



Biden's idealistic UN message on climate change

BY JOEL A. MINTZ, OPINION CONTRIBUTOR — 09/22/21 01:00 PM EDT
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Addresses by national leaders to the United Nations General Assembly are often broad expressions of lofty ideals, and President Joe Biden's speech Tuesday fell squarely into that category. It covered an extraordinary panoply of global challenges and policy concerns, including controlling the COVID-19 pandemic, rebuilding and strengthening global alliances and regional initiatives, curbing terrorism, protecting human rights (including the rights of women and workers) and lifting up democracy. Biden also committed the United States to advancing human dignity, combating corruption and seeking peace in areas of conflict around the world.

Of particular importance were Biden's remarks regarding the global climate change crisis. Observing that "we stand at an inflection point in history," Biden outlined a stark choice between "meeting the threat of climate change" or suffering "the merciless march of ever-worsening droughts and floods, more intense fires and hurricanes, longer heatwaves and rising seas." Attempting to lead by example, while also appealing to a domestic audience, Biden stressed the climate-related aspirations and actions of his administration. He noted that he had previously announced a U.S. national goal of reducing greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions by 50 percent to 52 percent below 2005 emission levels by the year 2030 and net-zero emissions by 2050 — goals that he reiterated in his address.

The president indicated that investing in "green technology" provides an opportunity to create numerous good-paying jobs — while spurring long-term economic growth and an improved quality of life. Moreover, he asserted, transparent, sustainable investments must be made to maintain high environmental (and labor) standards. Therefore, Biden indicated that his administration is working with the U.S. Congress to make critical federal investments in green infrastructure and electric vehicles. He exhorted the world's leaders to bring "their highest possible ambitions to the table" when they gather in Glasgow this fall for the UN's COP-26 summit meeting regarding climate change.

How should we assess Biden's remarks on the climate crisis? Without doubt, the president's grim prediction of what will happen if we ignore the threat of climate change is right on the mark. As I noted in [a previous piece in *The Hill*](#), the most recent report of the UN Intergovernmental

Panel on Climate Change spells out, in dry yet careful language, that without a massive collective effort to limit greenhouse gas emissions, the global future will be bleak. Current climate changes resulting from human activities have no precedent, as major alterations in natural global systems are already underway. Thus, Biden's warnings about the potential for ever more dangerous droughts, floods, heatwaves, wildfires and sea-level rise are well-supported by the most authoritative and reliable scientific research.

Less certain, however, is the likelihood that the ambitious ameliorative steps that the president proposed — both within the U.S. and internationally — will actually be taken. At this writing it is unclear whether the United States Congress will enact the far-reaching legislative proposals on climate change that the administration has proposed. Biden's Republican opponents seem firmly opposed to any comprehensive climate change legislation; and intra-party disagreements among congressional Democrats also pose obstacles to its passage.

Also in some doubt is Biden's proposal that our nation make critical investments in green infrastructure and electric vehicles. Congressional Republicans (and some Democrats) object to that spending request as too costly.

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At the international level, the prospects for the world's political leaders to agree in Glasgow to a bold treaty to curb global emissions of greenhouse gases seem similarly cloudy. Will China, India and other large emitters agree to meaningful emission limits? Is it realistic to expect that every nation will bring its "highest possible ambitions" to the table at the forthcoming Glasgow summit? To what extent will the world community actually provide sufficient funding to help impoverished developing nations follow a clean energy path? Those questions remain to be answered.

In sum, Biden's recent pronouncements before the UN General Assembly regarding climate change reflect a keen understanding of the dangers posed by the climate crisis, along with a clear willingness to offer appropriate solutions to solve the problem. Nonetheless, whether the president's hopeful climate change plans will yield meaningful (and much needed) results remains to be seen.

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