

UNITED STATES OF AMERICA

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Since the Obama administration took office in January 2009, climate policy in the United States has been through many ups and downs. Obama announced in his election campaign that he would make the passing of high-profile, comprehensive climate legislation one of his main objectives from the start of his first term and would push it through Congress. His efforts in this matter failed, and ever since the Senate rejected Obama's proposal, climate policy became a politically sensitive subject and largely disappeared from public debate.

For about a year now, however, the public as well as Congress and the administration are showing new interest in climate policy. A series of studies have been published in recent months that have received the support of both advocates and opponents of a strong climate policy. Interest groups have invested large sums of money – on television advertisements, for instance – to win the public over to their respective positions on climate change. At the same time, the existence of climate change is a highly contentious issue among the public. A study published by the American Association for the Advancement of Science in March 2014 found that most Americans consider climate change to be a scientifically disputed thesis. However, a change in thinking with regard to recognising anthropogenic climate change seems to be taking place among younger generations. A survey by the Pew Research Center in March 2013 shows that only 28 percent of US voters aged 65 or older believe in CO₂-induced global warming, while the same figure among voters 50 years or younger is almost 50 percent.

There have also been several heated debates in Congress. On 7 April 2014, the Democrats initiated a 30-hour discussion on climate change in the Senate. It cannot be ruled out that climate policy will again play a larger role and become a key issue in the mid-term elections in November 2014 and the presidential elections in 2016.

OBAMA'S CLIMATE INITIATIVE

What has triggered this new interest in climate policy? President Obama gave fresh impetus to the issue with a speech in July 2013 at Georgetown University. This was the president's first big speech on climate policy during his second term since his State of the Union

address, and gave him the chance to not only set out his priorities for his second term, but also to clarify how he wants to achieve his objectives. It is important to note that while the speech revived the debate on climate policy in the United States, its intention was not to provide a comprehensive vision of US climate objectives. It was more intended as an opportunity to announce the plans he had for using administrative actions to move forward on climate policy. It became clear from the speech that the president no longer envisages congressional cooperation in the legislative process, and that he plans rather to circumvent Congress wherever possible. The president also emphasised in his speech that climate policy will continue to be a top priority of his and that he intends to use his remaining time in office to take concrete steps in this matter in order to leave a positive legacy.



The California-based company Tesla Motors is a pioneer in e-cars and electric drive trains. It started its series production of emissions-free sports cars in 2008.

The objectives are threefold: the reduction of CO₂ emissions, preventive measures to mitigate the impacts of climate change and, above all, the United States taking a leading role in energy policy, specifically by improving energy efficiency and by increasing the use of clean and renewable energies. Obama's stressing of the medium-term positive effects for the economy and the environment from using natural gas as an energy source provided further political support for the rapidly increasing production of this energy source.

With regard to the reduction in greenhouse gases, the Obama administration set itself the ambitious target of a reduction of 17 percent by 2020 and a reduction of 83 percent by 2050, based on 2005 levels.

This turns the spotlight on coal-fired power plants because they represent the largest source of greenhouse gases in the United States. Obama therefore introduced a new Clean Power Plan through the Environmental Protection Agency on 2 June 2014. This plan will establish new regulations for CO₂ emissions from coal-fired power plants and reduce them by 30 percent by 2030. In addition to the reduction of fine particle air pollution, the costs of electricity are expected to fall by eight percent. After a period of public debate over the plan, binding regulations are expected to be in place from June 2015.

The plan also requires the US federal states to submit their implementation plans by 2016, but gives the individual states flexibility in how they achieve their climate goals – either by shifting emphasis to renewables and nuclear energy, by increasing energy efficiency or by introducing a market for renewable energy certificates.

There are already regional markets for renewable energy certificates in California and in a bloc of states in the northeast of the United States, which will now become more attractive to other states interested in following suit. This has shown that the federal states can assume a leading role in combating greenhouse gases.

Whether or not the plan will actually be implemented successfully or not is yet to be seen. Most Democrats in Congress support the plan, though the plan faces resistance not only from Republicans but also from Democratic legislators from coal-mining states. Congress has the option of limited funding for the Environmental Protection Agency (and other government agencies) through the budgetary process, a move that would at the very least impede the plan's implementation.

THE MILITARY'S ROLE IN CLIMATE POLICY

Interestingly, the Pentagon could increasingly become an important catalyst for US climate policy and for its international commitments on climate change. A new study by the CNA Corporation's Military Advisory Board reveals that the climate change-induced droughts in the Middle East and Africa have exacerbated resource-related conflicts and ethnic tensions, thus suggesting that climate change has intensified



Flexible solar panels on US Army tarps at Camp Lemonnier in Djibouti. These enable the unit to generate the energy it needs to operate fans, radios and lighting.

the risk of global instability. In March in another report (Quadrennial Defense Review), the US Defense Department found a direct link between climate change and terrorism. The report concluded that climate change intensifies poverty, environmental problems, political instability and social tensions and hence contributes to creating the conditions conducive to terrorist activities and other forms of violence. Climate change is thus seen as a significant threat to national security. This assessment faces stark criticism from opponents who consider threats to national security to come more from conventional areas.

At the same time, the US military has invested huge sums in the research and development of solar energy, not least to safeguard the armed forces' future energy independence. To this end, construction recently began on a 27.5-hectare solar installation in Arizona.

GERMANY'S ENERGY TRANSITION

Significant interest in Germany's energy transition has come largely from policy making circles, but misconceptions continue to surface time and again. The energy transition is frequently associated with the Fukushima disaster and is seen as an irrational panic reaction. Also, it is frequently overlooked that Germany has a long history of resistance to nuclear energy and that the decision to phase out nuclear power was taken long before Fukushima. The nuclear phase-out is primarily seen as an ideologically driven decision that fails to adequately weigh economic and strategic consequences, while not being sufficiently guided by economic and strategic considerations. One frequent criticism is that Germany is becoming too dependent on Russian national gas supplies as a result of its energy transition. These critics now feel especially vindicated by the events in the Ukraine.

INTERNATIONAL CLIMATE POLICY

The United States works with international partners in the field of climate policy. The Obama administration is currently working towards the goal of making the 2015 climate summit in Paris a success. In explaining the US's position in May 2014, chief negotiator Todd Stern said that the United States recognises the complexity of the situation with regard to the many national interests and that it has therefore compiled a list of "nationally determined contributions" that demands different contributions from each country based on their respective capabilities. At the same time, Stern said that the United States will not check the commitments to ensure that they represent a significant contribution to reducing climate change. He also vehemently rejects "shared but differentiated responsibilities", whereby developing countries are not subject to strict climate targets.

In addition to this multilateral context, the United States is also working bilaterally with other states – not least to support the multilateral efforts and to increase the involvement of developing countries in climate policy. Although the country signed the Kyoto Protocol in 1997, it has not ratified it, thus suggesting that the protocol is not binding for the countries who are the largest emitters of climate gases. This particularly applies to China and India, which are seen as the states that have the greatest influence on climate change. The United States is working towards a harmonised climate policy with these countries, especially in the hope of providing the basis for a successful climate summit in Paris.

In April 2013, US Secretary of State John Kerry agreed to set up the Climate Change Working Group in cooperation with China to deal with a range of subjects, including the reduction of exhaust emissions from heavy goods vehicles, CO₂ storage, energy efficiency in buildings, improved data collection of climate gases and smart grids.

The United States, which has been working with India since 2009 in the Partnership to Advance Clean Energy (PACE), supports the development of renewable energies in the south Asian nation. In 2012 and 2013 alone, the expansion of India's solar capacity received US funding to the tune of US\$2 billion. There is also cooperation with Indian oil and gas companies and in open-cast coal mining regarding the capturing of methane gases.

Whether these efforts will help make the 2015 climate summit in Paris a success – and whether the United States will then sign a new protocol – remains to be seen. Should it sign the protocol, however, Congress could very well block ratification again.

CONCLUSION

On the whole, climate policy is currently a high priority once again and will remain a matter of great importance for the remainder of Obama's second term. But given the political realities, the prospects of success are limited. Since current polls give the Democrats virtually no chance of gaining control of the House of Representatives in the mid-term elections in November 2014, the prospects of legislative initiatives finding support in Congress are very slim. The president will therefore continue to push through his climate policy by administrative means. The United States is currently taking significant steps towards clean energy, especially through an increased use of gas in energy production and the further restriction of coal-fired power plants. It is striving to make the upcoming UN Climate Change Conference in Paris a success, not least by securing the support of developing countries for the implementation of a stricter climate policy.

Furthermore, the debate surrounding the use of gas, in particular shale gas, is of key strategic importance in the United States.