



**THE INTERNATIONAL EFFORT TO CONTAIN GLOBAL CLIMATE CHANGE**  
**Spring 2024**  
**Todd Stern**  
**Senior Fellow, Watson Institute**

**Session Dates: February 29, March 7, 14 and 21, April 4.**  
**Each session will meet from 4-5:30 p.m.**

**Overview:**

Climate change is one of the great challenges of our time. In the fall of 2015, in the lead up to the Conference of the Parties in Paris, President Obama described climate change as the one issue he worked on other than nuclear weapons that “has the potential to alter the course of human progress.” And it is not a distant threat – it is here and now, a clear and present danger in the form of crippling heat waves, epic forest fires, scorching droughts, catastrophic floods, super-charged storms, and inexorably rising sea levels that will endanger tens of millions of people in coastal areas world-wide. It is an ecological threat, an economic threat, a national security threat. Whether and how the countries of the world make the transformational effort required to meet the challenge of climate change will be one of the central questions of this century.

For more than 20 years after the original climate “framework convention” was concluded in 1992, country-parties to that Convention tried unsuccessfully to establish an operational climate regime to combat this threat. The 2015 Paris Agreement changed all that, becoming one of the most important diplomatic accomplishments of the past century.

This study group will focus on the seven-year strategic effort that produced the Paris Agreement, running from the start of the Obama Administration in January 2009 through annual climate conferences near the end of every year, culminating in the Paris Conference in December 2015; the special relationship between the United States and China that was crucial to getting the Agreement done; and, in a final session, what of importance has happened in regard to climate change since the Paris Agreement and what needs to happen going forward.

A short reading list will be circulated well in advance of the start of the Study Group

**Feb. 29      1. Introduction to international Climate Change; the Copenhagen COP**

- We will start with some short history of the international climate regime, including the original climate treaty – the UN Framework

Convention on Climate Change (1992), the Kyoto Protocol (1997), and the Bali Action Plan (2007). We will then focus most of the session on the lead up to the 2009 Copenhagen Conference of the Parties (COP) during the first year of the Obama administration and the tumultuous, consequential Copenhagen COP itself.

- March 7      **2. COPs from 2010-2014 (Cancun, Durban, Doha, Warsaw, Lima)**
- We will look briefly at this run of five COPs to see how they collectively moved the ball forward toward the 2015 COP in Paris.
- March 14      **3. The Paris Agreement – 2015**
- We will look at the preparations for the Paris COP and the COP itself, which produced the Paris Agreement, one of the most important international agreements in the past 100 years.
- March 21      **4. The U.S.-China climate relationship**
- The United States and China are the two most important countries in the world for making progress on climate change. We had very different perspectives on what we wanted to accomplish in the climate negotiations through all seven years from 2009-2015, but we managed to make important progress that culminated in the Paris Agreement. This session will focus on how we and China managed our relationship through these years of the Obama administration; on the 10-month secret negotiations that produced the “Joint Announcement” in November 2014, a critical step on the road to Paris; on how the tensions in the larger U.S.-China relationship during the Biden Administration have presented challenges to the two sides in making progress on climate change; and on how the U.S. side should approach this dilemma going forward.
- April 4      **5. Looking ahead**
- This final session will look at both what of importance has happened since the Paris Agreement – including Trump’s election in 2016; the worsening science and impacts of climate change; the extraordinary technology progress we are making in the effort to rapidly transition away from fossil fuels; the obstacles we face in seeking to execute that transition at the speed and scale necessary; and what needs to be done going forward.

## **About the Instructor**

Todd Stern was the U.S. Special Envoy for Climate Change from the start of the Obama administration in January 2009 until May 2016, leading the U.S. effort in all climate negotiations leading up to and through the Paris Agreement. He has written a book on the climate negotiations that will be published by MIT Press in September 2024 called *Landing the Paris Climate Agreement: How It Happened, Why It Matters, What Comes Next*. He first started working on climate change in the Whitehouse during the Clinton Administration in 1997. He taught a course on the climate negotiations at Yale Law School in the fall of 2016. He is a non-resident Senior Fellow at the Brookings Institution and a non-resident Distinguished Fellow at the Asia Society.