

What is America's Biggest Challenge in the World? By Zack Lori

What if I told you that an adversary was soon going to take over South Florida, against the will of the United States? What if I told you that chaos caused by this adversary would uproot millions of people around the globe from their homes, and cause the largest refugee crisis in human history? What if I told you that our country and its allies knew this adversary was coming, decades ahead of time, and yet our large economic dependency on this adversary crippled our efforts to prevent the enemy's conquest of American soil? Unfortunately, this isn't a hypothetical: soon, a combatant will wreak havoc on the modern geopolitical landscape. The adversary in question is not China, Russia, or any other human nation. Rather, the adversary is climate change, America's largest and most underestimated challenge.

Politicians, whether in democracies or authoritarian regimes, tend to favor their countries' short term interests over their long term interests. In democracies, politicians are held accountable by voters, who, like all human beings, have a bias for the present that economists call hyperbolic discounting. In authoritarian regimes, despots are held in check by economic conditions-- a bad economy breeds civil unrest and possibly a coup. Voters in democracies, too, prioritize economic conditions in politics -- and due to hyperbolic discounting, they prioritize short term ones.

This becomes a major issue when politicians attempt to solve climate change. Unlike other policy areas such as health care or social policy, climate change is an issue wherein countries do not have much control over the outcome. Almost every country knows this issue must be solved collectively, but it is in individual nations' self-interests to prioritize short-term economic conditions, which often means emitting more carbon than they should. This problem is known as the tragedy of the commons in economics. Normally, the government, who acts in the public interest, can intervene to solve commons tragedies. But there is no global government to act in our self-interest. When nations have attempted to create legally binding treaties, such as in Copenhagen in 2009, they have always failed, as countries refuse to give up any aspect of their sovereignty.

As a result, the world created the Paris Agreement, a document that cannot be enforced. This document has been considered "the world's greatest diplomatic success" by

news outlets such as *The Guardian* and the world leaders who crafted it. But the Paris Agreement is anything but a success. According to the UN Environmental Program, the Earth would warm 3° Celsius under the emissions reduction pledges made in Paris. This is a full degree above the upper limit of the agreement's goal of 2°.

Consequently, the future of the Earth's climate is bleak. According to a recent study, there is only a 5% chance that under 2° Celsius of warming will occur by 2100. The result of 3 degrees of warming would be tremendous. During the mid-Pliocene Epoch (the last time the Earth was 3 degrees warmer), the oceans were 82 feet higher than today. It will take hundreds of years for the ocean level to rise this high. However, if the sea level rises 8 feet this century, a definite possibility, American cities such as New Orleans, Charleston, and Miami will cease to exist. Long term, the potential for disaster is huge, as 40% of the world's population lives within 100 kilometers (62 miles) of the coast. This includes the many of the world's critical economic centers- two-thirds of megacities (which have more than 10 million people) are on a coastline. Among these megacities are America's largest cities of New York and Los Angeles.

Climate change has many other potential effects as well. It will cause stronger, more violent hurricanes, and longer-lasting, deadlier wildfires. America will see severer heat waves, more flooding in wet areas, longer droughts in dry areas, and disruptions to our food supply. All in all, Stanford researchers predict America's per capita GDP to be 36% lower in 2100 than it would have been without the effects of climate change.

Today, America's challenge is to mitigate climate change and prepare for its effects. The 2° goal set in Paris may be unrealistic, but the effects of climate change will be worse the more the Earth warms. America's challenge to coordinate a global response to the climate crisis is a magnanimous task. Given that the US President recently tweeted that "Perhaps we could use a little bit of that good old global warming," America may not be up for the challenge.

The essay length is exactly 750 Words, not including title or citations

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