

PERSPECTIVE

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A New Climate Policy in the United States: Potential Implications for Southeast Asia

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US President Joe Biden speaks during climate change virtual summit from the East Room of the White House campus on 22 April 2021, in Washington, DC. Putting the United States back at the forefront on climate, Biden told a virtual Earth Day summit that the world's largest economy will cut emissions blamed for climate change by 50 to 52 percent by 2030 compared with 2005 levels. Photo: Brendan Smialowski, AFP.

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- The advent of Joe Biden as US president marked a major shift in US policy on climate change, but major obstacles stand in the way of the realization of the Biden administration's objectives.
- Even if the Biden administration's climate policies are implemented, climate change and its many impacts will continue to grow worse, with significant adverse consequences for Southeast Asia.
- The potential implications of Biden's climate policies for Southeast Asian nations include pressure to reduce reliance on fossil fuels, restrictions on trade, and the tying of development assistance to climate objectives.

INTRODUCTION

We may have reached a turning point in history. After decades of warnings from scientists about the dangers of climate change, humanity seems to have finally woken up and started to shift course toward a post-carbon world. I say this despite spending some decades considering the political world's responses to climate change and coming away feeling quite pessimistic about the likelihood of averting disaster.

The reason for having a little bit of optimism can be found in the emerging climate policies of the United States under President Joe Biden. Those policies may be an important reflection of the change in course globally away from climate change denial and toward climate action. They are certainly a dramatic shift in US policy compared to when President Donald Trump was in the White House.

But before getting too excited about Biden's new policies, we need to have a realistic perspective on what is happening. The change in course toward climate action has come much too late; the rate of turn, while perceptible and welcome, is far too slow to avoid what governments have for decades sought to avoid: dangerous interference in Earth's climate system.

THE REALITIES OF CLIMATE CHANGE

To put what is happening into some perspective, it is worth reminding ourselves that climate change is here to stay; its impacts will only get worse. Why do I say that? First, despite the global economic slowdown arising from the Covid-19 pandemic, greenhouse gas emissions are still increasing.¹ The global pollution that is causing climate change has not been stemmed, let alone reduced. It goes without saying that if the source of the problem is growing, the problem will, too.

Second, carbon dioxide concentrations in the atmosphere are at their highest level in 3 million years.² In May 2021 they surpassed 420 ppm, compared to 280 at the start of the Industrial Revolution.³ To put those numbers in perspective, atmospheric concentrations of carbon dioxide were only 315 ppm in 1958 (when measurements began). In other words, they rose by 35 ppm over more than 150 years, which was bad enough, but in the last 50 years they have skyrocketed by more than 100 ppm. This trend continues.

Scientists' worst-case predictions are turning out to be correct. Indeed, many of the impacts that the more pessimistic climate scientists predicted not long ago would happen toward the end of this century, or even later, are happening right now.

We can fairly predict that 2021 will be one of the hottest years on record, if not the hottest, and that there will be disastrous droughts, wildfires, tropical storms, melting ice and all the rest.⁴ Next year is likely to be worse, and so on.

Third, as a consequence of these impacts, human and environmental suffering will inevitably escalate. Countless people and creatures will suffer and perish in coming decades. The human casualties this century will be in the millions, many of them in Southeast Asia.⁵

Fourth, governments have been negotiating for more than three decades precisely to avoid these outcomes. The best they have been able to manage is the 2015 Paris Agreement, which aims to limit global warming to 1.5°-2°C, an objective that is entirely political because even achievement of the ambitious target of 1.5°C will not prevent “dangerous” climate change.⁶

Fifth, global warming has already reached 1.2°C.⁷ Incredibly, according to very recent predictions, there is a two-in-five chance that it will exceed 1.5°C sometime in the next five years.⁸ The chance of realizing the Paris targets is almost nil, notwithstanding the many technological and other solutions that are already available.

Full implementation of all national pledges (i.e., Nationally Determined Contributions or NDCs) toward the Paris objectives portend at least 3°C of global warming, and possibly very much more.⁹ It would be pollyannaish to assume that the Paris pledges will be fully implemented because too many nations have solid track records of not doing what they have promised to do in this context.

President Biden and officials in his administration know all of this. They know that US inaction over the past several decades has made things worse. The first implication for Southeast Asia is that anything that the United States does anytime soon will not change the trajectory of impacts across the region.

THE SHIFT IN US CLIMATE POLICY UNDER JOE BIDEN

Under Donald Trump, there was a US war on climate action, with the appointment of climate deniers throughout the federal government, reversal of existing pro-climate policies, proactive efforts to increase fossil-fuel use and extraction, and persistent diplomacy to slow international action.¹⁰

The tone has changed dramatically since the advent of Joe Biden, who made climate change a priority from his first day in office. He has issued multiple directives to bring an all-of-government approach to climate change, with cabinet secretaries presumably instructed to bring their departments into line. He created a National Climate Task Force and appointed experienced former officials to new high-level roles in his administration, including an international climate envoy, with a seat on the National Security Council, and a domestic climate policy advisor, who is on the White House staff.¹¹

Vitality, the Biden administration has agreed to cut US carbon emissions in half by 2030. That near-term goal is what matters – more than the pledge to have a carbon-neutral economy by 2050 or even the pledge to generate all of the nation’s electricity from non-carbon sources by 2035.

Alas, the administration is using 2005 as the base year for its 2030 objective. If the Biden pledge is realized, this means that by 2030, US emissions will be about where they were around 1960.¹² Depending on your perspective, that may sound wonderful – or it may sound like a recipe for climate disaster. Regardless, US emissions will have to continue falling rapidly after 2030.

Domestically, the Biden administration has made climate change a central part of its legislative proposals, notably in the context of infrastructure development. In the process, they are making the case that a rapid energy transition will increase employment while reducing climate injustices. The administration has taken action to stop new drilling leases on federal land and tried to halt some of those approved by the Trump administration. It has given its approval to the development of offshore wind schemes.

Internationally, the Biden administration has promised to increase financial assistance to help other nations meet the Paris objectives, and the United States is now actively involved in searching for diplomatic solutions to climate change. It is likely to play a positive role during November's COP26 in Glasgow.

What is the likely impact of the Biden administration's policies? The answer depends on many factors.

The roles of subnational actors in the United States – i.e., American states, local communities, industries, banks and insurance companies, universities and individuals, and so forth – matter greatly. In many respects, the Biden administration is following those actors more than leading them; because so many communities and businesses have turned the corner in favour of climate action, so too has the Biden administration. Insofar as those subnational actors continue to lead, Biden's policies on climate change are likely to have staying power well beyond his time in office.

Yet, everything that the Biden administration does will occur in the context of a hostile domestic political environment. We have been here before, more than once. Previous Democratic administrations (those of Bill Clinton and Barack Obama) attempted climate-friendly policies only to see most of them reversed under Republican presidents. Donald Trump was an extreme manifestation of a pre-existing condition.

It is debatable, even doubtful, whether Biden has enough support in Congress to get the legislation and funding that his climate policies require. If the Republicans regain either or both houses of Congress, which is certainly possible following next year's elections, they will block Biden's schemes at every opportunity. This will not stop the Biden administration from pressing ahead in many ways, drawing on the authority of the presidency, but it will mean that climate policies will be watered down greatly – as they have been for several decades.

And, as the Trump administration demonstrated, US climate policy can change quickly and radically. At the very least, it seems likely that US action on climate change will be mired in, or at least diminished by, highly partisan domestic politics and the continued influence of sunset industries, not least those dependent on the nation's (and indeed most of the world's) continued addiction to fossil fuels.

IMPLICATIONS FOR SOUTHEAST ASIAN NATIONS

The turnabout in US climate policy has implications for the nations of Southeast Asia. It is too soon to know for certain what those will be, but we can make some educated guesses.

First, as noted earlier, whatever happens during the Biden administration, US actions will not be enough to solve the climate crisis. Climate change will become much worse. The nations of Southeast Asia should plan for the worst impacts predicted by scientists, such as more severe weather, which will adversely affect agriculture, infrastructure and human health; higher temperatures, which will threaten water supplies; widespread coral bleaching, which will decimate local fisheries; and sea-level rise, which will affect the wellbeing and livelihoods of millions of people living along and near coastlines of the region.¹³

Second, Biden's whole-of-government approach to climate change inevitably means that US policies and programmes that affect Southeast Asian nations are likely to be adjusted to comply with the administration's climate objectives. Affected departments will include Commerce, Treasury, State, Defence, the US Agency for International Development, the US Trade Representative and others. Their counterparts in Southeast will need to be sensitive to policy changes as and when they emerge.

Third, the United States will expect Southeast Asian nations to do more to mitigate their greenhouse gas emissions. In particular, we can expect pressure from the United States for them to reduce their reliance on fossil fuels. This will be especially important for those nations that rely on coal for energy and those that export it (e.g., Indonesia).

The importance of land-use for climate change is also likely to become more important in US foreign policy, meaning that Southeast Asian nations with poor records on forest protection, notably Indonesia and Malaysia, will be in the spotlight.

Fourth, in the context of climate diplomacy, it will become harder for Southeast Asian nations to point to US inaction on climate change as an excuse to drag their feet, something that was especially easy to do during the Trump administration. In the near term, this means increased expectations in the United States that Southeast Asian nations should bolster their NDCs for COP26 and increase the ambition of their NDCs in the future.

Fifth, on the positive side, alongside US pressure to do more to limit emissions will come US support for international assistance to make doing so easier. We should expect more US bilateral assistance (e.g., development assistance, with climate-related strings attached) and more US funding for multilateral agencies (e.g., the Green Climate Fund) – assuming Congress's assent.

Sixth, if Biden's policies take hold, there is a very real prospect that climate action and trade will be linked concretely. Those nations that the United States deems to be doing too little may face climate-related tariffs and eventually trade restrictions.

The US government can be expected to implement policies that will encourage imports from the region that can assist its domestic greenhouse gas reductions and, in contrast, to discourage imports from the region when they might adversely affect those domestic efforts. It may do this by, for example, not importing polluting products and (treading the same path as the European Union) adding tariffs to goods and materials that are produced in ways that harm the climate or which compete with US businesses subject to new climate-related regulations and standards. In July 2021, Democrats in the US Congress introduced legislation to do just that.¹⁴

Seventh, as official pressure grows on US businesses and industries to be more transparent about their environmental credentials, and specifically their carbon footprints, pressure from the US government and US investment community on businesses and industries in Southeast Asia to do the same will also grow. Consequently, pressure on regional governments from major exporting industries to increase and standardize more ambitious climate-related policies may increase (or at least lobbying by such industries to maintain lax environmental standards may diminish).

Finally, there may be implications for the millions of affluent people in Southeast Asia. If the United States acts as Biden wants it to act, it will become increasingly difficult for those people to hide behind the relative poverty of their fellow citizens to avoid the kind of regulations, taxes and changes in lifestyle that will be expected of Americans. If Biden pushes most Americans to change their ways, they will expect him to push affluent people everywhere, including in Southeast Asia, to do likewise.

Alternatively, a Republican – possibly even Donald Trump – could replace Joe Biden in 2025. If that happens, US pressure on Southeast Asian nations to act on climate change could all but evaporate – and global efforts to address climate change effectively will face yet more setbacks originating in the United States.

¹ Robert Monroe, ‘Coronavirus response barely slows rising carbon dioxide’, Scripps Institution of Oceanography (2021), <https://scripps.ucsd.edu/news/coronavirus-response-barely-slows-rising-carbon-dioxide>.

² World Meteorological Association, *State of the Global Climate Report 2020* (Geneva: WMO, 2021), p. 4, https://library.wmo.int/index.php?lvl=notice_display&id=21880#.YH2STpMzZR4.

³ National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, “Carbon dioxide peaks near 420 parts per million at Mauna Loa observatory,” 7 June 2021, <https://research.noaa.gov/article/ArtMID/587/ArticleID/2764/Coronavirus-response-barely-slows-rising-carbon-dioxide>.

⁴ National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, “Global Annual Temperature Rankings Outlook,” *Global Climate Report – May 2021*, <https://www.ncdc.noaa.gov/sotc/global/202105/supplemental/page-2>.

⁵ Andy Haines and Kristie Ebi, “The Imperative for Climate Action to Protect Health,” *The New England Journal of Medicine*, 380 (2019): 263-273, <https://www.nejm.org/doi/full/10.1056/NEJMra1807873>.

⁶ Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, *Global Warming of 1.5°C* (Geneva: IPCC, 2018), <https://www.ipcc.ch/sr15/download/>.

⁷ World Meteorological Association, p. 6.

⁸ Grahame Madge, “Temporary exceedance of 1.5°C increasingly likely” (Met Office, 27 May 2021), <https://www.metoffice.gov.uk/about-us/press-office/news/weather-and-climate/2021/chance-of-temporarily-reaching-1.5-c-in-next-five-years-is-increasing>.

⁹ United Nations Environment Programme, *Emissions Gap Report 2020* (Nairobi: UNEP, 2020), <https://www.unep.org/interactive/emissions-gap-report/2020/>.

¹⁰ Paul G. Harris, *Pathologies of Climate Governance* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021), pp. 65-73.

¹¹ White House, "FACT SHEET: President Biden Takes Executive Actions to Tackle the Climate Crisis at Home and Abroad, Create Jobs, and Restore Scientific Integrity Across Federal Government," 27 January 2021, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2021/01/27/fact-sheet-president-biden-takes-executive-actions-to-tackle-the-climate-crisis-at-home-and-abroad-create-jobs-and-restore-scientific-integrity-across-federal-government/>.

¹² Hannah Ritchie and Max Roser, "United States: CO2 Country Profile," *Our World in Data* (2020), <https://ourworldindata.org/co2/country/united-states?country=~USA>.

¹³ Asian Development Bank, *A Region at Risk: The Human Dimensions of Climate Change in Asia and the Pacific* (Manila: ADB, 2017), <http://dx.doi.org/10.22617/TCS178839-2>.

¹⁴ Naomi Jagoda and Zack Budryk, "Democrats seek to tackle climate change with import tax," *The Hill* (18 July 2021), <https://thehill.com/policy/equilibrium-sustainability/563472-democrats-seek-to-tackle-climate-change-with-import-tax>.

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