



September 7, 2023

Office of the Special Presidential Envoy for Climate

Establishment

In November 2020, then President-elect Joe Biden announced that he would appoint former Secretary of State John F. Kerry to serve in a new Cabinet-level position of Special Presidential Envoy for Climate (SPEC). The SPEC plays a key role in the policy President Biden subsequently announced in Executive Order (E.O.) 14008 of January 27, 2021, “Tackling the Climate Crisis at Home and Abroad,”

that climate considerations shall be an essential element of United States foreign policy and national security [and that the] United States will work with other countries and partners, both bilaterally and multilaterally, to put the world on a sustainable climate pathway.

To help give effect to this policy, the SPEC is “[i]ntegrated closely with the State Department’s existing expert staff and personnel” and works with the Secretary of State, the Secretary of the Treasury, and other related agency heads “to elevate the issue of climate change and underscore the commitment [the Biden] Administration will make toward addressing it.” On January 20, 2021, Secretary Kerry was sworn in as the SPEC, the first-ever Cabinet-level position entirely dedicated to climate change to sit on the National Security Council. SPEC Kerry’s Office also includes two Deputy Special Envoys for Climate: Rick Duke and Sue Biniaz.

Purpose and Activities

The U.S. Department of State outlines the purpose of the SPEC Office as being “charged with leading U.S. diplomacy to address the climate crisis.” According to State, among the SPEC Office’s areas of focus are

- constructive engagement in the Paris Agreement and related agreements and processes;
- driving global greenhouse gas emission reductions so as to keep a 1.5 degrees Celsius limit on temperature rise within reach;
- enhancing adaptation and resilience to climate impacts;
- climate-aligning financial flows;
- driving overseas clean energy innovation and competitiveness; and
- better integrating climate and other areas, including the ocean, biodiversity, the Arctic, and international shipping and aviation activities.

For these purposes, SPEC Kerry has traveled to foreign countries to engage with government leaders, international institutions, and industry and stakeholder groups. During his tenure, SPEC Kerry has focused particular attention on international climate change negotiations, climate finance, and engagement with other high-emitting countries, such as China.

International Climate Change Negotiations

The United Nations Framework Convention of Climate Change (UNFCCC) has been the principal forum for cooperation among countries on greenhouse gas (GHG)-induced climate change since its adoption in 1992. In addition, other public policy architectures have emerged at multiple scales: global, regional, national, and local, as well as public-private initiatives and transnational networks. Part of this institutional diversity arises from the growing integration of climate change issues in other policy arenas (e.g., economic development, trade agreements, technology cooperation, and human rights).

SPEC Kerry’s diplomatic functions look to span these public policy architectures and arenas. SPEC Kerry has attended the past two Conference of Parties (COP) (COP26 in Glasgow, UK; and COP27 in Sharm el-Sheikh, Egypt) and is scheduled to attend COP28 in Dubai, United Arab Emirates, in November-December 2023. In this role, he supports the activities of the U.S. principal negotiator for the U.N. climate treaties, including the UNFCCC and its main subsidiary agreement, the 2015 Paris Agreement.

Climate Finance

International cooperation on climate change policy has increasingly focused on mobilizing public and private investment and finance for mitigation and adaptation activities in developing countries, particularly those most vulnerable to the adverse effects of climate change. International financial assistance has been a principal method used by governments to support actions to address global environmental problems in developing countries, as they may not have comparable financial resources, technological expertise, or institutional capacity to deploy environmentally protective measures on their own.

The Biden Administration has pledged to increase annual U.S. climate financing to \$11.4 billion annually, an amount it said was necessary “to support the countries and people that will be hit the hardest and that have the fewest resources to help them adapt.” Through diplomatic efforts, SPEC Kerry (along with Treasury Secretary Janet Yellen) has engaged in discussions on climate finance with governmental, observer, and private-sector representatives to discuss financial needs with developing countries, the mobilization of finance with higher income countries, and private sector investment with various corporate and financial institutions. SPEC Kerry and Secretary Yellen have also engaged in such discussions with the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund on institutional reform.

Engagement with China on Climate

Most observers contend that global climate change cannot be adequately addressed without the participation of both the United States and the People’s Republic of China, the world’s two largest economies and two highest GHG emitters. The United States and other developed country delegations to the UNFCCC are largely allied about (1) pressing China to strengthen its pledge to abate its GHG emissions, (2) resisting China’s positioning of itself as a “developing country,” thereby taking advantage of flexibilities and climate finance opportunities afforded to these countries; and (3) confronting China’s policies and practices that may provide it economic and trade advantages.

Climate change has emerged as one of the rare policy issues on which high-level officials from the two countries have spoken regularly over the past decade. In April 2021, SPEC Kerry became the first senior Biden Administration official to travel to China. He and his Chinese counterpart issued a joint statement saying they would “enhanc[e] their respective actions and cooperat[e] in multilateral processes.” SPEC Kerry traveled to China in July 2023 to re-engage with bilateral climate talks. In an interview with the *New York Times*, reported on July 6, 2023, SPEC Kerry said he intended to urge China to accelerate its phase-out of coal, combat deforestation, and issue a plan to reduce emissions of methane—topics China said it would address under a 2021 joint agreement with the United States.

Structure and Budget

Following the announcement in November 2020 of SPEC Kerry’s appointment, then President-elect Biden’s transition team stated that SPEC Kerry’s “role will be fully integrated into the Biden-Harris administration’s broader diplomacy, which, as always, will be helmed by the [S]ecretary of State.” To this end, the SPEC Office is organized within the Office of the Secretary at the U.S. Department of State. However, SPEC Kerry’s appointment also includes a seat on the Principals Committee of the National Security Council, and—as confirmed by SPEC Kerry at a July 13, 2023, House Committee on Foreign Affairs hearing—a direct line of report to President Biden.

Table 1. Special Presidential Envoy for Climate Budget, FY2022-FY2024 Request
(In thousands of current U.S. dollars)

Account	FY2022 Actual	FY2023 Adjusted Enacted	FY2024 Request
Diplomatic Programs	16,726	16,747	16,801

Source: U.S. Department of State, Congressional Budget Justification Appendix I: Department of State Diplomatic Engagement, Fiscal Year 2024, pp. 73, 364.

As part of its FY2024 budget request, the State Department called for \$16.8 million for the SPEC office. This comprises a slight increase (\$54,000, or 0.3%) from the FY2023 enacted funding level (see **Table 1**). The House Appropriations Committee reported its version of a State

Department appropriations bill on July 17, 2023. The bill includes a measure that, if enacted, would prohibit the State Department from using funds appropriated for the Diplomatic Programs account for special envoys, such as the SPEC, that are not expressly authorized in statute or have not been appointed with the Senate’s advice and consent. The Senate Appropriations Committee’s State Department appropriations bill, reported on July 20, 2023, contains no such restriction.

Congressional Considerations

Some observers have expressed concern that the SPEC Office may undermine Secretary of State Antony Blinken and complicate policymaking and coordination on international climate matters and other foreign policy issues. Further, some observers note that SPEC Kerry was appointed without the advice and consent of the Senate, thus circumventing Congress’s role in executive oversight. Congress has since enacted the “Department of State Authorization Act of 2021” (Division E of P.L. 117-81), which amended Section 1 of the State Department Basic Authorities Act of 1956 (22 U.S.C. §2651a) to require such advice and consent regarding the appointment of State Department special envoys who “exercis[e] significant authority pursuant to the laws of the United States.”

Some Members of Congress and various stakeholder groups have raised objections to what they view as the SPEC Office’s lack of transparency with respect to its activities, spending, and staffing. For example, House Committee on Oversight and Accountability Chair James Comer requested a letter to Secretary Blinken in April 2023 requesting documents and information related to the SPEC budget, employees, and communications with third parties, including environmental advocacy groups and foreign government officials. The letter stated that the Biden Administration “has refused to respond” to similar requests “for almost two years,” adding that the committee would consider “other means, including compulsory process,” if the State Department did not provide the requested documents and information.

Private parties seeking information from the State Department on the SPEC Office through the Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) also have reported difficulty obtaining similar information. For example, the group Judicial Watch filed a lawsuit against the State Department in September 2022, maintaining that the State Department had “failed to respond adequately” to a July 2022 FOIA request seeking information about the SPEC. Judicial Watch subsequently posted information online it said it had received from the State Department as a result of the lawsuit, including an organizational chart outlining SPEC’s internal structure and staffing. A separate group, RealClearInvestigations, noted that the State Department said it could not comply until April 2025 with a FOIA request filed in 2022 seeking information about how the SPEC Office spent its 2022 budget resources.

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