

The Biden climate plan, Part 2: Preparation for war

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This is the second of a two-part analysis of the Biden climate plan. The first part examined Biden's domestic climate agenda. This part details the international geopolitical implications of his climate plan.

As Biden has assembled his new administration, he devoted Wednesday, January 27, to unveiling his plans to fight climate change, with former Secretary of State John Kerry as his “climate envoy” and former EPA Administrator Gina McCarthy as the top White House adviser on climate change.

The record of these two leaders of the Biden climate policy demonstrates both the insincerity of the new administration's appeal to widespread popular concerns over global warming and the alignment of its policies with the worldwide interests of American imperialism.

McCarthy was head of the EPA during the worst pollution event in recent history, the systematic poisoning of the population of Flint, Michigan in the lead-in-water scandal that came to light in 2015. The federal EPA shared responsibility with state and local officials for covering up the profit-driven decisions that produced this catastrophe, leading to the deaths of dozens of people and the poisoning of tens of thousands, including many children who may suffer lifelong consequences.

That such an official is chosen for a top White House position, rather than publicly denounced and prosecuted, only demonstrates for the thousandth time that there is one law for the capitalists and their top servants, and another law for everyone else.

As for Kerry, the former senator, presidential candidate and secretary of state, he has so many crimes in the service of American imperialism on his dossier that it would take another article of this length just to list them all. Suffice it to say that he has supported all the American wars in the Middle East, including the 2003 invasion of Iraq, the US attack on Libya in 2011, and the ongoing interventions in Syria and Yemen, as well as the war in Afghanistan, now more than 20 years old.

His selection as climate envoy is a declaration by Biden that US efforts in relation to environmental issues will be driven, first and foremost, by the geopolitical needs of American imperialism, and particularly its predatory aims for the subjugation of China and Russia, which Washington regards as its two biggest military and security rivals.

Biden's choice of Kerry has been widely hailed by liberal and pseudoleft commentators, who drummed up 2020 votes for the Democrats as a sign that the new President is serious about climate change. Kerry co-chaired the Biden-Sanders unity task force on climate together with Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, a member of the Democratic Socialists of America (DSA) faction of the Democratic Party. One result of this task force was the Biden climate plan, a highly watered-down version of the Green New Deal popularized by Ocasio-Cortez.

In response to the announcement in late November, Bill McKibben, the prominent environmentalist and founder of 350.org, “I think @Johnkerry will do a fine job, not least because he understands that there's huge new expertise available from younger generations.”

Varshini Prakash, cofounder and executive director of the Sunrise Movement youth climate activism organization, said of the appointment, “one thing is clear: he really does care about stopping climate change. That's something we can work with.”

Kerry and the American Security Project

Kerry has indeed devoted considerable attention to climate change throughout his career. However, this interest is not unrelated to his decades of political service to the needs of US imperialism. In 2005, he co-founded the non-partisan American Security Project (ASP), which describes itself as “a leading organization detailing the threats posed by climate change” from a national security perspective.

ASP hailed Kerry's appointment, highlighting, “Three urgent and important issues that the National Security Council should take up immediately after the new Biden Administration takes office to begin to reduce the threats that climate change poses to security are: (1) military base resilience, (2) reorienting foreign aid and military assistance to support climate security, and (3) preparing for the security challenge of a melting Arctic.” In other words, the focus is less on reducing the impacts of climate change and more on ensuring that the US war machine responds effectively as the world warms.

Each of these points figures prominently in Biden's climate plan, illustrating that the ASP's hopes are well-founded that Kerry would help the administration pursue these priorities.

The Biden climate plan includes the following passages, apparently paraphrasing the ASP report. Biden will (1) “[i]nvest in the climate resilience of our military bases and critical security infrastructure across the U.S. and around the world, to deal with the risk of climate change effects.” Both documents use almost identical language, noting roughly \$10 billion in damages to US bases from extreme weather in 2019. (2) “rally a united front of nations to hold China accountable to high environmental standards in its Belt and Road Initiative infrastructure projects,” and (3) “use the Arctic Council to put a spotlight on Russia's activities in the Arctic, standing firm with council partners to hold Russia accountable for any efforts to further militarize the region.”

The ASP argues that China is using climate and energy as a tool to gain influence in regions such as South America, the Pacific, and West Africa, and that the US should do the same, using the “soft power tool” of climate aid. Speaking of China “showering cash to build seawalls, ports, and clean energy” on its soon-to-be submerged island neighbors, ASP claims that “Chinese influence, lubricated by climate aid, could extend the current challenges of the South China Sea well into the Pacific.”

They express similar concerns over China's Belt and Road initiative to build infrastructure corridors through the Eurasian landmass, calling for

action to “Stop China from subsidizing coal exports and outsourcing carbon pollution,” going on to denounce China’s initiative for financing fossil fuel infrastructure across Eurasia.

Raising such concerns with Biden is entirely hypocritical. During his eight years as vice president, the Obama administration exerted enormous diplomatic pressure on countries across the world to build liquefied natural gas import terminals to facilitate the export of US natural gas from fracking.

The ASP report concludes, “The U.S. should use the new tools of the Development Finance Corporation to direct climate and energy aid to countries that are both threatened by climate change and strategically important.” Biden’s climate plan includes similar language on both the South China Sea and the Belt and Road initiative.

In other words, climate aid and US international climate policy more generally are viewed as another tool in its ongoing attempts to geopolitically, economically, and militarily subjugate China, not as a humanitarian measure to ensure the world’s impoverished masses can transition to clean energy and weather the storms that inevitably arise.

Along these lines, the ASP’s primary takeaway on the rapidly melting Arctic is that the US should not allow Russia to gain naval influence in the newly navigable polar waters. Supposedly, “The ultimate goal would be to build confidence between NATO and Russia so that the Arctic does not slide into a zone of conflict as the ice melts.” Biden’s climate plan calls for mobilizing the US-dominated Arctic Council “to put a spotlight on Russia’s activities in the Arctic, standing firm with council partners to hold Russia accountable for any efforts to further militarize the region.”

In explaining what this would mean in practice, the ASP states, “the U.S. military should actively participate in Arctic joint exercises, and publicize US military deployments to the region, with particular focus on the Russian border.” In other words, a Biden administration will bring the reckless methods of militarized “freedom of navigation exercises” from the South China Sea to Russia’s Arctic coast.

Democrats accept global warming

The ASP document concludes with a subtle admission of the true attitude toward climate change within the sections of the US ruling class for which Biden and Kerry speak, arguing, “Ultimately, there are no security solutions in a world that sees unchecked global warming.” They go on to explain that “A world of 4 degrees of warming [presumably 4 degrees Celsius] is a world of drastically changed food supplies, sea levels, and water availability. Such a world would be beyond the capability of global military forces to secure.”

The authors are correct that the warming of 4 degrees Celsius would cause a global catastrophe, but the implication of this statement is that the warming of 3 degrees Celsius might be acceptable to US imperialism. The last time global temperatures reached this level, the sea was 20 meters higher than today. Nearly the entire nation of Bangladesh, with a population of 165 million, is less than 10 meters above sea level.

This is the true face of US climate policy and the logical outcome of the domestic and international policy initiatives put forward by the Biden administration. The Democratic Party is fully aware that its policies will not succeed in limiting global warming to 2 degrees Celsius, let alone 1.5 degrees Celsius. Those numbers are solely to feed popular illusions. All US capitalism can muster in the face of this well understood global crisis, of which it has been aware since the 1970s, is enough palliative measures to maintain US military dominance even in a world destabilized by global warming.

Highlighting the militarist and essentially right-wing role of Kerry’s

approach to climate change, in 2019 he co-founded an organization called World War Zero, dedicated to “uniting scientists and entrepreneurs, four-star generals and youth activists, popular artists and global leaders, Democrats and Republicans” to fight climate change. Prominent members of this organization include former Republican governors Arnold Schwarzenegger (California) and the John Kasich (Ohio), as well as actor Leonardo DiCaprio.

Aside from a goal of net zero emissions by 2050 and calls for people who support climate action to stop fighting each other, the organization has essentially nothing concrete to say. The praise for Kerry by the likes of the 350.org and the Sunrise Movement demonstrates that World War Zero has accomplished its purpose—presenting the Democratic Party as sympathetic to the millions of mostly young people concerned about whether they will have a future as the global environment collapses.

The DSA-affiliated *Jacobin* magazine has postured as a critic of Kerry’s close ties with the fossil fuel industry, but simply goes on to argue that “Beltway Liberals Aren’t Fighting Biden’s Pro-Corporate Admin Picks Hard Enough.” In other words, they calculate that an outright endorsement of Kerry would be too blatant a prostration before the Democratic establishment. Instead, they assert that the Democratic Party can be pressured to take meaningful action on climate change to keep workers and young people tied to capitalist politics.

In truth, there can be no serious talk of addressing climate change while the world’s imperialist powers prepare for global war, led by the anti-Russia and anti-China hawks of the Biden administration. The only way a capitalist Earth can limit warming to 1.5 degrees Celsius is through a nuclear winter. Biden’s proposed militarized climate policy only raises the odds of such an outcome.

China currently leads the world in carbon emissions, with 30 percent of the total compared to 15 percent for the United States. This is an inevitable outcome the development of world capitalism, not a specifically Chinese affair. As a central element of the globalization of production, China has emerged as the manufacturing hub of the world. Targeting China and forcing it to reduce its emissions would, under global capitalism, only lead to corporations shifting production to other countries, while destroying jobs in China and driving down wages and living standards for workers all over the world.

In contrast, the international Trotskyist movement calls on workers in the US and around the world to unite with our Chinese brothers and sisters to build a global economy that meets our collective needs. Humanity has the technological tools needed to do this while limiting global warming to levels compatible with protecting the lives and livelihood of the world’s population.

However, as they have demonstrated so tragically over the past year in the response to COVID-19, capitalism and the outmoded nation-state system are the main obstacles to any coordinated global response to an environmental and public health threat. The fight against climate change is the fight against capitalism and the fight for socialism.



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