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America's climate carousel

As Trump's re-election threatens to derail climate diplomacy once again, the Global South is done waiting for stable leadership from wealthier powers

The rhythmic swing of American climate policy has taken another dramatic turn. With Donald Trump's return to the presidency in 2024, the international climate community finds itself bracing for what many fear will be another American exodus from the Paris Agreement. This development, more than just another chapter in US political volatility, threatens to fundamentally reshape the global climate dialogue and potentially fracture an already fragile international consensus.

The story began hopefully in 2016 when the United States, under President Barack Obama, joined the Paris Agreement in a moment of seemingly decisive climate leadership. Yet, barely a year later, Trump withdrew, citing economic pressures and perceived disadvantages to American industry. His successor, Joe Biden, made rejoining the agreement his first presidential act in 2021, attempting to restore American credibility in global climate efforts. Now, with Trump's return to power, the international community watches with a mixture of resignation and concern as history appears poised to repeat itself.

For nations of the Global South, this pattern of engagement and disengagement reveals a stark truth about the climate conversation. What was once whispered in diplomatic corridors is now openly discussed in international forums: climate action for wealthy nations appears to be a luxury that can be discarded when economically inconvenient, while for developing nations it remains a matter of survival.

Why should a nation struggling to industrialise accept binding emissions targets when wealthy nations treat such commitments as optional?

In the bustling streets of Lagos, the flooded slums of Jakarta, and the drought-stricken farms of Honduras and Kenya, the American policy pendulum would predictably be viewed not just with frustration but with a deepening sense of betrayal. These nations, contributing least to global emissions but suffering their worst effects, are watching as the world's second-

largest emitter treats climate commitments like reversible political decisions rather than existential imperatives.

If the pendulum were to swing again in January 2025, the impact on COP30 would be seismic, as conversations would inevitably tilt toward addressing this fundamental crisis of confidence. Developing nations, already sceptical of Western commitment to climate action, would have concrete evidence that even the most basic climate agreements can be subordinated to domestic political winds. This reality would likely reshape negotiating positions fundamentally. After all, why should a nation struggling to industrialise accept binding emissions targets when wealthy nations treat such commitments as optional?

The economic argument that typically accompanies US withdrawal – that climate agreements disadvantage American workers and industry – rings particularly hollow in the Global South. These nations watch as their agricultural sectors collapse under changing weather patterns, their coastal cities face existential threats from rising seas, and their populations grapple with climate-induced displacement. For them, the economic costs of climate change aren't future projections but present-day realities.

A turning point?

The looming reversal in American climate policy may well mark a turning point in global climate diplomacy, where COP30 risks becoming a parlour of academics rather than a forum for serious climate action. Developing nations are increasingly looking to forge their own path, seeking climate resilience strategies that don't depend on the unreliable support of wealthy nations. China's growing influence in climate diplomacy, particularly in the Global South, gains additional momentum with each American reversal — all of this seems to rest on which way the Trump administration will go. The Trump presidency could decide the future of climate negotiations.

The international community now faces a critical question: how to build climate action frameworks that can withstand political volatility in key nations? The answer may lie in decentralised cooperation, where cities, regions and non-state actors forge direct partnerships across borders. Already, networks of cities from both developed and developing nations are creating climate action partnerships that bypass national governments entirely.

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Yet, the fundamental issue remains unresolved. The original promise of the Paris Agreement was not just about emissions targets but about shared responsibility and trust between nations. The 2017 US withdrawal eroded this foundation, transforming what was meant to be a unified global response to climate change into an increasingly fractured and uncertain effort — if it happens again, this trust would be further eroded.

For the Global South, this pattern will confirm their deepest suspicions: that in the halls of power in developed nations, climate action remains fundamentally an economic conversation dressed in environmental rhetoric — indeed, echoing a pattern that has become visible since the General Agreement on Trade and Tariff (GATT) was established in 1947.

As climate impacts intensify and the window for effective action narrows, this reality threatens not just the future of climate cooperation but the very premise of global environmental governance.

The path forward remains uncertain, but one thing is clear: the era of taking Western climate leadership for granted is over. The Global South, faced with existential climate threats, can no longer afford to pin its hopes on the shifting political winds of wealthy nations. The question now is not whether international climate action will continue, but what form it will take in a world where the most powerful nations' commitments prove as changeable as the weather they're supposedly trying to protect.



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