



# In a League of its Own: The United States and Climate Policy Non-Compliance in the World-System

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The United States is the second largest emitter in the world, but it has fallen behind in meeting global climate targets. Sociological theory helps to explain why this is happening. The author argues that the US can do more to play a larger role in the creation of a sustainable future.

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## INTRODUCTION

The climate crisis is certainly one of the most dire and consequential issues the world faces now and in the future. Thus, efforts toward sustainable development and effective climate policies—both on the national and international level—will be significant to mitigate and adapt to the effects of climate change on our society. As a major global power and the 2<sup>nd</sup> largest emitter of greenhouse gasses (GHGs) in the world (EDGAR/JRC, 2023), the United States has the opportunity,

and arguably, a responsibility to be a leader on this front. Yet, the US has continually failed to meet global climate targets or reflect its commitment to international norms in its national policies. Hence, this paper seeks to explore, utilizing sociological theory, why the United States does not adhere to the international norms and policies of the green transition and offers policy recommendations on how the US, and the world, can move forward towards a more sustainable future.

## THEORY

There are two relevant theories in sociology that serve as the foundation for the following argument. World-

systemstheory argues that the world system is made of core, periphery, and semi-periphery countries and

that core countries seek to dominate and exploit the periphery (Chase-Dunn, 1999). Moreover, the current world system is described as a capitalist one, with the main goal being capital accumulation, and another attribute is that the capitalist world economy has experienced a cyclical process of the rise and fall of hegemony. The other is world polity theory, which argues that the nation-state is a worldwide institution constructed by world culture that includes ideals such as socioeconomic progress, human development, equality, and more recently, the green transition (Meyer et al., 1997). This theory also houses the concepts of institutional isomorphism (the diffusion of cultural models, in that the global system has established a set of norms that have been disseminated worldwide), and decoupling (the separation of commitment to internationally recognized global norms and the actions of a nation-state). Both offer explanations to the differences between commitments made by governments on the international stage and which norms are actually reflected in their policies.

Another relevant concept is neoliberalism, which can be understood in four dimensions: an ideology, a mode of governance, a policy package, and a particular form of capitalism. Neoliberalism emphasizes the

superiority of self-regulating market mechanisms over state intervention to produce sustained economic growth (Steger and Roy, 2021). At a turning point in history, the US was able to rise to its status as the hegemon and became responsible for the dissemination of neoliberalism globally, beginning in the 1980s. Neoliberalism has continued to be reinforced by international institutions and norms it helped build, supported by the hegemonic status of the US. In a world where capital accumulation has caused rampant pollution, social upheaval, and inequalities, capitalism is threatened by institutional and structural deficits and “could be undermined by destruction of the political, social, and environmental conditions on which it depends (Wallerstein et al., 2013).

The viability of capitalism can also be challenged by the impending climate crisis, which may necessitate the radical reconstruction of the current system since the present conditions of the world have thus far not been conducive to fostering the necessary level of international cooperation to fight climate change. Such massive transformation requires a level of collective action that has yet to be seen. It is under this context that international norms and policies pertaining to the green transition have been constructed and will likely be the conditions in which future elaborations on these policies will be made.

## **INTERNATIONAL ENVIRONMENTAL POLICY AND THE GREEN TRANSITION: BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT**

In a recent study on global climate action, 69% of people were willing to contribute 1% of their household income every month to fight global warming (Andre et al., 2024), proving there is vast global support to deal with climate change. Recent collective action has included increasingly ambitious effort by the international community such as the creation of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and the Paris Climate Agreement at the Conference of Parties in 2015. The SDGs are 17 goals crafted by United Nations Member States to all be interconnected and created a blueprint for a more sustainable future focusing on poverty, inequality, environmental degradation, climate change, and peace and justice (United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs, 2015). The Paris Climate Agreement created the Nationally Determined Contributions (NDCs),

offering a quantifiable accountability mechanism that can be used to keep nations on track with their commitments to reduce their GHG emissions. Nations set their own NDCs which are supposed to “reflect its capacity to contribute to the collective reduction of global emissions” (Congressional Research Service, 2021). However, the responsibility to significantly reduce GHG emissions falls on a select few countries, notably the US which is the 2nd largest GHG emitter only to China (Appendix Item 1).

The SDGs and the Paris Climate Agreement represent the green transition becoming a more prominent internationally disseminated norm that nations should follow, and the importance of action being taken on the sub-national and international levels, both by civil society and the private sector (Intergovernmental

Panel on Climate Change, 2023). Yet neoliberalism has changed how the international community deals with climate and environmental policy.

Specifically, there is an overall lack of clarity on how the Paris Agreement can be enforced, how the poorest nations will get assistance with meeting their NDCs, and that market and private sector dominance has become indicative in the decision-making process (Ciplet & Timmons Roberts, 2017). Neoliberalist economic political policy has allowed climate change to be an issue perceived by economists as a negative externality that can be corrected through market mechanisms, thus creating an environment which is not conducive to promoting the necessary actions

nations should take to mitigate the consequences of climate change. For climate policy to be effective, there needs to be strong public investment and participation by government and neoliberalism doesn't create that environment.

The US has faced years of decreased public investment, decentralization of democracy, and dwindling government involvement in economic markets neoliberalism has its most visible impact on climate policy and "since climate change is a global problem that requires a global solution, the decentralization of democracy has functioned to discourage, rather than encourage, experiments in decarbonization" (Fremstad & Paul, 2022).

## **THE UNITED STATES IS FALLING BEHIND**

### **US Participation in International Environmental Policy**

In the context of world-systems theory, the US holds hegemony status, having played a significant role in the current way in which the international community operates now. As a core country, the U.S. has the highest GDP in the world but has maintained a historically poor track record when it comes to its participation in multilateral environmental regulations. In the years between 1989 and 2011, US presidents have signed 11 major multilateral environmental agreements, all of them failing to be ratified by the US Congress (Bang, Hovi, and Sprinz, 2012) (Appendix Item 2). Furthermore, the US may rank marginally higher on the SDG Report compared to China (75.9 vs 72.01), which is the highest GHG emitter in the world. Despite this, when compared to other high-income countries like those in the European Union, the U.S. still falls behind. Spain (80.43), France (82.05), Germany (83.36), Italy (78.79), and the United Kingdom (81.65) all rank ahead of the US and the US score is more closely aligned with that of middle-income countries like Brazil (73.69), Ukraine (76.52), and Morocco (70.87) and below the regional average of 77.8 (Sachs, Lafortune, & Drumm, 2023).

### **The Green New Deal and the Inflation Reduction Act**

The Green New Deal (GND) is a multifaceted compilation of different policy mechanisms, advocating for huge fiscal stimulus, subordination of the global financial system to the interest of society, and redistributive policies toward the global south (Kedward & Ryan-Collins, 2021). It has recently been met with increased popularity, with legislators most associated with the ideology of democratic socialists supporting it. It requires a focus on mitigation through deep economic transformation rather the carbon-centric and market-orientated strategies and can put the US on track to meet its NDCs, while being economically sound (Galvin & Healey, 2020).

The Inflation Reduction Act (IRA) is a recently passed piece of legislation. Signed into law in 2022, the IRA relied heavily on reducing carbon emissions and the creation of climate policies through tax credits and subsidies. The IRA puts the US on track to reduce its GHG emissions by 32-42% by 2030 (Bistline, Mehrotra, & Wolfram, 2023) stills below its NDCs. It also claims to reduce net imports of crude oil by 106% (Larsen, 2022), a policy decision that seems to be in direct contradiction to the US becoming the largest

producer of crude oil in the world (Appendix Item 3). The IRA is hypothesized to increase US spending on climate mitigation and adaptation through 2025 by \$130 billion, constituting 1.2% of GDP, making them more comparable to that of the UK and EU (Busch & Hsu, 2022).

The passage of the IRA is momentous in the current political climate but faces an uphill battle. The legislation, however, is likely to fall short of the promises it makes to significantly reduce GHG emissions. The existing significant challenges with supply, demand, and polarization threaten the overall success of the legislation (Burgess et al., 2024) due to the constraints of the current neoliberal environment and other obstacles that prevent effective climate policy on the national level i.e., reducing GHG emissions been branded a partisan policy, corporations and lobbyists can heavily influence government climate policy, and the outsized influence of other political actors can continue to deprioritize climate policies to their benefit (Basseches et al., 2012).

This environment breeds competition on the local, state, and federal levels, and “the neoliberal world creates conditions that are destructive of the trust and collective responsibility that lie at the heart of ‘social capital’” (Fieldman, 2011). Cooperation is essential to take meaningful action towards a global green

transition which the US doesn’t exhibit much of at the national nor international level. Even the more ambitious NDC targets created when the US rejoined the Paris Agreement in 2021 (Clean Air Task Force, 2023) will fall short of being met. The US bears much of the responsibility for the consequences of climate change as reflected by GHG emissions, their crude oil production, their high military expenditures, and their failures to meet SDG targets. Simultaneously, they participate at the superficial level with some international environmental agreements and the global effort overall in climate justice. Although the GND is a more comprehensive policy package to realize the goals of the SDGs, the NDCs, and overall international climate policy while also giving the US an opportunity to prove its commitments to international norms and policies through its actions.

Pursuing the IRA in place of a superior alternative is the manifestation of how the US weaponizes its status in the international order to fall short of executing effective climate policy and take responsibility for its role in the global climate crisis. To pass on the chance to champion a more comprehensive policy package for one that still favors neoliberal priorities, falls short of meeting internationally recognized climate targets, and still have it receive acclaim as the most ambitious climate policy package to date, proves that currently the US doesn’t exhibit the will to subscribe to progressive climate policy.

## **DISCUSSION, CONCLUSION AND POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS**

The US has fallen behind in pursuing effective climate policy, with the SDGs indicating they perform below other comparable countries. Additionally, it has maintained subpar participation in international environmental treaties despite having plenty of opportunities and resources to meet international climate targets and a more comprehensive piece of climate legislation option to help the US meet its climate targets. Although they have agreed there is shared value that these policies are necessary for future global well-being and the current US administration has emphasized climate and sustainability policy, the top 3 exports from the US as of 2022, are petroleum and they haven’t ratified major International Environmental treaties.

The GND represents the most effective policy package, showcasing how institutional isomorphism operates, illustrating the diffusion of the ideal global policies needed to address the climate crisis and facilitate an effective green transition. However, The IRA represents reality—instead of choosing the more effective path, the US falls short on international norms and targets related to the green transition. The US has decoupled the commitments from the diffused cultural models it has made through institutional isomorphism from its actions with climate policy on the national level.

In the context of world polity theory, world-systems theory, and a review of the above research, the US

uses its status as a hegemon to subvert international norms by superficially participating in international environmental agreements and decoupling commitments from their national policy priorities, actions that thwart progress made internationally. Facing different paths to implementing climate policy packages on the national level, the US chose to pursue the IRA instead of the GND because it didn't fit their current policy priorities. The US has also used its influence to diffuse neoliberal goals and priorities which has now created an environment that doesn't help foster the level of cooperation and collective action needed to make adequate advances to reduce the effects of the climate crisis.

The current dynamics don't generate the will, or the systems of accountability needed for the US to participate wholeheartedly in the fight against climate change and their non-compliance is felt globally. The US must choose to prioritize making the necessary transformations and adhering to international environmental norms.

First, although politically complicated with current levels of polarization, the US must consider passing

the Green New Deal or implementing more aspects of the package into new climate legislation. Second, there must be increased accountability mechanisms at the international level. In the interest of collective action, more countries should be advocating for more tangible ways to disincentivize non-compliance, particularly for larger countries that have more opportunities to scrape by doing the bare minimum. This could include creating some sort of consequence for failure to meet SDGs or NDCs that could be considered on an annual basis. Third, in the context of sociological theory, if other countries were to rise to hegemony status similar to that of the US, they have more power to hold the US responsible for not following through on the commitments they make on the world stage. There is much work that must be done to help get the US back on track.

However, by increasing pressure from the international community, more cooperation on the local, state, and federal level, as well as implementing many policy solutions that already exists, there's hope the worst consequences of the climate crisis can be averted and a more sustainable future achieved.



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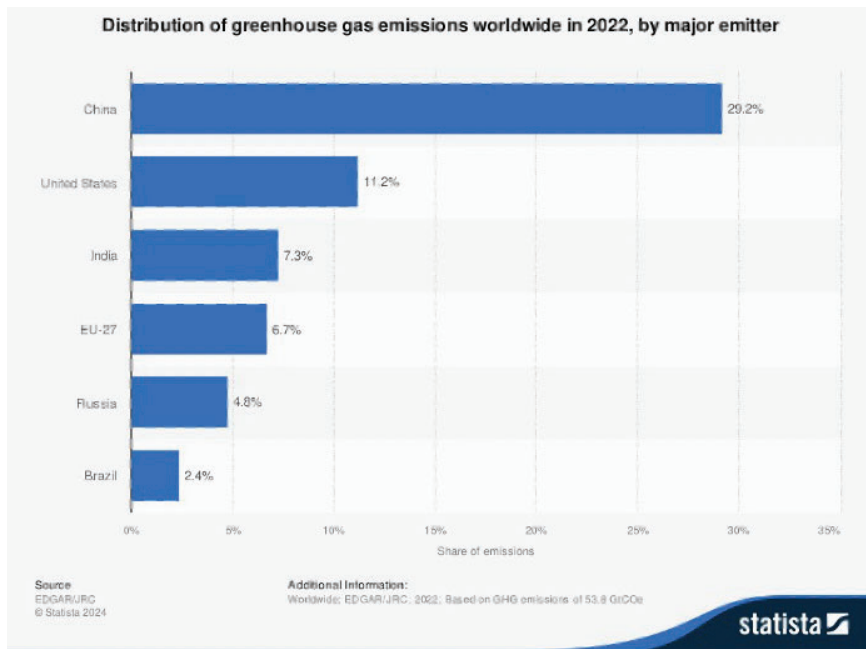
**Nylah Hill** is a 4<sup>th</sup> year International Affairs and Economics Major who is also pursuing a M.A. in International Affairs with a Concentration in Sustainability and Climate Change Policy through the Plus-One Program. They're most passionate about the intersection between economic development and sustainability policy. Specifically, she is interested in an interdisciplinary approach to enacting sustainable policies as a mechanism to encourage economic development internationally. For their upcoming co-op they are pursuing Environmental Policy Research through the Sustainability Science Lab, which focuses specifically on community engaged research to better environmental decision making. Outside of the classroom, she is involved in the International Relations Council and Husky Ambassadors and have participated in abroad opportunities in the United Kingdom, Egypt, Jordan, and the U.A.E.

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# APPENDIX

## Appendix Item 1- Largest GHG Emitters in the World



EDGAR/JRC. (2023). Distribution of greenhouse gas emissions worldwide in 2022, by major emitter [Graph]. In Statista. Retrieved April 08, 2024, from <https://www-statista-com.ezproxy.neu.edu/statistics/500524/worldwide-annual-carbon-dioxide-emissions-by-select-country/wow> - I did not realize how much China contributed to greenhouse gases!

## Appendix Item 2- Major International Environmental Treaties the US has signed within the three waves of Neoliberalism

Wave	International Treaty	Comments
<b>1<sup>st</sup> wave (1980s)</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora (1975)</li> <li>• Convention on Biodiversity and the Cartagena Protocol on Biosafety (1983)</li> <li>• Montreal Protocol on Substances that Deplete the Ozone Layer (1987)</li> <li>• Basel Convention on the Control of Transboundary Movements of Hazardous Wastes and their Disposal (1989)</li> </ul>	<p>The Basel Convention is signed by the United States but has not been ratified.</p> <p>The United States is neither a signatory nor has ratified the Convention on Biodiversity and the Cartagena Protocol.</p>
<b>2<sup>nd</sup> wave (1990s)</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (1992)</li> <li>• Rotterdam Convention on the Prior Informed Consent Procedure (1998)</li> <li>• Stockholm Convention on Persistent Organic Pollutants (2001)</li> </ul>	<p>The Stockholm Convention is signed by the United States but has not been ratified.</p> <p>The Rotterdam Convention is signed by the United States but has not been ratified.</p>
<b>3<sup>rd</sup> wave (2010s)</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Minamata Negotiations on Mercury (2013)</li> <li>• Paris Climate Agreement (COP21) (2015)</li> </ul>	<p>Under the Trump Administration, the US pulled out of the Paris climate agreement in 2020 before returning in 2021 under the Biden Administration.</p>

Multilateral Environmental Agreements. (2024). United States Trade Representative. [https://ustr.gov/issue-areas/environment/multilateral-environmental-agreements#:~:text=Montreal%20Protocol%20on%20Substances%20that,Un+ited%20Nations%20Environment%20Program%20\(UNEP\)](https://ustr.gov/issue-areas/environment/multilateral-environmental-agreements#:~:text=Montreal%20Protocol%20on%20Substances%20that,Un+ited%20Nations%20Environment%20Program%20(UNEP))

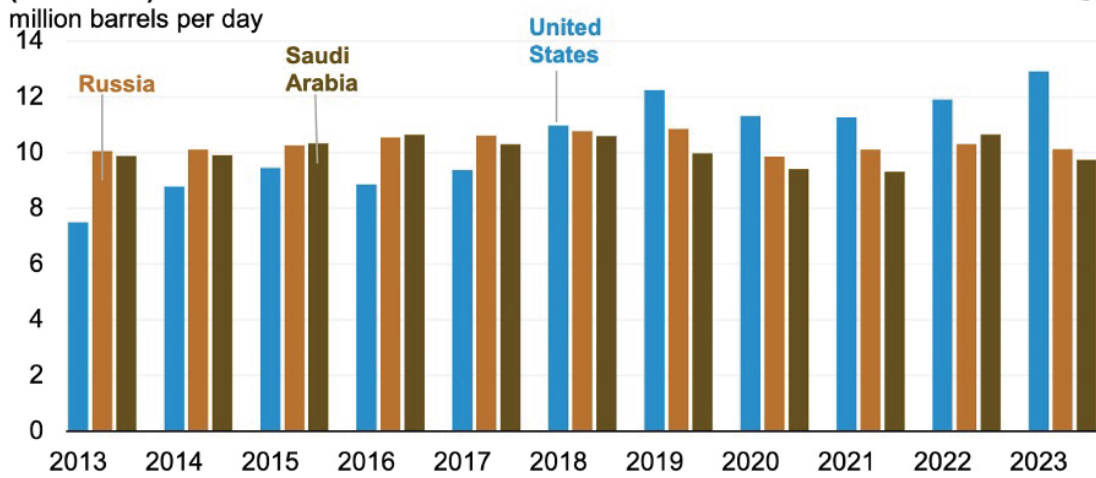
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# APPENDIX

## Appendix Item 3- US Increased Crude Oil Production

Average annual crude oil and condensate production from top three global producers (2013–2023)



Kreil, E. (2024). United States produces more crude oil than any country, ever - U.S. Energy Information Administration (EIA). Eia.gov. <https://www.eia.gov/todayinenergy/detail.php?id=61545>