China surges ahead as US retreats on climate change

Armin Rosencranz and Aaron Salot | March 21, 2018 1:02 am

Chinese President Xi Jinping and US President Donald Trump.
In 2017, US president Donald Trump announced his decision to back out of the Paris Agreement. On the other side of the world, Chinese officials dedicated several provisions of their 13th Five-Year-Plan (FYP) to tackle climate change.

China and the US advocate two diverging environmental policies while their goal is inherently the same – economic growth for their respective countries.

The Trump administration has increasingly become more isolationist, as seen with its protectionist policies, such as the recent solar-panel and washing machine tariffs, decrease in overseas spending and steel-aluminium tariffs.

Trump’s reasoning behind the pull-out from the Paris Agreement is that environmental regulations hinder US economic growth. To allow the US economy to grow, Trump signed an order in December 2017 intended to create jobs by opening off-shore drilling sites.

Trump’s decision to create off-shore drilling sites reverses Obama’s plan to abstain from offshore non-renewable energy exploration.

The current cost of fossil fuel energy is at $0.05/kWh, whereas commercial solar energy can go as low as $0.029/kWh, a significant difference of 40 per cent.

Simultaneously, according to a study done by the Environmental Defense Fund (a non-profit US environmental advocacy group), clean technology, precisely solar and wind industries, allowed for job creation 12 times faster than the rest of the US economy in 2016-2017.

The United States has a growing clean technology market. But Trump does not consider it a part of his plan. It is not only that Trump undervalues environmental policy, but it reflects on the overall practices of his administration to make uninformed decisions.

China, on the other hand, has been taking every opportunity to mitigate carbon emissions, while simultaneously achieving economic growth.

In its 13th FYP, China calls for an increase in energy conservation, environmental protection enterprises and environmental-friendly technology. These policies are not merely on paper; they are reflected in China’s actions.

To decrease traffic congestion and pollution in their big cities, the cost of license plates for fuel-based cars can cost over $14,000, whereas licenses can be acquired at no cost for plug-in electric cars.

Chinese leaders have used the developing nature of their economy to their benefit and have supported urban growth through green buildings and clean technology. At least 50 per cent of all new buildings in urban spaces in China must be certified as green buildings.

The steel tariffs and other trade barriers of the United States, as seen through the Trump administration's recent actions, suggests a new isolationist tendency.

Former president George H.W. Bush represented the US at the 1992 Rio conference. He signed the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change, accepting the Convention's mandate of "common but differentiate responsibility."

This was understood to obligate industrialized countries to pay disproportionately to help developing nations mitigate and adapt to the effects of climate change.
While China has not only been pursuing environmental-friendly policies, it has also been increasing its presence overseas through road- and rail building and resource extraction. These strategies have helped the Chinese economy to flourish.

A big difference between the United States and China is in their respective energy policies. As a developing country, China is creating clean technology infrastructure across their country.

By contrast, the United States government has failed to support clean technology and continues to pursue oil drilling offshore and in the Arctic.

The broader picture is that China is taking advantage of every step where the United States is backing out. Whether it is environmental-friendly policies, foreign trade, foreign investment or soft power in foreign states, China is increasing its presence across the continents.

The Chinese increase in investment across the African Union, its influence in severing Central American ties with Taiwan and its increase in investments in Bolivia and other poor countries are prominent examples of a rising global power.

In doing so, China is creating economic ties across continents and diversifying its economy, while also establishing its dominance.

In contrast, the United States' recent imposition of tariffs reflects its increasing protectionism and reversion to the old and discredited "fortress America" policy.

It cannot be denied that the United States still holds economic and military strength across the world. But the past year seems a harbinger of diminution of power away from the West.

As China is the world's leading developing country, its emergence as a driver of the global economy is timely and likely to be long-standing.

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