

The Atlantic

The Paris Agreement: Already Forgotten?

It's unclear whether Trump will pay any price for leaving the treaty at the G20 conference in Hamburg.

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REYKJAVÍK, Iceland—When President Donald Trump pulled the United States out of the Paris Agreement on climate change, it seemed like the entire world rushed to condemn him.

Emmanuel Macron, the president of France, immediately made a live broadcast. “He is making a mistake for the future of his country and his people, and a mistake for the future of the planet,” he said.

Bishop Marcelo Sánchez Sorondo, the head of the Pontifical Academy of Sciences at the Vatican, declared the withdrawal “a disaster for [the United States] and also for all the world.”

And 25 countries—including Chile, Switzerland, and this small, volcanic nation in the North Atlantic—banded together to make a joint statement. “Our commitment to the Paris Agreement is unshakeable,” it said. “We have every reason to fight for its full implementation: our families, our health, our welfare, our security, our economies, and our livelihoods.”

That torrent of global opprobrium rained down on Trump a month ago. This weekend, the leaders of the world’s 20 largest economies could deliver their censure to the president again, when they meet in Hamburg, Germany, at the G20 conference. So will they?

It’s still unclear. Germany and other western European countries had hoped to issue a unity statement on the treaty, creating a quasi-“G19” that continues to abide by the Paris Agreement while the United States dallies. There’s some precedent for this: Last month, at a meeting in Bologna, environmental ministers from six of the planet’s seven largest economies declared the Paris Agreement “irreversible, non-negotiable and the only instrument possible to combat climate change.” EPA Administrator Scott Pruitt and the rest of the American delegation, also in attendance at the meeting, [were relegated to a footnote](#).

But Lisa Friedman of *The New York Times* reports [that the European effort to create a *cordon sanitaire* isn’t going as well as it did in Italy](#). At least four of the G20 attendees—Russia, Turkey, Indonesia, and Saudi Arabia—[seem unlikely to enthusiastically affirm Paris](#), even though [they all signed it](#) last year.

Each of these countries has a different reason for resisting. Saudi Arabia, which has [historically played the spoiler](#) in climate talks, needs to stay on Trump’s good side as it besieges Qatar and [bombs Yemen](#) with [U.S.-made weapons](#).

Indonesia [ratified the Paris Agreement last October](#), but in the absence of U.S. pressure it may decide that investing in renewable energy isn’t worth the hassle. Michael Oppenheimer, a Princeton professor and longtime observer of climate diplomacy, [predicted last month](#) that Indonesia—along with Brazil and India—would “back off” their Paris commitments after the American abdication. Those three countries emit 7 percent of the world’s greenhouse gases today; they are expected to take a larger share later this century.

And Russia has many reasons to buck the treaty. Not only is it the third-ranking emitter of heat-trapping gases, and not only does it want to reward Trump and rebuke Merkel: [As Mother Jones’s Rebecca Leber writes](#), Russia has long seen climate policy more as a diplomatic tool than as a high-ranking motivation. Though it signed Paris, it has not ratified it; and it helped to scuttle an earlier attempt at a climate agreement in Copenhagen in 2009.

Before that, Russia only ratified the Kyoto Protocol, an earlier climate pact, when European countries said that doing so would allow it to join the World Trade Organization. As Leber reports:

[Former Putin economic policy adviser Andrei] Illarionov [framed](#) Putin’s decision as a straight transaction having little to do with the environment. “Everybody who was speaking [at the Russian government meeting] was saying that we do understand that the Kyoto protocol does not have any scientific background, and we are making this decision not because the Kyoto protocol is scientifically proven but because we would like to have good relations with Europe, with European countries.”

(Illarionov, now a [fellow](#) at the Cato Institute in Washington, D.C., also claims that Putin’s government believes humans do not play a major role in global warming, Leber notes.)

It’s easy to shrug at this diplomatic hoopla. What does it mean if a group of countries publish *another* statement condemning Trump? But it has consequences for American politics—mostly because it has consequences for American journalism. [As the journalist Brian Beutler describes it](#), the U.S. media is biased toward “new” news: “things we didn’t know before, but do know now.” This often means that climate change gets left out. And with no “new news” about the Paris Agreement to cover, many outlets won’t mention the treaty in their Hamburg stories—even though the American withdrawal remains a major issue.

And that’s a shame. Because if there’s one theme among countries’ reactions to the Paris withdrawal, it’s that Trump—here as on other foreign-policy issues—is alienating traditional American allies far more than he’s alienating American adversaries. Indeed, some of the harshest censure for Trump came from the cabinet heads and departmental ministers of historic U.S. partners.

“I’m not just disappointed, but also feel anger,” said Tarō Asō, Japan’s finance minister, at the time. “Even if there’s a 50 percent likelihood that climate change and global warming are caused by human activity, it is our duty to act to minimize risks,” said Yuval Steinitz, Israel’s energy minister. And France’s environmental minister, [Nicolas Hulot](#), has called the array of Trump climate policies “a crime against humanity.”

If there’s any good news this week for advocates of aggressive climate action, it came from Americans again. A recent Yale University poll found that [58 percent of Americans](#) say that global warming is caused by human activity. It’s the highest level ever recorded since the survey began in 2008.