

Essay

Climate politics in the era of US President Trump¹

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International politics is becoming increasingly difficult in many countries the era of US President Trump, Brexit, and the tendency towards renationalisation and protectionism. The emerging migration pressure presents a particular challenge, especially if you consider the possibility of millions of climate refugees in the future. At the same time as the international issues, the losers of the globalisation processes of recent decades generate political shifts within countries. Their situation has not been fairly taken into account in the public debate for far too long. At the national level, almost everywhere there are people who promise simple solutions, while the difficult, but promising approaches to genuine international cooperation are more suppressed on all sides.

The current problems become particularly clear when it comes to climate protection. **The Paris Climate Agreement is a step forward in international coordination, but it is not the solution to the climate problem**, even if many people involved in the area of sustainability and climate protection are acting as if the world community in Paris had decided on a fully-fledged solution to tackle climate change. This is not the case. The Paris Climate Agreement has two dimensions: a binding and a non-binding part. (1) The necessary objectives were formulated from the point of view of climate protection, but in a legally non-binding manner, with no clarified jurisdiction. (2) Only the voluntary CO₂ reduction commitments are halfway binding (Intended Nationally Determined Contributions

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(INDCs)) for the individual countries. They in sum, however, are at most limited to limiting global warming by perhaps 3.5 degrees compared to the pre-industrial age. The very important 2-degree goal is not achievable with these commitments.

The US President has now announced they are withdrawing from this contract. This probably does not mean he wants to give up the 2-degree goal. Rather, as always in the last 20 years, the load distribution is more important. The adaptation costs that a more climate-tolerated policy requires are primarily to be taken on by others rather than the US.

What are the consequences for international climate policy?

The consequences are not yet foreseeable at the moment. At the level of political relations and the pursuit of international consensus, the withdrawal of the United States is a serious blow. However, the US announcing its withdrawal could also create a counter-reaction in the other countries and cause them to work more closely together.

Regarding voluntary commitments, President Trump may, at most, revise the commitments of the United States. However, there is not much to be expected here. The US has already implemented its commitments on reduction targets by 2025 to a considerable extent. There is much evidence that this development will continue, even with withdrawing from the Paris Agreement.

The per capita emissions have been reduced in the US in recent years from about 20 t per capita to now 16.5 t. This is considerable. Germany cannot progress in the same way. Among other things, this is a consequence of the hasty nuclear energy exit, at least from a climate perspective. There is already a lot of "unworldliness" to declare the withdrawal from nuclear energy as a contribution to climate protection, as is sometimes heard in Germany. Honesty in communication would at least require making it clear in public debates that climate protection is important to us, but we also consider the withdrawal from nuclear energy as equally important and that we also reject slate gas production. Only one conclusion can be drawn from Germany's current approach: withdrawal from nuclear energy and the rejection of slate gas production are so important to us that it could make us okay with less climate protection. This is unfortunately not expressed so openly.

Where do the enormous American CO₂ reductions come from?

The considerable American CO₂ reductions have little to do with US climate policy. The trigger is the enormous US shale gas production, which has often replaced coal and oil as a fuel. Gas causes significantly lower CO₂ emissions as oil, and even more so than coal. If you consider the CO₂ emissions in the combustion of fossil fuels in kg CO₂/ kWh, the following values are obtained: Natural gas 0.20; light fuel oil 0.26; heavy fuel oil 0.28; hard coal 0.33, and brown coal 0.40. The emissions from brown coal are thus twice as high as for natural gas per unit of energy. The shale gas policy of the US is for strategic reasons above all. It is about reducing their dependency on oil and making things difficult for Russia, Iran, as well as the Arab states through massively declining oil prices. There will be little change in this geopolitical strategy by the US policy under President Trump. In addition, it is expected that the attempt to strengthen coal will not have much effect because coal is increasingly becoming an economic burden and a financial problem for investors, all the more so since there will continue to be massive shale gas activities in the US.

Can the climate problem even be solved?

The problems with climate protection lie in an entirely different place than is usually discussed. The key moment for climate protection was the climate conference of Copenhagen in 2009. After the intervention by the then US President and the then Chinese Prime Minister, an attempt was finally made to negotiate a binding climate agreement which implements the 2-degree goal. It was clear that the countries of the world would not be able to agree on how the burden was distributed for such a climate regime. The rich countries in particular were not willing to finance the path of emerging and developing countries to a growing prosperity with simultaneous climate protection by means of substantial transfer payments. This is in contrast to the control of the opening ozone layer by the Montreal Protocol of 1989. But the situation was also much simpler with regard to the ozone hole. There were cost-effective alternatives for the use of CFCs and the overall costs of the conversion were manageable. The rich countries took on these costs.

The situation was different in climate negotiations. The concepts of justice were too different in this context, too different were the expectations for the future and the aspirations of people for more prosperity.

In a study conducted by the FAW/n, two fundamental problems of justice were found which made it difficult to find a consensus-based approach to climate protection. In climate policy, on the one hand, there is justice between the countries. This issue is the real object of the international negotiation process. But it is also about justice between rich consumers with an elevated lifestyle and the rest of the population. It should be noted that in the poorer countries there are just as many extremely wealthy people with an excessive lifestyle as in the rich world.

The FAW/n analyses on the topic therefore contained the following conclusion: Compared to the status quo according to Copenhagen, the global CO₂ emissions must be reduced by about 1000 billion tonnes by 2050. At the time, we estimated that the conceivable reduction commitments of the countries could account for about half of the volume saved by 2050, which would reduce the open gap from 1000 to 500 billion tonnes of CO₂ as a result.

The Paris Agreement has the potential for this expected level of reduction, taking into account the expected improvements of the Agreement over the coming years. The expected gap of 500 billion t CO₂ thus remains of the additional reduction requirement until 2050 - what is called the ambition **gap**. In the opinion of the author, this gap cannot be closed by politics, but only by the private sector.

The following figure illustrates the distributed responsibility between politics and the private sector and the respective magnitudes of the required CO₂ reductions:

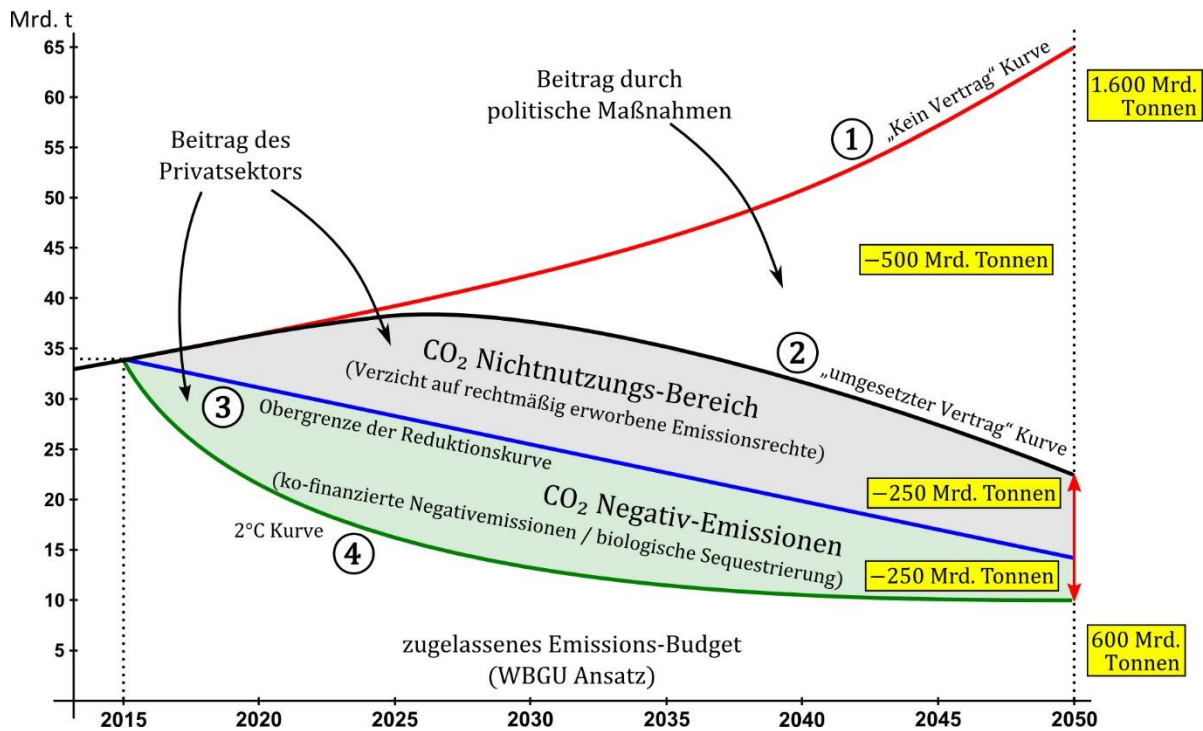


Fig. 1: Necessary distributed responsibility for climate protection - contributions of the political and private sectors

A new FAW/n analysis from 2016 confirmed the position that politics alone cannot close the existing ambition gap. It is therefore also not important if numerous NGOs insist on this point over and over again and politics is called on to take responsibility. Rather, in the sense of the second dimension of justice, the prosperous part of the world's population is to be activated for voluntary climate protection measures. The relevant NGOs should finally become offensive here. The more prosperous part of the world's population must and can solve the second half of the climate problem through its own (manageable) efforts. It is important to understand that this unresolved part of the problem is much greater than anything the US will or will not contribute. In other words, regardless of what the US does, a 500 billion t gap will probably become a 550 billion t gap, but that is not the main problem.

Who can solve the problem then?

The private sector is needed. This means companies, organisations, local authorities, and private individuals - with contributions that depend on their level of prosperity and thus the level of their CO₂ emissions. On the one hand, it is about people

who generate very high climate emissions (directly or indirectly) through their lifestyle. On the other hand, it is about companies and other organisations whose business activity cause considerable CO₂ emissions despite all measures taken to avoid and reduce CO₂emissions. The strategy for the private sector should therefore be as follows: voluntary individual climate neutrality using the tools **avoidance, saving, and compensation**, and doing so at their own expense going beyond all legal requirements.

Examples from the recent past are the companies Avia with climate-neutral fuel oil as well as SAP with its recently announced 2025 climate neutral strategy. The state of Hesse, with its programme for a climate management administration in 2030, is also a pioneer in this area.

Climate neutrality can be achieved in several ways. One approach is to help the atmosphere withdraw CO₂ through massive global reforestation and humus formation (negative emissions), hundreds of billions of tonnes of it. CO₂ can even be converted into a productive force, namely in the areas of wood and agriculture. In addition, financing projects to promote renewable energies in poorer countries will have to contribute to prosperity while at the same time protecting the climate, for example replacing firewood with electric cookers or using solar energy in places where no electricity network is available. Such projects are also essential building blocks of a **marshal plan with Africa** and the attempt to implement Agenda 2030, ie the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Such a broad-based plan is feasible, but it has to be co-financed in large part by the prosperous part of the world's population and by the private sector: companies, other organisations, and private individuals. Per year, it is about contributions in the amount of perhaps 150-300 billion US dollars for development and climate protection, which is twice the amount of today's funding for development cooperation. Such a volume is easy to shoulder from the prosperous part of the world and is (1) directly rewarded with individual climate neutrality and thus a self-made and externally communicable contribution to the solution of the challenges of today's time and (2) this will provide the conditions for a high standard of living and a corresponding lifestyle for the corresponding segment of the (world) population to remain possible in the future.

The two approaches described, which contribute to climate protection and economic development at the same time - and thus also to the implementation of the SDGs - can thus be important building blocks for securing the future and peace. It goes without saying that this is also in the interest of strong performance all over the world.

Summary

If the climate problem is to be solved, 500 billion tonnes of CO₂ savings or negative emissions must be made by 2050 in addition to the existing and foreseeable further political reduction commitments. This is the real challenge. The decision of the US President can again increase this value by 50 billion, which is not decisive in the matter. The decisive factor is that the powerful people in this world are finally aware of their responsibilities and, by means of voluntary compensatory measures, can eliminate the remaining gaps in the climate area which cannot be closed by politics. The irritation caused by President Trump can be overcome once the decision has been made. In the area of climate protection, people can act independent from the ups and downs of politics. Powerful people can solve the climate problem, on their own and without waiting for politics, whereby the support of the voluntary measures by politics would certainly be very helpful. When powerful people make a decision about climate neutrality, they do it to their benefit and the benefit of everyone. A wise policy should incorporate this approach into its strategy and encourage it as much as possible. It is much more sensible than driving a citizen or company into a cost-effective solution in a kind of climate plan which can hardly do anything for the climate at a high central rate, frustrate the affected citizens, and at the same time exacerbate the social imbalance in our countries.