

# US sees voluntary emissions cuts as key to a climate change accord

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The United States is championing a new international approach to cutting greenhouse gases that offers the best chance of prompting countries to take action to avert the worst effects of global warming, the nation's chief climate negotiator said Monday.

The comments by the State Department's Todd Stern came as United Nations negotiations began in Peru to develop the framework for an international accord to curtail heat-trapping [emissions](#) and adapt to changes already occurring on the planet. The final agreement is expected to be signed in Paris next December.

Despite more than 20 years of international discussions about addressing climate change, the world's emissions of carbon dioxide and other heat-trapping gases are higher than ever. Efforts have stumbled, in part, over the stringency and feasibility of emissions cuts. In the past, big polluters such as the United States were mandated by a U.N. accord to make deep cuts, a top-down approach that Congress rejected.

This time, the U.S. is backing a bottom-up plan that lets each country determine the emissions cuts it will make, Stern said. Still, countries would have to accept other binding conditions, such as a schedule for announcing planned cuts, and uniform and transparent reporting standards. Further, countries would have to agree to no backsliding: Emissions targets set every five or 10 years would have to be increasingly more ambitious.

Though a plan for voluntary cuts sounded "counterintuitive" to making progress on emissions, Stern pointed out that past approaches did not work.

"The reality of it is that no one was able to come up with a different way of going about it," Stern said in a meeting with reporters. "You could assign every country a particular reduction that on paper looks like a perfect result and then you can't get agreement on it. This is a way to get everyone in. It's not going to be perfect, but it's a strong start that would get better and better."

There are no sanctions against countries that do not offer emissions cuts or fail to abide by them. But the effect of global warming is growing clearer, and countries that previously sat on the sidelines, most notably China, have begun to act. The hope is that a kind of international peer pressure will lead states to cut emissions.

Scientists warn that the window is closing on the measures nations can take to slow the increase in average global temperatures and avert the worst effects of global warming.

The talks in Peru could benefit from fresh momentum, in large part as a result of steps the U.S. has taken over the last month. In early November, President Barack Obama and Chinese President Xi Jinping jointly announced ambitious plans to limit heat-trapping emissions by 2030 by their countries, the world's biggest greenhouse gas polluters.

Days later, Obama pledged \$3 billion to an international climate fund aimed at helping developing countries prepare for and slow the effects of global warming. The money would go to the U.N. Green Climate Fund, an integral part of the international effort to craft an agreement to address climate change.

The fund, created in 2011, asks industrialized countries and their private sectors, which account for most of the greenhouse gases pumped into the atmosphere over the last century, to help developing countries shift to low-carbon fuel and adapt to the effects of climate change. Research has shown that the poorest [countries](#) that emitted the least [greenhouse gases](#), such as those in Africa, stand to suffer the most damage from [global warming](#).

The announcement with China and the climate fund pledge were challenged by Obama's Republican critics on Capitol Hill, who have pledged to make it a priority to roll back his measures on the environment when they assume the majority in Congress next year.

Stern said the president's budget proposal, due in February, would ask Congress for \$3 billion over four years to fulfill the climate fund pledge.

The commitment is meant to follow a \$2 billion pledge President George W. Bush made in 2008 to a Climate Investment Fund.

"Funding for [climate change](#) is always challenging, and I expect it will continue to be," Stern said, "but it's also something that has gotten done at the end of the day on a bipartisan basis. There will be very, very strong support coming from the White House for it."

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