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A change in Climate Change policy

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The Presidential elections in the United States captured the attention of many like the television drama series, West Wing, only this time rendered as real-time TV. President Donald John Trump faces Joseph Robinette Biden, Jr. in a battle for the Presidency.

Pundits referred to the elections as the most consequential elections in a lifetime. Indeed, the voter turnout is on pace to set a new record of close to 160 million. It is testament to the importance of the election to the American people.

Meanwhile, the world watches with bated breath, of course. Why? Because at stake is a wide number of policy changes that will certainly impact on many aspects of the global village. Immigration, health care, trade and foreign relations will either carry on as it has in the last four years or see a 180 degree reversal under the Democrats.

On the street, though, the future of Climate Change policy is among the most-awaited. President Trump pulled the United States out of the COP21 agreement that was supported by then President Obama.

The COP21 Paris agreement set out a global framework to limit global warming to well below 2°C and pursue efforts to limit it to 1.5°C. The signatories to the Agreement account for 97 percent of global greenhouse gas emissions. The United States, China and India – three of the four largest emitters of greenhouse gases – all acceded to COP21 back in 2015, until the administration of President Trump notified the United Nations of its withdrawal.

With the possible change in the Presidency of the USA to a Democratic leadership under former Vice President Joe Biden, it is widely expected that the United States will once again take its place in the global community supporting critical environmental initiatives. During the Presidential campaign, candidate Joe Biden made this clear. In fact, he courted the ire of Texan voters when, on one of the Presidential debates, he said that he would cut any support for fossil fuel. The context, of course, is that fossil fuel is harmful to the environment but that there will be a managed transition to alternative energy.

Back in 2018, President Trump rolled out his plan to reverse ambitious tail pipe emission standards set by President Obama on the automotive industry. Among others, the plan of the incumbent administration was to roll back fuel economy targets on cars and trucks to about 37 miles per gallon (mpg) versus the previous aim of 50mpg. It also aimed to strip California of its special authority to set its own fuel economy goals. President Trump's administration announced its policy in final form in April, 2020, setting the new Corporate Average Fuel Economy (CAFE) at 40 mpg – a goal that, apparently, the auto industry was set to achieve even without any prodding from government.

If candidate Joe Biden delivers on his campaign promise, the world will heave a sigh of relief and rejoice in the possible re-accession of the United States to the COP21.

In the Philippines, meantime, the push for our commitments under COP21 continues. The Philippine Senate ratified the Paris Agreement on Climate Change in July, 2019. The targets are ambitious at 70 percent reduction versus Business As Usual (BAU).

One of the critical challenges for the Philippine government is the continuing growth in coal-fired power capacity. President Duterte signed into law the Energy Efficiency and Conservation Act in April, 2019, to establish strategies to realize improved energy use, aiming to reduce overall demand by 24 percent below BAU by 2040. Investments in coal, however, keep growing due to a compelling need to secure the electricity supply of the country. Coal supplies around 48% of our power.

In the automotive sector, government also continues to promote alternative energy. Hybrid Electric Vehicles (HEVs) are still the best bet in terms of realizing short term reductions in tail-pipe emissions. Under the Tax Reform for Acceleration and Inclusion Act that went into law on January 1, 2018 reduced excise taxes in HEV by 50 percent and for local production of Battery Electric Vehicles (BEVs) to zero.

Although the appetite for more environmentally friendly technologies in autos is growing and awareness for the need for more responsible motoring is increasing, this still needs to translate to a growth in car purchases of HEV's or BEV's. Hopefully, this happens sooner than later. After all, mobility for the Filipino people must grow sustainably.

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