



How U.S. Diplomacy and Diplomats Can Help Get International Climate Action Back on Track

By Alan Yu | December 8, 2020

On January 20, the United States will inaugurate a climate president.

Throughout the 2020 presidential campaign and in the early days of the transition, President-elect Joe Biden has made clear that climate action will be a core element of his plan to “build back better,” driving toward a more resilient, sustainable economy that will put the United States on an irreversible path to achieve net-zero emissions by no later than 2050.¹

President-elect Biden’s first foreign policy actions have also demonstrated a commitment to make climate change a central pillar of his foreign policy. He has announced a senior national security team that recognizes the linkage between U.S. national security and climate change and is committed to climate action.² He has raised climate action in every congratulatory call he has received from foreign leaders.³ And, most notably, he has created the new position of special presidential envoy (SPE) for climate change and enlisted former U.S. Secretary of State John Kerry, Washington’s leading climate champion—a strong signal that President-elect Biden intends to return the United States to global climate change leadership.

President-elect Biden’s intention to position climate action as a central focus of U.S. foreign policy aligns with recommendations by the Center for American Progress and other leading international climate and U.S. foreign policy experts.⁴ Although President-elect Biden and SPE-designate Kerry will lead this transformation, it will be the U.S. Department of State and U.S. diplomats who will execute this new charge. This will require fundamental changes to the U.S. foreign policy apparatus and the work of its diplomats. At a time when experts are calling for reform and repurposing how the State Department executes a foreign policy to fit changing global challenges, now is the time to design for the centrality of climate action in the department’s mission and operations.⁵

There is no alternative to the United States for driving all countries toward climate ambition and action—including China, the world’s largest carbon emitter.⁶ Restoring U.S. leadership in the global fight against climate change is in the U.S. national interest and the global interest. But while the world would welcome the United States back to the fight against climate change, four years of head-snapping changes in U.S. policy—

such as reversals in domestic climate policies and actions, withdrawal from the Paris Agreement, and retreat from global cooperation—have eroded trust in the United States’ consistency and commitment. America must demonstrate that it is a reliable global leader and partner.

In order for the Biden administration to restore U.S. climate leadership and then drive global action, it will need to determine what the U.S. government will do and how it will do it. The president and his special envoy must lead, but they should put U.S. diplomats and the State Department in the central role to drive global climate action. This issue brief offers some priority actions for the new administration to consider and a series of detailed recommendations on how to execute these changes through leadership and actions by the president, the secretary of state, and U.S. ambassadors overseas. It concludes with recommendations on management reforms, including a boost in foreign service personnel, which the State Department should adopt to make the centrality of climate diplomacy in U.S. foreign relations built to last.

A progressive U.S. agenda on global climate action

President-elect Biden has been clear that a return to the Paris Agreement would be the first necessary step for the United States to reclaim its place in international climate leadership,⁷ but his administration will have much to do to repair the United States’ reputation and move to counter climate change.

A U.S. agenda for international climate policy that prioritizes urgent and consequential outcomes should include the following core actions:

- Promptly deliver an ambitious and credible plan to demonstrate to the world that the United States will act domestically to reduce greenhouse gas emissions to net-zero by 2050.⁸
- Reengage diplomatically in key multilateral processes and with major climate players such as China, India, the European Union, and Brazil to drive stronger and faster collective and country actions.
- Restore and elevate the United States’ work with developing countries to support their efforts to achieve their development goals in a clean energy pathway that aligns with the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change’s recommendation to limit global temperature rise to 1.5 degrees Celsius and that strengthens their resilience to the impacts of climate change.⁹
- Accelerate work across U.S. agencies—such as the departments of State, Defense, Treasury, Agriculture, and Energy and the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID)—and with key foreign governments, research institutions, and other stakeholders to deepen America’s understanding and planning to address the national security risk implications of climate change and develop measures to address them.
- Draw from the U.S. trade and financial policy toolkits to catalyze increased climate action by major emitters beyond U.S. borders.

How can the Biden administration best position itself to drive climate action internationally? CAP identifies two key factors: Washington's demonstration of climate leadership and a strategic use of the full power of U.S. diplomacy.

Presidential leadership: The centrality of international climate action in words and deeds

As noted earlier, President-elect Biden has demonstrated both in his statements and senior appointments his intention to prioritize climate action in his foreign policy agenda. As a practical matter, the new administration's first priority on climate will be to deliver an ambitious and credible domestic plan to make up for lost progress. Demonstrating bold action at home is also the first step to regaining U.S. climate influence abroad to drive global action. In turn, helping to drive action internationally will be critical in order for the administration to sustain public support for domestic climate ambition.

After he is sworn in, President-elect Biden should use the occasion of his first foreign policy speech to speak directly to the American people about the urgency of the climate crisis and the need for action—and explain how he will deliver climate results globally at the same time he calls for consequential domestic transformations. He should make the case that combatting climate change globally is in the economic and security interests of the United States and declare that, under his National Security Strategy, he will make achieving meaningful climate action beyond U.S. borders a central priority of U.S. foreign policy. President-elect Biden and senior leaders in his administration must reinforce that message and vision to both domestic and international audiences—and, importantly, to his own government.

To reinforce his words, the president-elect can take the following steps to put climate at the center of U.S. foreign policy:

- **Engage in presidential climate diplomacy.** President-elect Biden has demonstrated his commitment to engaging on climate change in his congratulatory calls from foreign leaders. Once in office, he should continue to make clear to foreign governments that the U.S. government will prioritize addressing climate change in all bilateral relationships. He should commit to making climate an ongoing leader-level topic with key global climate players such as China, India, the European Union, and Brazil, and he should include it on his agenda at the G-7, G-20, NATO, and Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation, commonly known as APEC.
- **Appoint senior officials committed to climate action.** The president should select senior leadership who embrace this new paradigm and are committed to leading this transformation in U.S. foreign policymaking. His nominees for secretary of state, secretary of the treasury, national security adviser, and director of the national

economic council do just that. He should look for those same qualities in his nominees for secretaries of defense and energy, U.S. trade representative, USAID administrator, and ambassadors to China, India, the European Union, and Brazil.

- **Give his special presidential envoy for climate change resources and authority.** Former Secretary of State John Kerry's appointment to the SPE role gives the administration immediate credibility in foreign capitals and a leader with diplomatic experience, substantive expertise, and policy passion. To deliver on this central foreign policy priority, the White House must grant the SPE sufficient authority to lead across the government, mobilizing cabinet agencies to align diplomats and technical experts, as well as development assistance and other policy tools. His seat on the National Security Council is critical for that reason. The secretary of state-SPE relationship will also be critically important.
- **Boost the federal climate budget to meet the crisis.** To reinvigorate U.S. diplomatic and development strategies, the president-elect should seek funding from Congress to hire 500 new diplomatic positions and boost U.S. climate-related foreign assistance programs to \$25 billion over five years. The Biden administration should use the additional funding to make good on U.S. funding commitments to the Green Climate Fund.¹⁰

Reenvisioning U.S. diplomacy and climate change

For U.S. diplomacy to deliver on global climate action, State Department leaders will need to work seamlessly with SPE-designate Kerry, as the State Department will be the lead agency responsible for executing the reorientation of U.S. foreign policy to a climate-centric vision. The State Department will also need to partner with and rely on the contributions from a wide range of U.S. economic, development, and technical agencies, but it will be ultimately accountable for delivering results.

The success of this reorientation will rely critically on the strategic vision and bureaucratic stamina of the secretary of state, who will face both the urgency to act on the climate crisis and the challenge of driving change to the State Department's outmoded culture, structure, and incentives, which hamper its capacity to deliver stronger climate action. Secretary of State-designate Antony Blinken's previous experience as deputy secretary in leading and managing the department would enable him to understand the scope of the challenge and lead the change, if confirmed.¹¹ But change will not happen overnight or without the right mix of incentives and structural support.

Setting diplomatic course direction at the State Department

The Biden administration can draw useful lessons from then-Secretary of State Kerry's efforts to elevate climate change as a top foreign policy issue and his attempts to implement cultural and operational change at the State Department. Current Secretary of State Mike Pompeo's whole-of-department approach on China policy also offers insights and a

potential model for climate policy management. Both examples illustrate that for climate change to be central to U.S. foreign policy—and not just a niche issue that may or may not be considered more broadly—State Department leaders will need to fully integrate it into department policy and operations, including by embassies worldwide.

The secretary of state and State Department leadership should take the following key steps to elevate and center climate action in the work of the department:

- **Set the secretary's vision for climate diplomacy.** One of Secretary-designate Blinken's first tasks will be to translate the administration's broad framing of climate change policy into a strategic vision and operational guidance for U.S. diplomats across the world and in Washington.

During the Obama administration, Secretary Kerry's focus on climate shook up the department's tradition-bound bureaucracy. In his first months in office, he used the secretary's traditional first message to U.S. embassies worldwide to issue a very non-traditional directive, declaring that climate action would be a top department priority. He identified core objectives and directed bureaus and embassies to realign resources and effort accordingly—and they did.¹² In the department's 2015 Quadrennial Diplomatic and Development Review, Secretary Kerry declared "mitigating and adapting to climate change" to be one of four department priorities.¹³ Transformative while he was there, Secretary Kerry's efforts to lock in the primacy of climate in U.S. foreign policy went dormant after the change in administration. CAP recommends that the new administration take policy and administrative steps to build sustainability of climate as a State Department priority.

- **Engage in secretarial climate diplomacy.** The single most important action the incoming secretary can take to elevate and give urgency to climate in U.S. foreign policy is to do so in his own diplomacy.

Secretary Kerry put climate change on the agenda in all of his foreign diplomatic engagements. For some engagements, climate was a top, extensive discussion topic. For others, it was a secondary but present issue. He took a direct role in securing the Paris Agreement. The department and embassies quickly adjusted and followed his new policy direction. Domestically, Secretary Kerry was a persistent and effective advocate with the White House, federal agencies, Congress, industry, and civil society to align effort and resources in support of the department's climate agenda.

- **Make the right senior State Department appointments.** The department will need senior leaders who accept the strategic imperative of embedding climate action as a central pillar of foreign policy. The secretary of State, deputy Secretary, and undersecretaries¹⁴ will be instrumental in driving this change from the top. But it will be the department's regional bureau assistant secretaries¹⁵ and U.S. ambassadors overseas who will direct U.S. diplomats on whether to take up and act on climate as a priority in the nation's foreign policy. Their appointments will be critical.

- **Sync climate policy coordination between the secretary of state and SPE-designate Kerry.** Clear communication and close coordination between Secretary-designate Blinken and SPE-designate Kerry will be critical for the administration to best leverage the expertise and policy connections of U.S. diplomats, who typically look to their chains of command for instruction. For good, SPE-designate Kerry knows how the department works and how it conducts climate diplomacy, but unity of communication between the secretary’s office and SPE-designate Kerry will be critical for foreign service officers (FSOs) to implement the administration’s climate action agenda with speed and effectiveness. Importantly, it will be the secretary of state and the department’s leadership who will ultimately drive U.S. diplomats to integrate climate change in their conduct of foreign policy. The success of this effort will be key to ensuring that climate action as a department priority is not vulnerable to changes in leadership or administration.
- **China “core policy” offers a model for departmentwide climate policy action.** Secretary Pompeo’s mobilization of bureaus and embassies to execute the administration’s China adversary strategy provides an interesting model that the next administration could draw from to unify and direct all department elements to advance its climate change strategy.

Secretary Pompeo instructed the deputy secretary to chair a monthly meeting with all bureau assistant secretaries to identify and prioritize specific policy actions and align resources and efforts to act accordingly. The East Asia assistant secretary coordinated departmentwide efforts; each bureau identified a senior official and staff to coordinate China action within the bureau; and each embassy designated China-responsible officers. For example, under the deputy secretary’s direction, relevant regional and technical bureaus coordinated on a worldwide diplomatic strategy to counter China’s commercial 5G buildout by engaging foreign governments, corporations, and other stakeholders to explain the security risks Chinese technology pose to domestic networks.¹⁶

For climate purposes, the deputy secretary could adapt this mechanism to coordinate and leverage the efforts of senior State Department officials and ambassadors to engage senior foreign government leaders—particularly at the presidential or prime ministerial level—to address specific climate policy objectives or strategies. That could be at a global level—for example, a global hydrogen research and development strategy—or at a regional level, such as a Gulf states engagement strategy. Administratively, the assistant secretary for Oceans and International Environmental and Scientific Affairs could serve as the department coordinator. Regional bureaus and embassies could create structures to coordinate climate-related work within bureaus and between bureaus and embassies.

Climate action on the ground: Ambassadors and embassies

The urgency for global action requires the State Department to scrap its past practice of putting U.S. climate diplomacy solely in the hands of Washington-based climate policy experts and instead put its ambassadors, diplomats, and local embassy staff at the forefront of advancing U.S. climate policy in host countries.

Climate diplomacy for the early 2020s has a very different charge when compared with the mission during the Obama administration and even earlier. At that time, the State Department was focused on negotiating the new design of an international climate regime, and long-time Washington-based climate experts carried the diplomatic load. FSOs, who often have generalist backgrounds, largely played supporting roles or watched from the side. A smaller team was able to successfully carry out the mission.¹⁷

But with the Paris Agreement framework now established, countries are focused on implementing their commitments. Climate policy has pivoted from U.N. negotiations to domestic governance. Governments are deciding development pathways; passing legislation and setting rules; debating economic and energy policies with business and labor; and communicating their climate policy vision to the public. It is at this governance stage where U.S. diplomats—advancing U.S. climate policy with government, business, and civil society—do their best work.

To put climate at the center of every embassy’s policy mission, the administration can:

- **Make clear embassy senior leaders’ intent.** The president’s letter of instruction to chiefs of mission¹⁸ should direct all ambassadors to make climate change a priority issue in their embassies’ work in host countries. Just as the secretary would communicate to the entire department the centrality of climate change, U.S. ambassadors should do the same to embassy staff and in their own diplomacy. Ambassadors should prioritize climate change action appropriately in their Integrated Country Strategy, the strategic and priority-setting policy document for U.S. foreign policy in the host country.¹⁹
- **Institute a whole-of-embassy effort.** Economic or science sections traditionally manage U.S. embassies’ climate change diplomacy. But because climate change policy spans the equities of nearly all parts of a typical embassy, the ambassador’s office should lead and direct a holistic approach to the embassy’s policy strategy.

Under the deputy chief of mission’s (DCM) direction, for example, the embassy country team should make briefings on embassy actions on climate change a standard agenda item in its regular meeting. Forging a cohesive team that includes State Department economic and public affairs officers; defense attaches; and Foreign Commercial Service, Foreign Agricultural Service, and USAID officers is vital to a successful, full-court press to advance a U.S. climate agenda. Also, U.S. embassies have long benefited from the talent and experience of local professional staff, many of whom previously served in prestigious roles in government, industry, and academia.

They are an invaluable resource that embassies should elevate to serve as full partners to advance the U.S. climate agenda.

- **Leverage the diplomatic tool of climate assistance.** There have been few more effective tools for U.S. technical agencies and embassies to drive on-the-ground climate policy implementation than the Obama administration’s Global Climate Change Initiative (GCCCI), particularly in developing countries. Under the GCCCI, the State Department funded the overseas climate-related activities of experts from the U.S. departments of Agriculture, Energy, and the Treasury and the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency,²⁰ who advanced climate policy objectives and built important political and economic connections. The Biden administration should revive and boost GCCCI-like activities. As noted above, CAP recommends seeking \$25 billion over five years.
- **Launch State Department annual climate country reports.** The State Department’s annual Human Rights Country Report is one of the U.S. government’s most powerful instruments for monitoring and potentially driving improved human rights performance around the world.²¹ An annual State Department Climate Change Country Report could serve a similar catalytic function. Embassies could provide annual updates on host country greenhouse gas emissions; their climate policies and actions; climate adaptation preparedness; transition trends in the power, transportation, and other sectors; and more. Climate country reports could serve to increase transparency of country actions—or inaction and highlight creative solutions.

Making climate diplomacy built to last in U.S. foreign relations

Nearly all the leadership and management changes recommended in this issue brief are subject to the risk of fading or termination should a subsequent administration take a less urgent approach to climate change. To sustain prioritized climate action, the Biden administration, in any broader State Department reform strategy, should incorporate new measures to ensure climate change is mainstreamed into how the department and the foreign service conduct U.S. foreign relations. The secretary of state and the department leadership team can take administrative measures in the following areas to make “built to last” the goal of embedding climate action into U.S. foreign policy.

More people

Executing climate action effectively, both under the Biden administration and over the long term, will require many more foreign affairs professionals. The administration should create 500 new foreign service and local U.S. embassy staff positions at the State Department, USAID, the Department of Commerce, and the Department of Agriculture—all dedicated to the international climate brief. An exodus of diplomats in recent years²² might tempt the State Department to direct new officers and resources to traditional foreign policy priority areas. It should resist doing so. Looming global challenges such as climate change require the department to reorient its strategic outlook and resources.

More climate-smart people

For most foreign affairs professionals, climate change is a subject that is expansive, complex, and new. That can no longer stand. The department should implement training across a range of climate policy functions and at all seniority levels to elevate and sustain climate policy and program management competencies.

A departmentwide climate training program should include climate policy familiarization modules at entering-officer orientation, as well as DCM and ambassador courses; required courses on topics such as climate diplomacy, decarbonization policy measures, and climate science for all officers with climate policy responsibilities; and distance learning units on priority climate policy initiatives for all personnel. The department should also offer promising officers one-year external assignments at agencies such as USAID, the Department of Energy, the U.S. Development Finance Corporation, and the U.S. Trade and Development Agency to learn about these agencies' climate-related tools and capabilities. To realize those training and detail opportunities without compromising the State Department's operational readiness, the department needs more "float" personnel slots, which the 500 new-hire positions would help make possible.

More climate-as-career people

The Biden administration can further embed climate change as a core State Department policy priority over time and across changes in administration with changes to organizational incentives that influence the culture of the foreign service.²³ Foreign service job assignments and promotion are two areas where the department can act.²⁴

If you were to speak to any FSO, she would tell you that her career path decisions are largely influenced by two incentives: onward job assignments and promotion potential. For any number of historical reasons, the personnel system rewards both in assignments and promotion those officers who specialize in regions—such as Europe, the Middle East, or East Asia—over those who specialize in global or transnational issues, such as climate change, nonproliferation, or refugee matters.

To rebalance the system to make climate change a desirable career path for FSOs, the department should take the following actions:

- **Create more embassy climate change jobs.** Officers see little foreign service career growth opportunity in climate. At a typical embassy, climate change responsibility is given to one midlevel officer. Supervisors engage on an ad hoc basis, ambassadors and DCMs even less so. The department should create clear career ladder opportunities from midlevel to senior positions, both in Washington and at embassies. Embassies in major capitals should have senior climate officers who lead multiofficer teams.

- **Consider climate performance in foreign service promotion decisions.** Given the up-or-out system, all FSOs focus on how a job’s responsibilities and visibility can help them move up the ladder. The foreign service promotion system discourages an officer from considering a climate change assignment or career focused on climate. The system rewards accomplishments that support department-specified priorities, of which climate has long been absent. The department should work with the American Foreign Service Association to add to its promotion precepts a specific expectation that officers demonstrate positive performance on climate to be considered for promotion at each professional level.
- **Reward and recognize climate performance.** The department’s servicewide awards program is another signal of the low priority it places on climate change. There are awards for DCM performance, political reporting, consular management, and other areas. There is no department award recognizing foreign service performance on climate change.²⁵ The department should create such an award.

Conclusion

The majority of Americans expect President-elect Biden to act promptly on climate change, both at home and abroad.²⁶ The gravity of the threat of climate change to the United States and the world requires the Biden administration to make climate change a central focus of U.S. foreign policy, aligning the resources and influence of the United States to help drive global action. The president must lead, but he should put U.S. diplomats and the State Department in the central role for executing this new charge and driving global action. These recommendations should go a long way in enabling them to do so.

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Endnotes

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