



Paris accords: Nuclear energy be part of a serious US recommitment

BY SWETA CHAKRABORTY, OPINION CONTRIBUTOR — 01/27/21 11:00 AM EST
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Just days into the Biden administration the world has already witnessed a 180-degree turn on the U.S.'s approach to [climate change](#).

From starting the process to rejoin the Paris Accord to [strengthening](#) vehicle emissions and efficiency standards, Biden has also named appointees across government that they've hit the ground running in implementing his clean energy revolution and environmental justice agenda.

There is a focus on correcting past wrongs, from no longer [leasing](#) public lands for oil and gas drilling — to be overseen by the first ever Indigenous woman at a cabinet position, Rep. Deborah Haaland (D-N.M.) as secretary of the Interior — to addressing historic and systemic environmental racism overseen by the first ever Black man, [Michael Regan](#), appointed as the EPA administrator. These appointees comprise of a "climate dream team" that also includes U.S. Climate Envoy [John Kerry](#), all of whom will hopefully and ultimately put forth a strategic climate effort that takes national accountability, updates U.S.'s nationally determined contributions (NDCs) as part of the Paris Accords and leads the world in ensuring the planet doesn't warm past 1.5 degrees Celsius by the end of the century.

While Biden appears to be keeping to his promise to an administration that resembles the people it is meant to represent, one key issue remains:

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what is the role of nuclear energy in reaching net zero? I worked closely with the [Clean Energy for Biden](#) working group leading up to his electoral victory and it was evident that for many the role of nuclear was a non-starter. While those close to Biden's climate platform are cheering his appointees, many are questioning how the U.S. will succeed in rejoining and leading the Paris Accords without significant investment and policy support in nuclear energy given it currently provides about [20 percent](#) of the U.S. electricity.

The controversy around the role of nuclear in reaching net zero carbon emissions by 2050 isn't unique to the U.S. It is hotly [contested](#) around the world. In fact, a coherent governance and implementation plan on nuclear energy has not been achieved by various national governments due to the political sensitivities, lengthy and complex planning approval processes, adverse social and cultural perceptions and major cost overruns of nuclear projects. Without a clear consensus on nuclear's role in achieving net zero targets, relevant countries have been unable to create required policy frameworks and incentives to encourage innovation and take advantage of the latest nuclear technologies available, which could play a role in reducing greenhouse gas emissions (GHG) in the timeframes highlighted by the [InterGovernmental Panel on Climate Change](#) (IPCC) and defined in the Paris agreement.

Nuclear energy must play a role in the overall global energy transition alongside other low-carbon technologies, although the extent of the role will vary between countries. With the U.S. recommitting to the Paris Accords and conceivably taking the lead, the role of nuclear energy must be supported globally by Kerry and his team, while domestic climate appointees ensure that nuclear energy remains a part of the national energy agenda. The U.S. must lead by example and show that nuclear energy is necessary for a stable energy transition and to support the removal of reliance from fossil fuels. Energy demands are only [surging](#) from an increasing global population and more frequent, persistent impacts of climate change (e.g., increased heating and cooling needs).

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There are many nuclear [investment opportunities](#) that can be prioritized in both the near and long term. These include, but are not limited to light water reactors, small modular reactors and waste processing and storage technologies. Opportunity also exists in the decommissioning of old technologies and the upgrading of existing sites with solid retraining of existing skilled workforces — to name a few.

There is significant promise in investing in nuclear energy-related opportunities and reinforcing policies to ensure that Biden's clean energy revolution and environmental justice agenda will be met. The climate dream team has much to tackle following former [President Trump's](#) efforts to systematically dismantle environmental protections and the U.S.'s climate leadership role in the world. Early recognition, investment and policy support of nuclear energy will ensure the Biden administration reaches and exceeds its goals and that it also sets up the world for a clean energy revolution that veers the planet from its current path warming to 1.5 degrees Celsius by mid-century.

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