

Elements of a Blue-Green Foreign Policy

How the United States could lead the international
ocean-climate effort



Advancing ocean-climate diplomacy could be an early success for the next U.S. Administration that seeks to lead the international climate effort. This brief presents several opportunities to create a “blue-green” foreign policy.

Introduction

For the next U.S. Administration, rejoining the Paris Agreement should be the first step of rebuilding an effective international climate policy. In addition, the Administration can be expected to develop a realistic yet ambitious emissions reduction target for 2030, as well as a longer-term strategy that sets the country on a path to net-zero greenhouse gas emissions no later than 2050. It will also need to reassert U.S. leadership in the global fight against climate change, a challenge that has increased over the past few years given the severity of the scientific warnings, the fraying of U.S. diplomatic relationships, and, most recently, the need to sustainably build back from the COVID-19 pandemic.

One significant and achievable “win” for the next Administration would be to more fully integrate ocean issues into global efforts to combat climate change. Ocean and climate issues are inseparable. Through effects such as ocean warming and acidification, climate change is devastating ocean ecosystems and the communities and economies that rely on their health. At the same time, the ocean is a source of climate solutions, from reducing shipping emissions and scaling up offshore renewable energy to establishing climate-smart marine-protected areas and creating natural infrastructure to protect against sea-level rise.

There are a number of avenues for the United States to advance ocean-climate action on the international stage. This brief focuses on four key opportunities:

- actively working to ensure that the international climate regime takes due account of ocean issues going forward;
- undertaking ocean-specific climate commitments;
- driving the decarbonization of shipping; and

- creating/steering regional coalitions and partnerships that advance ocean-climate stewardship.

It goes without saying that the most important step that the international community could take for the health of the ocean is to reduce greenhouse gases on an economy-wide basis, particularly carbon dioxide, which drives both ocean warming and acidification. This must remain the first priority of ocean-smart climate policy. There are two other priorities, however, which are complementary: a) implementing sustainable ocean-based mitigation solutions as part of the full suite of mitigation measures necessary for economy-wide decarbonization and b) bolstering the resilience of ecosystems and communities on the front lines of the ocean-climate crisis. Each of the opportunities in this brief advance one or more of these priorities.

“Blue-ing” the international climate regime

The U.S. withdrawal from the Paris Agreement will take effect on November 4, 2020. Assuming the United States rejoins the Agreement in early January 2021, it will again be a Party to the Agreement by the time of the 26th Conference of the Parties (“COP 26”) in November 2021. In this scenario, there will be an opportunity for the United States to champion the emerging effort to create an ocean-smart U.N. Framework Convention on Climate Change and Paris Agreement (UNFCCC regime).

Support has been building within the UNFCCC regime over the past few years for more attention to be paid to the ocean, in terms of both climate mitigation and adaptation. The last Conference of the Parties adopted the first decision that includes a section on ocean-climate action, which mandated a dialogue among the Parties “on the ocean and climate change to consider how to strengthen mitigation and adaptation action in this context” (1). Parties and non-Party stakeholders have now prepared submissions to inform the format and content of the dialogue.

It is likely that the dialogue will address the linkages between the ocean and climate change; appropriate integration of ocean issues into the overall work of the UNFCCC regime; and

various options to include ocean-related efforts in Parties' nationally determined contributions (NDCs) or adaptation communications under the Paris Agreement. These options might include protecting and restoring coastal blue carbon ecosystems, reducing emissions from ports, increasing offshore wind energy, creating climate-smart marine protected areas, or creating climate-ready fisheries, among others.

At COP 26, the Administration would then have the opportunity to champion—and encourage the Parties to adopt—a decision ensuring that the dialogue's consideration of the ocean-climate nexus was not a “one-off,” i.e., that there is an ongoing arrangement, such as a biennial dialogue, for promoting ocean-based climate action and better integration of ocean issues throughout the UNFCCC's work.

More generally, the United States could join and collaborate with the “Friends of the Ocean and Climate” countries, a group working to elevate ocean issues in the context of the UNFCCC regime. This group not only helped deliver the result at the last COP but has sought to spread awareness—and propose possible actions—regarding the many intersections between climate change and the ocean. To take two examples:

- Individual (or groups of) Parties to the Paris Agreement might choose to take on carbon dioxide-specific commitments, in addition to their economy-wide emissions reduction targets (see section below).
- The current scale for comparing greenhouse gases is based on relative global warming potential (GWP); however, such a scale does not differentiate the gases based on potential to acidify the ocean (where carbon dioxide would stand out). Therefore, one might consider developing a scale that would assess the relative ocean acidification impact of the gases, either to supplement the GWP scale or to be integrated with it (2).

U.S. ocean-specific climate commitments

To set a global example for ambitious ocean-climate stewardship, the Administration could formulate its own climate commitments related to ocean issues. As a matter of placement, such commitments might be part of the next U.S. NDC under the Paris Agreement (whether submitted along with the overarching U.S. emissions target or added subsequently as an update) or announced separately.

As a matter of substance, the Administration might consider a specific supplementary target to reduce carbon dioxide emissions. Carbon dioxide has a destructive dual effect on the ocean: it drives not only ocean warming but also ocean acidification, which can be devastating to shellfish (and the

shellfish industry) and corals, among other impacts. It is notable that warming and acidification could essentially eradicate coral reefs under a scenario that limits warming within 2 degrees Celsius. A carbon dioxide-specific target could focus global attention on the particular importance of reducing carbon dioxide for ocean health.

The Administration might also consider sector-specific commitments on topics such as:

- protecting and restoring near-shore blue carbon ecosystems, e.g., mangroves, seagrasses, and saltmarshes, which, in addition to their carbon sequestration value, would have co-benefits in terms of climate resilience (possible commitments include zero loss of wetlands);
- reducing emissions from ports, e.g., through levers such as speed reductions (slow steaming) and use of onshore power when in port (cold ironing); and/or
- increasing well-sited and inclusively planned offshore renewable energy to support U.S. jobs and supply clean electricity.

Leading the decarbonization of shipping

The UNFCCC has for a long time deferred to the International Maritime Organization (IMO) to address the regulation of shipping emissions, in part because of issues concerning how to attribute emissions from international shipping to individual countries.

Shipping is a significant sector in relation to climate change. Approximately 90% of world trade is carried by the international shipping industry. In 2015, both domestic and international shipping accounted for approximately 2.6% of global carbon dioxide emissions, which is roughly equivalent to the national emissions of Germany (3). If advances in technology and low- or zero-carbon fuels are not adopted, emissions from shipping could continue to grow up to 250% from 2012 levels by 2050 (4).

The Administration could support and promote high ambition proposals within the IMO to reduce greenhouse gas emissions. In 2018, the IMO adopted its Initial IMO Strategy on the Reduction of GHG Emissions from Ships, which was designed to reduce emissions, with reference to the Paris Agreement. The Strategy includes two long-term collective goals (reducing carbon dioxide per unit of transport work by 40% by 2030 and reducing emissions by at least 50% from 2008 levels by 2050) and contemplates developing and adopting a series of short-term measures (including by 2023), medium-term measures, and long-term measures towards achieving those goals.

Considering the long commercial lifespan of ships, it will be important to move toward operational zero-emission vessels by 2030 if we are to be able to meet the Strategy's targets, let alone fully decarbonize the industry (5). Accordingly, it is essential to adopt stringent climate measures in the first phase to facilitate and reduce emissions pending more widespread deployment of zero-emission vessels. For instance, ships could set a strong “goal-based” approach that sets energy efficiency targets for vessel operations, which could be met through a combination of operational measures (e.g., speed reductions) and technological improvements.

In addition, the Administration could lead the way in reducing emissions in port, e.g., through requiring some ship types to use onshore power, if available, to reduce emissions including black carbon.

Driving regional ocean-climate leadership

As multilateral bodies with broad membership and stringent decision-making rules, the UNFCCC and IMO have challenges when it comes to being on the leading edge of the climate effort. Instead, it falls to smaller progressive coalitions to serve as a “North Star” for ambitious action.

One near-term opportunity would be for the United States to join the multi-stakeholder Pacific Rim Ocean-Climate Action Partnership (PROCAP) as a founding member and to steer its development in advance of its formal launch in 2021. During the last COP, Fiji, California, Peru, Costa Rica, and Panama soft-launched the Partnership, which is dedicated to:

- advancing economy-wide decarbonization as the most important thing for ocean health;
- scaling up sustainable ocean-based mitigation; and
- maximizing the resilience of frontline communities and economies.

With countries on the Pacific Rim accounting for approximately 60% of global GDP (6) and approximately 60% of global emissions (7), this coalition to protect the world's largest ocean is a promising avenue for ocean-climate stewardship and leadership.

The United States will also have an opportunity to partner with Canada and Mexico to create a low-carbon and climate-resilient continent. Although changes in leadership have disrupted North American climate cooperation, there is a strong history of climate diplomacy among the countries, including the 2016 North American Climate, Clean Energy, and Environment Partnership, which aimed for 50% clean electricity continent-wide and a 40-45% reduction in methane emissions from the oil and gas sector, both by 2025. In the

future, the countries could work on a North American climate agenda that could include ocean-related solutions.

Adopting ocean-related climate solutions as a main area of cooperation makes particular sense for North American countries. The continent has 15 broad terrestrial ecoregions and more than 20 marine ecoregions, many of which cross national boundaries (8). The countries also have individual track records on marine and terrestrial stewardship. Canada, for example, has recently prioritized ocean action in its G7 agenda; U.S. states from California to Maryland have recently been at the forefront of international ocean-climate efforts; and Mexico has in the past been a global leader in land and ocean conservation, having seen significant damage to its wetlands, mangroves, and coral reefs. Although it will obviously be essential for the United States to focus on climate diplomacy with China and India as the countries with the first and third highest levels of greenhouse gas emissions, regional collaboration is a key avenue for pursuing the goals of the Paris Agreement. North American governments could become a unified force for nature-based climate solutions—and climate ambition generally—on the world stage.

Conclusion

Given the inseparability of ocean and climate issues, negotiators who work at the intersection have increasingly noted the desirability of creating coherence across the international ocean and climate regimes. Countries should ensure that climate fora take into account ocean impacts and solutions; they likewise should ensure that ocean fora work to protect ecosystems, communities, and economies in the face of a changing climate. This brief's options for creating a blue-green foreign policy are therefore not exhaustive but are promising initial actions to bring the ocean more squarely into the global climate effort.

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