

Can a Fossil Fuel Non-Proliferation Treaty Strengthen Efforts to Address Climate Change?

By Don Sutherland

Last week, in the wake of terrible flooding that resulted as the climate change-enhanced remnants of Hurricane Ida moved through the New York City and New Jersey regions, I noted that the fossil fuel industry is the leading and knowing actor driving climate change. Since that time, there have been no new stories announcing a public apology from any leading fossil fuel company for the damage that was inflicted, in part, on account of its continuing greenhouse gas pollution. There were no offers to provide even partial funding for the recovery effort. Almost certainly, if left to its own free will, there never will be such responsible actions from an industry that has separated profits from accountability, pollution from sustainability.

What can be done?

One approach includes national policy measures that would include a freeze and then rollback on fossil fuel industry infrastructure, a ban on new oil & gas drilling leases, a polluter's fee to capture some of the costs associated with the industries externalities, and a timeline for phasing out fossil fuel production (oil, gas, and coal). Short-term prospects for such measures are not good in the United States. The alliance over fossil fuels stretches from most Republican members of the House and Senate to a handful of Democrats, including Senator Joe Mancin of West Virginia. That alliance remains sufficiently strong to thwart meaningful efforts to address climate change.

On the global front, there is an emergent initiative for what would become a "Fossil Fuel Non-Proliferation Treaty." A [website](#) dedicated to the effort explains:

Climate change, like nuclear weapons, is a major global threat.

Bold and immediate action is needed to address the climate emergency.

The main cause of the climate emergency is fossil fuels. Coal, oil and gas are responsible for almost 80% of all carbon dioxide emissions since the industrial revolution.

Phasing out fossil fuel production, and fast-tracking progress towards safer and more cost-effective alternatives, will require unprecedented international cooperation in three main areas—non-proliferation, global disarmament and a peaceful, just transition.

Pursuit of such a treaty would also likely be challenging. National interests, the issue of clean energy technology sharing (knowledge or technology), investment protocols, and enforcement mechanisms would all create obstacles. In the United States, the forces aligned with the fossil fuel industry and broader status quo could thwart ratification. Nevertheless, the broad consensus on the Paris Agreement suggests that determined effort could yield a critical mass of countries to make such a treaty viable.

For now, the policy front is in its very early stages of providing concrete and specific initiatives for addressing climate change. At the same time, fossil fuel production and related emissions continues to grow, compounding an already bad and worsening problem and further squandering the time left for a relatively smooth transition.