Chief Jeff Rosenfeld.

Climate change may also put fish with toxic levels of mercury on our dinner tables, according to new [research](#) published in *Science Advances*. Warmer temperatures are causing increased rainfall and snow and ice melt, which lead to more runoff of organic materials. "That means a greater discharge of mercury and organic carbon to coastal ecosystems, which leads to higher levels of mercury in the small animals living there," [said](#) Jeffra Schaefer, an assistant research professor at Rutgers University and a study co-author. "These coastal regions are major feeding grounds for fish, and, thus, the organisms living there serve as an important source of mercury that accumulates to high levels in the fish people like to eat."

Surprises

In what came as a surprise because took place under the Trump administration's watch, a Department of Defense (DoD) [document](#) on protecting U.S. interests in the Arctic released this week mentions "climate change" and says rapid warming in the region poses risks to national security. "To operate safely and effectively in the region, DoD must adapt current and future operations to address the effects of environmental changes through identification and assessment of the effects of climate change on the DoD mission, taking those effects into consideration in developing plans and implementing procedures and anticipating and managing any risks that develop as a result of climate change to build resilience to the changing operational environment in the Arctic," reads the strategy document made public by Alaska Senator Dan Sullivan, a Republican. "After nearly two years of advocacy and bipartisan efforts, I am pleased that we finally have a much more serious military strategy for the Arctic region," Sullivan [said](#).

In another surprise, János Pásztor, former climate adviser to the U.N. secretary general, surfaced in Nairobi, speaking as executive director of the [Carnegie Climate Geoengineering Governance Initiative \(C2G2\)](#). "As much as the Paris Agreement was a major step forward, we know that even if all countries meet their targets we're still looking at warming of 3° C," he [told](#) *Climate Home*. "To assume it will be 100-percent [successful] is not realistic, and we are saying to reach these ambitious goals, we need to think seriously on what else to add in to massive mitigation efforts. Some scientists are saying this is not enough, and we should consider solar radiation management to make sure we don't go beyond 1.5° C to 2°C. These are plausible scenarios, and we need to think seriously about all options." Less than a year ago, the U.N. [warned](#) against geoengineering climate solutions, but Pásztor insists the once-taboo subject must be discussed. "It could possibly give a breathing space for decarbonization or make sure that if we overshoot [2°C], we don't overshoot for too long," he said. "Government officials, intergovernmental officials—some of my craziest conservationist friends—they agree unanimously we must deal with this. They're not all pro. Some are very much against it. But all agree it must be discussed... ."

In another sci-fi-come-true news item, *The New York Times* [reported](#) that California's [Seasteading Institute](#)—with about \$2.5 million of crowdfunding in hand—is forging ahead with plans to build a model city on floating islands, with the aim of meeting the needs of a world that will be increasingly swamped by sea rise. French Polynesia may host the futuristic enclave in one of its lagoons, but costs of up to \$50 million for housing that will accommodate only a few dozen people could limit buyers to wealthy foreigners.

Along similar lines, this week's *New Yorker* [featured](#) a story about super-rich doomsday preppers setting up homes away from home—in places such as old nuclear missile silos in the United States or mountain hideaways in New Zealand—to shelter from a coming apocalypse, whether it be climatic or of some more immediate man-made origin. "In private Facebook groups, wealthy survivalists swap tips on gas masks, bunkers and locations safe from the effects of climate change," the author wrote. "One member, the head of an investment firm, told me, 'I keep a helicopter gassed up all the time and I have an underground bunker with an air-filtration system.' He said that his preparations probably put him at the 'extreme' end among his peers. But he added, 'A lot of my friends do the guns and the motorcycles and the gold coins. That's not too rare anymore.'"

Stacking the deck

Groups advocating climate action and environmental protection continue to staff up for the legal battles they expect to prevent the Trump administration from backsliding on hard-won U.S. policies and laws, the *Associated Press* [reported](#) on Sunday. "It's going to be all-out war," said Patrick Parenteau, a professor at Vermont Law School. "We're not surprised at what they're doing but maybe a little surprised at how fast and furious it's all happening," said Pat Gallagher, director of the Sierra Club's 50-member legal team, of Trump's moves to date.

President Trump will certainly "withdraw" from the Paris Agreement, Myron Ebell, former head of the transition team at the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), [told](#) reporters in London on Monday. Even though Rex Tillerson, Trump's choice for secretary of state, said during his Senate

confirmation hearing that it is important for the U.S. to keep a seat at the table in global climate talks, the Americans who elected Trump "would prefer not to have a seat at the table," Ebell said at an event hosted by the Global Warming Policy Foundation and the Foreign Press Association. "If Rex Tillerson disagrees with the president, who's going to win that debate?" he said. "The president was elected, and Rex Tillerson wasn't."

Buzzfeed [reported](#) Tuesday that the former ExxonMobil CEO took a "different tone" in written responses to questions after his hearing. In answer to a query about the Paris Agreement from Senator Jeff Merkley, Democrat of Oregon, Tillerson said: "The United States should decide to join an international agreement based on its own national interests and not the interests or opinions of other nations. If confirmed, I will support U.S. membership in only those international agreements that advance our national interest and do not cause harm to the American people or our economic competitiveness."

On Wednesday, the Senate approved Tillerson's nomination by an underwhelming 56-43 vote, and the president swore him in as secretary of state that night. "The scientific community and the 194 other countries that signed the Paris climate agreement will not sit idly by. We will be watching Mr. Tillerson's actions closely," [warned](#) Kathy Mulvey, climate accountability campaign manager at the Union of Concerned Scientists, in a statement.

In a move that could have a longer shelf life than Trump himself, the president on Tuesday nominated Neil Gorsuch to fill the vacancy on the U.S. Supreme Court left by conservative Justice Antonin Scalia. The 49-year-old

Gorsuch, a justice on Denver's 10th Circuit Court of Appeals, has a resume [filled](#) with the right stuff—schooling at Columbia, Harvard and Oxford; stints as partner in a Washington law firm and at the U.S. Department of Justice; clerkships for Supreme Court Justices Byron White and Anthony Kennedy—and happens to idolize Scalia. In 2015, *ThinkProgress* [lauded](#) Gorsuch for ruling in favor of Colorado's clean energy law over the fossil fuel industry. However, that same year, he said in a *National Review* article, "American liberals have become addicted to the courtroom, relying on judges and lawyers rather than elected leaders and the ballot box as the primary means of effecting their social agenda." He also opposes the so-called Chevron standard, which gives deference to federal regulatory agencies when laws are ambiguous.

"Gorsuch has a lengthy record of decisions that seek to benefit corporations and restrict the federal government's regulatory responsibilities," Earthjustice President Trip Van Noppen said in a [statement](#) asking the Senate to reject the nomination. "A review of Gorsuch's writings and decisions indicate that he would seek to overturn well-established Supreme Court precedents and prevent the federal government from enforcing bedrock environmental laws such as the Clean Air Act and Clean Water Act. Gorsuch's record suggests he would take the court in a far-right direction, doing irreparable harm to the health of communities, while failing to protect wildlife [and] our public lands and restricting efforts to combat climate change."

An [analysis](#) by *Climate Central* shows that President Trump could have the opportunity to remake much of the federal court system in his ideological image, perhaps filling 114 vacant federal judgeships in the coming four years. "It's a very

serious problem," said Glenn Sugameli, an attorney for Defenders of Wildlife. "It does create more opportunities for bad judges to get confirmed, for bad decisions to be issued and for courts to tilt [away from environmental safeguards]."

Although Senate Democrats [boycotted](#) a vote by the Environment and Public Works Committee on Scott Pruitt, Trump's nominee to head the EPA, Republicans used their majority to suspend committee rules Thursday and voted 11-0 to send Pruitt for a full vote of the Senate.

Also on Thursday, following House approval on Wednesday, the Senate [voted](#) 54-45 to throw out a rule aimed at protecting waterways from coal mining waste. "Make no mistake about it, this Obama administration rule is not designed to protect streams," Republican Representative Bill Johnson of Ohio said on Wednesday. "Instead, it was an effort to regulate the coal mining industry right out of business."

Meanwhile, *Climate Central* [reported](#) that the EPA's website no longer features any mention of humanity's greenhouse gas emissions as a cause of climate change, references to the Clean Power Plan or the statement of U.S. commitment to U.N. climate negotiations.

Worrying signs

Xinhua opened the week with stories about China's clean energy progress and prospects, but a couple of less climate-friendly news items surfaced in the press toward the week's end.

"China becomes more efficient, cleaner in energy use," [said](#) one *Xinhua* headline on Monday. "China's wind power capacity continues to grow," [said](#) another. The Russian

government's *Sputnik* news agency [reported](#) Monday that China had decided to expand environmental checks to the entire country in 2017, citing China's Ministry of Environmental Protection and *Xinhua*.

"China firing blanks in 'war on pollution' as smog worsens," [declared](#) a headline on Thursday in Hong Kong's *South China Morning Post*. "Posts berating the government's insincerity or incompetence in dealing with air pollution are flooding social media, lawyers are taking the authorities to court for failing to solve the problem, and sporadic protests against smog have surfaced in cities like Chengdu and Beijing," the story said. "China pledged 10 billion yuan [\$1.45 billion] to a smog-fighting fund in 2014, with the money distributed to nine provincial-level governments... . But after an inspection... last year, the Ministry of Finance published a report... that named and shamed Anhui, Tianjin, Henan and Shanxi for embezzlement and misappropriation of funds ranging from several million yuan to hundreds of millions. Some counties in Anhui were found to have spent their funds on renovating government office buildings, digging new wells, buying transformers and even entertainment." Indeed, local environmental protection authorities continue to be "a weak link in the system because they are subject to protectionist pressure from local officials and because they face contradictory incentives in doing their job well," said Tseming Yang, a law professor at Santa Clara University in California, who studies China's environmental policies.

An article today in *The Australian* [reported](#) that the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) has dropped its ban on financing coal-fired power plants. The Australian "government has convinced the China-sponsored AIIB to curtail its 'socially acceptable' policy of not lending money to build gas- or coal-

fired power stations in Asia," the story said. "The new guidelines open up the \$100 billion in infrastructure loans—of which Australia has pledged almost \$5 billion—to finance the latest clean coal-powered stations in developing Asian nations seeking to provide electricity to 500 million people."

Tepid demand, incentives

The *Nikkei Asian Review* [reported](#) Tuesday on an unpublished report in which state-run Coal India, the world's largest coal producer, raised doubts about its ability to maintain dominance in India's energy market in the face of improving prospects for renewable energy. The "internal report paints a bleak future for coal in the country due to the increased cost of extraction, a leveling off in [coal]-power demand and the growing viability of renewable energy sources such as solar," the story said. However, it also quoted R. Mohandas, Coal India's personnel director, as saying, "We are already investing in... renewable energy, but the [coal] ministry is also backing our ambitious... 2020 target that sets our coal production target at 1 billion tons" per year.

Representatives of Coal India's more than 250,000 workers dismissed the report as a bargaining tool to counter their demands for a 50-percent pay increase. Company officials [said](#) they may not be able to even match the 25-percent raise granted five years ago. "Things are different now," a senior executive said. "Previously, the demand for coal exceeded supply, and now supply is exceeding demand."

The central government's budget for the 2017-18 fiscal year, presented on Wednesday by Finance Minister Arun Jaitley, [included](#) cuts in import duties and tariffs for parts and materials used to manufacture solar and wind power

components, as well as a 50-percent [decrease](#) in the customs duty on liquefied natural gas. In another nod to cleaner energy, Jaitley announced the government would outfit of 7,000 train stations with solar power. At the same time, he outlined plans to create an Indian oil giant the likes of ExxonMobil, through mergers of state-run companies. "We propose to create an integrated public sector 'oil major' which will be able to match the performance of international and domestic private sector oil and gas companies," the minister [said](#).

Expert observers expressed disappointment in the budget's weak incentives for clean energy. "India has an ambitious target of 175 gigawatts of solar, wind and other renewable energy by 2022. ... The budget must be evaluated against this scale of need and opportunity. The role of public funds should be to either catalyze action, attract investment or underwrite risk," [wrote](#) Arunabha Ghosh and Kanika Chawla of the Council on Energy, Environment and Water in an op-ed for *Livemint*. "...[T]here is no allocation for energy storage, which could exacerbate challenges with integrating renewable energy into the grid. ...[D]espite some focus on transport infrastructure, no allowances have been made for electric vehicles or biofuels. While total budgetary outlay to renewable energy marginally increased, there is little to celebrate. This budget is unlikely to catalyze action, attract private investment or underwrite risks. An opportunity was lost."

Looking forward

With Rex Tillerson now at the helm of U.S. diplomacy, we should see more definitive indications of where the Trump administration intends to go with the Paris Agreement. U.N. expert Shazia Rafi [predicts](#) that Tillerson, after 40 years at

ExxonMobil, will exercise a steady hand. "Corporations like to have rules that don't arbitrarily change," she said. "I don't think someone with that experience is going to want the U.S. to be pulling out of treaties in a rush and creating chaos in the world."

If all goes to the Republicans' way, the EPA may have Scott Pruitt in charge by next week. To make things interesting, the House Science Committee, chaired by a 16-term Texas Republican Lamar Smith, has scheduled a Tuesday [hearing](#), titled "Making the EPA great again," to examine how the agency uses science in making regulatory decisions.

The partisan fight over confirming Neil Gorsuch will carry on, perhaps punctuated by the Senate choosing the "nuclear option," as [recommended](#) by President Trump, to vaporize Democratic opposition.

Looking further ahead, the conservative Heartland Institute has scheduled an event, titled "Resetting U.S. climate policy," on March 23-24, for Trump appointees. "It's time to reset U.S. climate and energy policy away from the alarmism and fake science that dominated policy making during the Obama era and plot a new course based on real scientific data and economic analysis," Joseph Bast, the group's president, [said](#) in a press release. "The American people deserve a huge 'peace dividend' that can be brought about by ending the unnecessary and futile war on fossil fuels."

The [March for Science](#) is scheduled for Earth Day, Saturday, April 22, in Washington, DC. "We are overwhelmed and grateful at the incredible support we've had in organizing this march," the organizers said in an email this week. "...[A]lmost 40,000 people have reached out to us eager to help. Satellite

marches are being formed in countries across the globe, from Canada to Australia. In Washington, DC, our march will lead to a rally on the Washington Mall, where scientists will hold teach-ins about their work and how science impacts our every day lives." According to the official website, the march will celebrate "publicly funded and publicly communicated science as a pillar of human freedom and democracy."

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