

Issue

Brief

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Assessing Biden's Climate Agenda: Bold Promises, Slow Results

Vivek Mishra

Abstract

The Biden administration's climate agenda is a crucial plank to restore American commitments to climate actions and reinstate US leadership globally. However, the agenda has been slow on results. Although the climate fight has been linked to most other federal goals, such as economy, jobs, infrastructure, and procurements, the Biden administration faces both domestic and external challenges that continue to limit how much it can achieve on its climate agenda.

Tackling climate change was one of the primary planks on which Joe Biden competed against the incumbent Donald Trump during the 2020 US presidential elections, with the former calling for drastic action on climate change through a clean energy revolution. On assuming the presidency, Biden sought to achieve two immediate goals through his climate agenda—domestically, he aimed to appear as a leader who had embraced the climate challenge; and internationally, he hoped to regain global leadership riding on a climate agenda. Despite starting strongly with executive orders boosting his administration's climate fight, it now lags on both goals.

Biden showed an early recognition of the climate crisis^a that the US and the rest of the world faces.¹ Much of his political path to being elected US president had a distinct plan for a clean energy revolution and environmental justice. Indeed, his presidential campaign incorporated public participation through online surveys on whether there is a need to take drastic measures to address the 'climate emergency'.² Even though Biden's climate agenda rode on domestic political goals, there was a realisation of its seriousness among a wide section of the US population,³ especially given the unprecedented impacts in recent years. Climate change has fuelled record wildfires in the western parts of the US, historic floods and loss of crops, and the most active Atlantic hurricanes for the past few years. Extreme high and low temperatures across the US droughts in some areas have accelerated national electricity demands, putting stress on the country's energy infrastructure.⁴ Nevertheless, as the second-biggest emitter of carbon dioxide globally,⁵ the US also faces a great challenge in reducing emissions.

This brief examines some of the key steps that the Biden administration has taken in the fight against climate change, assesses the political challenges to realising this climate agenda, and appraises Biden's success in his goal of regaining global influence through climate leadership.

a The Biden-Sanders Unity Task, formed in the early days of the Biden presidential campaign, declared climate change as a 'global emergency'.

Biden's Climate Commitments

During his tenure as president, Trump rolled back over 125 US environmental safeguards.^{b,6} As such, Biden's stand on climate change, a stark contrast to Trump's position on these issues, became a primary plank for his presidential campaign. Importantly, his campaign also stressed the economic benefits that would accrue from his administration's focused climate agenda.⁷ Among Biden's first few decisions as president was the confirmation of major officials related to energy and climate change;^c cancelling the permit for the Keystone XL Pipeline,⁸ which had become a concern for environmentalists; and re-entering the US to the Paris Climate Accord through an executive order.⁹ Another executive order on tackling the climate crisis at home and abroad¹⁰ soon followed, which sought to build on the Paris Agreement's objectives and promote American leadership through it. Decisions entailed in the executive orders included creating the Special Presidential Envoy for Climate position to address climate concerns, with a seat on the National Security Council; the hosting of a Leaders' Climate Summit on Earth Day (22 April) in 2021; reconvening the Major Economies Forum on Energy and Climate Change; and pressing for enhanced climate ambition and integrating it with the administration's commitment to elevate climate action in US foreign policy.¹¹

The Biden administration adopted a restructuring of bureaucracy to achieve a better integration of climate-oriented strategies with governance. Apart from appointing a special envoy on climate, Biden directed the Director of National Intelligence to make an assessment on the security implications of climate change. Acting on other important fronts, the administration asked the State Department to prepare a 'transmittal package' to the Senate for the Kigali Amendment to the Montreal Protocol.^d Above all, the administration's initial steps sought to take a whole-of-government approach to tackle climate change by directing all agencies to develop strategies to integrate climate considerations into their international work. Two important decisions came through the executive orders to consolidate this approach: the first concerns the establishment of the White House Office of Domestic Climate Policy, to be led by the first-ever National Climate Advisor and Deputy National Climate Advisor, essentially creating a central office in the White House that would

b For instance, Trump replaced the Obama-era Clean Power Plan with the Affordable Clean Energy rule, and withdrew a Clinton-era rule designed to limit toxic emissions from major industrial polluters.

c He was quick to finalise key positions, such as the administrator of the Environmental Protection Agency and leaders of the Department of Interior and the Department of Energy.

d An international agreement to gradually reduce the consumption and production of hydrofluorocarbons.

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be responsible for coordinating and implementing the president's domestic climate agenda; and second, the establishment of the National Climate Task Force, bringing together leaders from 21 federal agencies and departments to enable a whole-of-government approach to combat the climate crisis.¹²

Furthermore, the federal agencies were asked to procure carbon pollution-free electricity and clean, zero-emission vehicles to create good-paying, union jobs, and stimulate clean energy industries.¹³ The executive orders also directed the federal agencies to align facilities and operations to climate impacts, improve climate forecast capabilities to boost the adaptability to climate change, eliminate fossil fuel subsidies, put a pause on new oil and natural gas leases on public lands or offshore waters to the extent possible, and reduce climate pollution in building federal infrastructure.¹⁴ On 8 December 2021, Biden signed another executive order streamlining the US's clean energy economy through a federal plan of sustainable growth aimed to reduce emissions across all federal operations.¹⁵

To further advance conservation, improve climate-resilient agriculture, and reforestation, the administration committed to conserving at least 30 percent of lands and oceans by 2030 by engaging with multiple stakeholders.^e Additionally, an important agenda of the Biden administration is to include environmental justice^f as part of every agency.

During his campaign, Biden promised that were he to become president, he would announce a new plan to spend US\$2 trillion over four years to increase the share of clean energy usage in sectors such as transportation, electricity, and building.¹⁶ This was part of his broader agenda to link job creation with better infrastructure, while still tackling climate change.^g Towards achieving a broader synergy between growth and policy, Biden also sought to link his economic recovery plan with the climate change agenda, which is the central pillar of his administration's Build Back Better (B3) programme. Among its most important focus areas, B3 aims to promote environmental justice by reducing greenhouse gas (GHG) pollution by over one gigaton by 2030 and cutting consumer energy costs. The Biden administration touted B3 as the largest effort to combat the

e The administration has established the Civilian Climate Corps and Intra Agency Working Groups Initiative to implement these strategies.

f Amongst its major mandates are to address disproportionate health, environmental, economic, and climate impacts on disadvantaged communities.

g Specifically, the investment plan aimed to achieve the zero-carbon pollution from the electricity sector by 2035 and net-zero emissions by 2050 for the US.

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climate crisis in American history at the COP26 in Glasgow.¹⁷ As part of the initiative, Biden has promised to spend US\$555 billion on clean energy across buildings, transportation, industry, electricity, agriculture, and climate-smart practice, which currently remains stalled in the Senate.¹⁸ The B3 programme focuses on fighting climate change by enabling a shift to clean energy through subsidies, ensuring clean energy technologies, promoting environmental justice, and providing natural solutions to climate change such as coastal reforestation, forest management, and soil conservation across the US.¹⁹

Biden's strategy has also outlined some measures to bring the US back into the international climate fold. For instance, since January 2021, the US has submitted its climate assessments from 2016 to 2020 and released²⁰ its long-term strategy to meet the 2050 goal in line with limiting global warming to less than 1.5° C.²¹ The US aims to achieve carbon-neutrality by 2050, just as Japan, South Korea, Germany, the UK and the European Union (EU).²² However, the sheer size of its economy will make it more challenging for the Biden administration to achieve these targets.

Biden's domestic actions related to fighting climate change and bettering the environment have been a mix of executive action and proposals for Congress to fund climate-friendly investments. Many of these proposals are yet to secure Congressional approval for funding, including plans to harness wind energy, with a push to advance the offshore wind industry.^h

For the Biden administration, the synergy between the various federal departmentsⁱ forms a key component of its whole-of-government approach towards fighting climate change. The Department of the Interior has approved 18 onshore energy projects in the past year, estimated to deliver 4.175 GW of clean energy.²³ On 12 January 2022, the US Department of Energy launched the "Building a Better Grid" initiative²⁴ to develop new and upgraded high-capacity electric transmission lines. The US Department of Agriculture is leading programmes to develop community renewable clean energy projects through funding availability.^{j,25} Additionally, the Department of Commerce has Rescue Plan funds to support regional coalitions to put in place new industries with a focus on clean energy deployment and job training.²⁶

h It aims to generate enough offshore wind power for 10 million homes by 2030. Towards achieving this, it aims to hold at least 7 offshore wind lease sales by 2025.

i The Department of the Interior, Department of Agriculture, Department of Defense, Department of Energy, and the Environmental Protection Agency are working in tandem to ensure more efficient ways to identify areas for energy projects on public lands to expand solar, onshore wind, and geothermal energy.

j One such initiative is the Rural Energy Pilot Program that promises financial assistance to rural communities to further develop renewable energy.

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The United States Innovation and Competition Act, passed in June 2021, and the America COMPETES Act, passed in February 2022, have significant climate elements. The climate leg of the COMPETES Act includes enhancing the use of solar energy in supply chains, improved environmental standards to protect ocean and wildlife, bolstering climate diplomacy, and deepening partnerships across key strategic regions, such as the Arctic, Oceania, Africa, Asia, and the Caribbean, through clean and renewable energy.²⁷ The Act focuses on employing clean technologies in commercialisation, manufacturing, and advancing supply chain security.²⁸ Another focus of the Biden administration is planning policies and investments in hydrogen technology given its potential as an alternative to fossil fuels. By advancing hydrogen technology, the administration aims to decarbonise the domestic industrial sector, which is responsible for one-third of carbon emissions. To achieve this, the Bipartisan Infrastructure Law has designated US\$8 billion for creating Regional Clean Hydrogen Hubs to expand the use of clean hydrogen across the country.²⁹ These initiatives and funding by the Biden administration are closely linked with research and development to advance clean energy missions. The OPEN 2021 programme, led by the US Department of Energy's Advanced Research Projects Agency-Energy,^k or ARPA-E, aims to further research and development in clean energy by prioritising funding “high-impact, high-risk technologies” that advances newer approaches to clean energy challenges.³⁰

These domestic efforts have been accompanied by plans for a coordinated international focus on climate that is geared towards restoring leadership in key areas, starting new cooperation, and preventing China from gaining influence in newer areas, particularly climate technologies.

Climate Focus in Foreign Policy

In April 2021, mere months into his presidency, Biden invited 40 world leaders to the virtual Leaders Summit on Climate. In a symbolic move, the meeting was held on the Earth Day and the US led it by committing to cut its emissions by half by 2030 from 2005 levels. On the face of it, the Summit provided an opportunity for Biden to stress the urgency and benefits of strong climate action on the economic sector. The Summit also brought together 17 countries,

k In February 2022, the ARPA-E announced US\$175 million for 68 OPEN 2021 research and development projects.

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responsible for approximately 80 percent of global emissions and global GDP, within the umbrella of the US-led Major Economies Forum on Energy and Climate.³¹ Politically, Biden also used the summit to signal a democratic consensus on issues of climate change and global climate governance, led by commitments by the US.³² One of the most important developments in this regard was the Lowering Emissions by Accelerating Forest Finance coalition between the US, UK, and Norway to raise at least US\$1 billion for sustainable development efforts, specifically to protect tropical forests.³³

Additionally, the President's Emergency Plan for Adaptation and Resilience (PREPARE), launched at the COP26, aims to support developing nations and vulnerable communities in boosting their adaptability and managing varied impacts of climate change.^{1, 34} The goal is to help developing countries build climate resilience through a coordinated strategy of making investments, providing climate technologies, and extending diplomatic, technical, and developmental support. The Biden administration has pushed for a US\$3-billion annual climate adaptation fund for PREPARE by 2024.³⁵

Domestic Challenges

One of the biggest challenges that Biden faces in advancing his energy goals is political opposition from the Republican Party. The Republican opposition to climate funding, nature of projects, and scepticism over the advantages of some of these projects remain and have obstructed Congressional approval for funding. Besides, even within the Democratic Party many have become disenchanted with the Biden administration's ambitious climate agenda in the face of increasing climate-related disasters and the party's feeble political prospects in the November 2022 midterm elections.³⁶

Some Republicans continue to look at climate change with deep scepticism. Even those Republicans who see climate change as a reality and gravely responsible for the degrading environment are less inclined to prioritise these issues.³⁷ For instance, Senator Scott Perry has shown a deep distrust of Biden's climate policies, introducing a Bill in April 2021 to withdraw the US from the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change,³⁸ but it is yet to pass

¹ PREPARE has three key components: disseminating knowledge and sharing know-how with the developing world to understand climate risks, vulnerabilities, and adaptation solutions; mainstreaming adaptation by reducing climate impact and improving human security; and financing adaptation through resource mobilisation.

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in the House or Senate. A host of Republicans have also shown an unwillingness to carry out climate policies in their states, and these differences have also crept in how infrastructure funding is being used in Republican states.³⁹ For instance, in February 2022, US Senate minority leader Mitch McConnell, who is also on the Senate Committee on Environment and Public Works, and Senator Shelley Moore Capito issued a letter to state governors asking them to deprioritise the instructions in a Federal Highway Administration memorandum that advised on the types of projects states should pursue to improve roadway safety in line with clean energy goals by reducing GHG emissions.⁴⁰

Beyond obstructing Biden's climate agenda, Republican leaders have also attempted to chart their own versions of the climate crisis^m and the strategy to fix it.⁴¹ Issues of legislation related to US environment and climate change, carbon tax, and green programme funding continue to divide the Republicans and Democrats, slowing down the Biden administration's momentum. In their latest salvo against Biden's climate agenda, Republican states, led by West Virginia, invoked the "major questions doctrine"⁴²—a judicial principle that says that "courts should not defer to agency statutory interpretations that concern questions of "vast economic or political significance".⁴³

The Republicans are being supported by the coal industry in their case that the Environmental Protection Agency should be blocked from regulating GHG emissions from power plants. Most recently, the Republicans have alleged that the Biden administration's excessive focus on renewables and lessening dependency on imported fossil fuels could be a cause of the ongoing Ukraine war.⁴⁴ With rising energy prices across the US, the opposition threatens to grow bigger. In addition, the growing resistance from a strong oil and coal lobby in the US is worsening the situation. The coal miners see Biden's clean energy campaign as an attempt to replace their higher paid jobs and, as a result, have shown a lack of support for Biden's B3 plan that allocates a substantial amount towards clean energy.⁴⁵

^m Two dozen House Republican met secretly in Utah in February 2021 to frame a Republican response to climate change.

Biden Administration's Climate Action Record

In August 2021, the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change warned of faster warming, rising frequency of climate change-related crises across the world, its negative impact on water cycles and rainfall, thawing permafrost, and the danger to cities.⁴⁶ These have compounded Biden's challenges both at home and abroad, as he looks to combine mitigation with leadership through actions on climate change. Under the Biden administration, the US has committed to cut its GHGs to 50 percent below 2005 levels by 2030 and has committed investments, contingent on Congressional approval, for "green infrastructure and electric vehicles".⁴⁷

Among the major successes in Biden's climate change agenda is the negotiation and passage of the US\$1.2-trillion Bipartisan Infrastructure Bill, which was made into a law in 2021⁴⁸ and is perhaps his most noticeable legislative accomplishment in climate, energy, and transportation policy. Yet, the national and international assessments of Biden's climate commitments state that he has overpromised and underdelivered.⁴⁹ A primary reasons for this is that Biden's climate goals are overambitious, seeing mixed success in getting Congressional approval. Implementing the infrastructure law will be a major priority for the Biden administration in 2022, especially with the midterm elections looming.

Importantly, the Build Back Better Bill remains stalled. In the absence of Republican support, every Senate Democrat (and almost every House Democrat) has to sign the final bill for it to become law. Other challenges remain in the areas of the requirement to reach zero emissions by 2035 from vehicles, clean electricity, tackle super pollutants, enhance appliance and equipment standards to replace fossil fuels, ensure performance standards for cement, steel, and plastic, and regaining global climate leadership.⁵⁰

The ongoing war in Ukraine has further bound Biden with strategic compulsions over the future course of his energy plans: should his administration continue the path to clean energy goals or wait until the stress induced by disruptions from Russia settles? Certainly, many of Biden's energy goals are tied to the US's ability to help its allies across the developing world with their energy needs, clean technologies, and other related resources and skills. More importantly, the Ukraine crisis has put additional stress on the US by adding the responsibility of ensuring adequate energy supplies to its transatlantic partners in the face of uncertain supplies from Moscow. Stabilising


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high gas prices and controlling inflation are now two of the most important goals of the Biden administration. Biden has projected tax credits and climate spending as two ways to fight the inflation problem. However, an unstable global energy market connected these domestic concerns of the US with the world. In March 2022, the Biden administration decided to release 1 million barrels of oil per day from reserves.⁵¹ This is on the top of a US commitment on March 01 2022 to release 30 million barrels of crude from strategic petroleum reserves.⁵² The Ukraine war has complicated Biden's climate agenda, especially the goal of lessening the dependence on oil and other fossil fuels and cutting emissions by half by 2030. Despite bipartisan calls to ban Russian oil imports, US sanctions have largely avoided doing that. A destabilised global energy market has pushed the Republicans to ask Biden to rethink his cancellation of the Keystone XL pipeline and the moratorium on new oil and gas leases on public lands and waters.⁵³

“The national and international assessments of Biden's climate commitments state that he has overpromised and underdelivered. A primary reasons for this is that Biden's climate goals are overambitious, seeing mixed success in getting Congressional approval.”

Conclusion

Biden's campaign promise of sweeping reforms in the fight against climate change is yet to be realised. The political opposition from the Republicans at home and the rapidly changing external environment, due to the troop pull-out from Afghanistan and the ongoing Russia-Ukraine war, have contributed to the administration's limited success on its climate goals. Additionally, with some important climate legislations currently stalled in the US Congress, Biden is now facing a race against time to get them passed before the midterm elections.

The US pledge to work with international partners, especially China, has not shown much progress. With Sino-Russian relations reaching new heights amid the Ukraine war, partnering with China will need to be carefully vetted to avoid any unwanted benefits to Russia via China. As another major player, India's decision to buy discounted oil from Russia amid the US efforts to sanction Russia may have further compounded the US international energy partnerships. Internationally, Biden will have to bank on his climate diplomacy with China, India, and the EU. Russia, as one of the largest energy suppliers of the world, will remain an outlier that can impact Biden's fight against climate change and his environmental cause both positively and negatively. 

Vivek Mishra is a Fellow with ORF's Strategic Studies Programme.

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20, Rouse Avenue Institutional Area,
New Delhi - 110 002, INDIA
Ph. : +91-11-35332000. Fax : +91-11-35332005
E-mail: contactus@orfonline.org
Website: www.orfonline.org