ECONOMY AND ECOLOGY 13.06.2017 | Katja Biedenkopf

Nothing but hot air

Trump's decision to abandon the Paris climate agreement is based on political cynicism and bad mathematics

At the beginning of June, US president Donald Trump announced he would pull his country out of the Paris climate agreement, drawing the ire of world leaders, environmental campaigners as well as heads of industry. He has previously described climate change as a hoax. But as climate change expert Katja Biedenkopf points out in an interview with Ellie Mears, even Trump's economic arguments ring hollow: the coal industry is on the way out and jobs are moving to green tech and renewables.

What are the main reasons Donald Trump decided to pull out of the 2015 Paris climate accord?

It's very difficult to understand many of President Trump's decisions on rational grounds. We can only speculate on what his motivations may be. As I see it, the reasons for exiting the Paris Agreement are related to the US domestic agenda rather than international politics. During his election campaign Trump promised he would "cancel" the Paris Agreement (which is of course not possible) and that he would safeguard jobs in the coal sector. So the decision to exit the Paris Agreement was a way to deliver on some of his campaign promises. Trump has now started to realise it won't be easy to deliver on some of the other promises he made – such as reforming the health care system and various tax cuts. Climate change and the Paris Agreement, however, are issues on which he actually could deliver.

In the speech he gave on leaving the agreement, Trump labelled it "unfair". He did not specify why. Given that countries decide themselves what kind of climate policies they submit to the UNFCCC (United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change) process, it's difficult to see what the alleged injustice could be. Perhaps he was referring to the financial commitments the US was expected to make to help tackle climate change. But considering the US' per capita and indirect greenhouse gas emissions, it seems only fair that the US shoulder parts of the financial burden to help vulnerable and poor countries in their efforts to mitigate and adapt to

climate change.

What has been the reaction within the Republican Party and the US electorate?

President Trump's decision to withdraw from the Paris Agreement has triggered strong responses from a number of actors. Most of those oppose a US exit from the Paris Agreement but, for example, politicians from US states with significant coal and other fossil fuel resources and a number of companies from fossil fuel intensive sectors support the decision. Yet, a number of opinion polls have revealed a majority of US citizens support action on climate change and want the US to remain party to the Paris Agreement. Twelve US states and a number of cities have teamed to form a 'US Climate Alliance' and expressed their commitment to the Paris Agreement. Also a number of large US companies, including Apple, eBay and Google have spoken out in favour of climate action. So we are seeing a significant resistance movement evolving at the subnational level and in the private sector. This could mean that the US' greenhouse gas emissions will not rise as much as some might fear. Nonetheless, I don't think that they will be able entirely to compensate for the lack of US federal climate action.

We are seeing a significant resistance movement evolving at the subnational level and in the private sector.

The agreement is widely believed to be the world's best chance of tackling catastrophic climate change. Can the rest of the world go it alone without America?

This question is speculative and difficult to answer. The US withdrawal will most likely have an impact on greenhouse gas emissions and possibly on global political dynamics. So far, government leaders in China and Europe have merely reaffirmed their commitment to the Paris accord. There have also been calls by a few countries to lower their own commitments, such as when the Belgian minister for sustainable development's statement calling for a watering down of Belgium's mitigation targets. Belgium's Prime Minister, Charles Michel, has however since refuted the minister and stressed his country's unchanged ambition to tackle climate change. So far then, President Trump's decision provoked some discussion but no yielded discernible negative effects on the rest of the world. It probably is too early for such an

assessment.

Will US intransigence encourage closer cooperation between European countries and big emitters such as China?

We are already seeing some signs that hint at enhanced cooperation between the EU and China on climate governance. For example, on the fringes of the most recent UNFCCC negotiations in Bonn, EU and Chinese negotiators met to discuss ways they can work together more closely. However, an EU-China summit held in early June fell short of adopting a joint statement on climate change, which was postponed until after the summit.

Other leaders are also trying to forge closer cooperation deals with China. California's governor Jerry Brown, for instance, visited China only a few days after President Trump's announcement and signed a (non-binding) agreement to expand California-China cooperation on renewable energy, zero-emissions vehicles and low-carbon urban development.

Are Donald Trump's economic arguments sound, when he says pulling out of the accord will bring jobs in coal and industry back to America?

The economics speak against a revival of the coal sector as a major employer. Other energy sources—including renewables—are cheaper and investors don't appear to be switching back to the coal sector. In his speech announcing the exit from the Paris Agreement, Trump appears to have referred to flawed information about the economic impact of US climate action. He neglected to mention that the number of jobs created in the US renewables sector actually surpasses those jobs now created in the fossil fuel industry. This links to my answer to your first question. I do not think President Trump's decision was based on the factual analysis of the situation. It rather appears to be based on a political calculation.



Katja Biedenkopf

Brussels

Katja is Senior Associate Research Fellow at the Institute for European Studies at Vrije Universiteit Brussels, which she joined in June 2007. She is also Assistant Professor at the University of Leuven where she teaches courses on EU policy-making, global environmental politics and research methods. The focus of Katja's academic research is on global governance and the external effects of EU environmental policy, in particular chemicals, electronic waste and climate policy.