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THE CURRENT: What is the U.S. doing on climate change?

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PITA: You're listening to The Current, part of the Brookings Podcast Network. I'm your host, Adrianna Pita.

The U.N.'s world climate summit opened Monday in Madrid with a stark warning from Secretary General Antonio Guterres: "the point of no return is no longer over the horizon." With us today to discuss what's happening at the Conference of the Parties, or COP 25, is Nathan Hultman, nonresident senior fellow in our Global Economy and Development program here at Brookings, and also director of the Center for Global Sustainability and associate professor at the University of Maryland. Nate, thanks for being here.

HULTMAN: Happy to be here.

PITA: So, what can you tell us about what's on the agenda for this year's conference - what are they hoping to achieve?

HULTMAN: There's a way to think about this where there's a number of smaller items on the agenda that are in and of themselves important. But the bigger picture is really what we want to focus on, and the bigger picture is, as you laid it out at the beginning, about this next 12-month period. This next 12-month period is a crucial one for the global climate, because it's one where countries around the world are being asked to evaluate what they are doing today to arrest climate change, scope out potential higher levels of ambition they could deliver, and make commitments to deliver on that higher level of ambition by next year at this time. So over the course of the next 12 months, we're going to see a tremendous amount of pressure brought to bear on countries around the world to do this, both from citizens and from governments around the world. This meeting this next couple of weeks is really there as the starting gate, kicking off this global conversation, one that's existentially important for us to be focusing on.

PITA: The Trump administration has famously withdrawn the U.S. from the Paris accord, so what does official U.S. representation at the conference look like this year?

HULTMAN: Well, officially the U.S. is still in the agreement until a year from now; that's the way the legal system works under international law. So, the U.S. has announced its intention to pull out of the Paris agreement, but it hasn't done so yet, so there will be a small delegation that participates in the meetings because there are, again, some small discussions that are happening in which the U.S. will

participate. But again in this bigger picture question of, is there going to be a higher level of ambition coming from the U.S. federal government, I think the answer is clearly no.

PITA: You're involved with America's Pledge, an organization helping organize U.S. commitments to preventing and mitigating climate change at the sub-national level – which is to say, commitments by cities, states, businesses, universities, all that sort of thing. What does that look like at this time? How is that subnational commitment shaping up?

HULTMAN: It's a really interesting story, and one that, in contrast to what's happening at the federal level or the executive branch in our country today, is actually a remarkable story of action and progress. We actually are looking at a world in the U.S. where, as we all know, we have a federal system; there's actions that can be taken at the federal level from the exec branch, from congress, but there's also many opportunities to act on climate in various ways at state levels, at city levels, counties, municipalities, as you say, universities, communities of faith, tribes, businesses, and more. What we're seeing today is there's a large and growing coalition of actors across all of these entities that is concerned and stepping up and using those policy authorities that are granted to them under our system here in the U.S. to make significant commitments, commitments that are in fact deepening, getting more ambitious even over the last couple of years. And also broadening to include more kinds of actors, more kinds of people across the political spectrum. As just one example of how big that coalition is, as you said, I'm a part of the America's Pledge initiative, that's a group that does assessment of these sub-national and non-state actors, of what we're doing in the US. One of the several results of the report that we're releasing at the COP in the next couple of weeks is addressing the size of this burgeoning groundswell that's happening across the country. It's really remarkable; it's a globally significant coalition. There's over 3800 actors now. It represents almost 70% of the U.S. economy, U.S. GDP. It represents about 65% of the U.S. population, and over half of U.S. emissions. If it were its own country, it would be the world's second largest economy, bigger than China. So what we're talking about is a globally significant coalition that's taking action today on clean electricity standards, building standards, on electric vehicles, on lands, on HFCs and efficiency and many, many other areas.

PITA: I guess the big question is, can that save us? Can it compensate for stonewalling at the federal level, or is there a missing piece that has to happen?

HULTMAN: It's kind of a two-part story, and I think that the good news, such as it is, what we are witnessing is the U.S. building what I think we should view as a deep and broad groundwork for higher ambition in this country. This country is built on actions from the bottom up; we all are familiar with the concept of the laboratories of democracy in the states, so what we are seeing today is a tremendous amount of leadership happening at all these different levels and those are actually making a difference.

Let me lay out a little bit what that means. In our assessment that we're releasing this year, we looked at what could be accomplished if cities, states, and businesses took what's actually happening today and built on that and expanded it across a larger set of leading states and businesses. That showed that by 2030, those leader states and businesses could deliver reductions in this country something like 37% below 2005 levels by 2030. That's a remarkable amount. It's predicated on higher ambition, on citizen engagement, on the level of action that we know are going to be consistent with what the U.N. Secretary General called for, as you mentioned at the beginning. But that in itself is remarkable.

That said, as you asked, as you hinted at, in this country we cannot do it all just on the shoulders of city and state action. There's just not enough breadth of policy levers that touch on those areas. We really do need federal re-engagement. And that is why this next election is really important to look for leaders of all levels, at the federal level, at the city and state level, who are committed to taking action on climate. And if we get federal re-engagement, if we get congressional action on climate change, get executive action on climate change in the 2020s, we think that we can actually deliver in this country, based on this bottom-up action across cities, states, and businesses, layering in the federal re-engagement after 2020, we could see reductions of up to 49% below 2005 levels by 2030. What that tells us is we are still, potentially – the window is open, but closing quickly – we are able to potentially get on a track toward getting this country onto a pathway that's compatible with global goals for keeping warming under 1.5C, which is the kind of goal that we've committed to.

PITA: To swing back to those global priorities at the end here, can you talk about how – priorities for the COP at Madrid – the balance between mitigation and prevention. There's a lot of small island nations and communities in fragile ecosystems, that this is already existential. How are they balancing those priorities?

HULTMAN: This is a perpetual discussion in these international meetings, and it's become extraordinarily clear even in the last year that the science of climate change is in fact more worrisome than I think many people – not all – but many people imagined it would be. The IPCC report last year in October was a clarion warning call to all of us that the impacts could be more severe than many people had anticipated, they could be more far-reaching, estimating that hundreds of millions of people could be affected by climate change by 2050. What you're asking is how do we actually address those issues today, as opposed to waiting 10 or 20 years to do it?

There's several pieces of that puzzle. You mentioned there's an important piece that's of course looking at what countries can do to control the emissions that they're causing that lead to global warming, that lead to climate change. That's a really important part, that's a fundamental part of climate policy but that's not the only thing. It's essentially important for all countries around the world, even here in the U.S. we're feeling the impacts of climate change already, so communities and countries around the world have to be thinking about how do they build new infrastructure that's more robust against climate change. How do they deal with vulnerabilities that exist today in the communities that are vulnerable to those changes? And there is a tremendous amount of discussion at the international level about how to leverage and how to mobilize finance to support that, so that's a third element that's been really rising over the last say, five years, to expand rapidly the amount and the kind of financing available for both adapting to climate change and for reducing emissions.

PITA: Nate, thanks for being here. We'll look forward to seeing the report come out later this week.

HULTMAN: Yeah, thanks very much.