

Congress of the United States
Washington, DC 20515

May 15, 2024

The Honorable Antony J. Blinken
Secretary
United States Department of State
2201 C Street, NW
Washington, DC 20520

Dear Secretary Blinken,

We write to you as part of our continued attempts to clarify the leadership structure of the Biden administration as it sets climate policy on the international stage, specifically, the responsibilities of the State Department's Special Presidential Envoy for Climate (SPEC) office and that office's relationship to, and coordination with, the Senior Advisor to the President for International Climate Policy.

In January 2024, the White House announced that Secretary John Kerry would be leaving the SPEC role and that John Podesta would "continue to lead [...] global climate efforts" by assuming the role of Senior Advisor to the President for International Climate Policy.¹ Rather than nominate Mr. Podesta to the SPEC role, which would require confirmation with the advice and consent of the Senate under legislation signed into law in 2021,² President Biden appointed Mr. Podesta to a new position based in the White House that appears to have striking similarities to the SPEC role previously held by Secretary Kerry.³

As the Republican leaders of the House Energy and Commerce Committee and the Senate Environment and Public Works Committee (the Committees) described in a March 5, 2024, letter to President Biden,⁴ the administration appears to be deliberately evading congressional oversight of its international climate policy by appointing Mr. Podesta to an advisory position in the White House. The response from the White House Counsel's office to the Committees stated, "On January 31, 2024, the White House announced President Biden's appointment of Mr. Podesta to serve as Senior Advisor to the President for International Climate Policy. Mr. Podesta now leads interagency coordination of the Administration's international climate policy agenda."⁵ The response also stated, "Mr. Podesta's role is not a replacement for SPEC, and the

¹ Release, The White House, Statement from National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan on John Podesta, Jan. 31, 2024, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2024/01/31/statement-from-national-security-advisor-jake-sullivan-on-john-podesta/>.

² National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2022, Pub. L. No. 117-81, § 5105 (2021).

³ Maxine Joselow, *A Veteran Adviser Is Taking Over as Top U.S. Climate Diplomat*, WASH. POST, Jan. 31, 2024, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/climate-environment/2024/01/31/podesta-john-kerry-climate-envoy/>.

⁴ Letter from Cathy McMorris Rodgers, Chair, House Committee on Energy and Commerce & Shelley Moore Capito, Ranking Member, Senate Committee on Environment and Public Works, to Joseph Biden, President (Mar. 5, 2024).

⁵ See Letter from Richard Sauber, Special Counsel to the President, the White House, to Cathy McMorris Rodgers, Chair, House Committee on Energy and Commerce & Shelley Moore Capito, Ranking Member, Senate Committee on Environment and Public Works (Mar. 19, 2024).

State Department will continue to lead international climate diplomacy, including negotiations, for the United States.”⁶

The White House’s response letter conflicts with reporting that Mr. Podesta would assume at least some of Secretary Kerry’s responsibilities and duties during his time as the SPEC.⁷ In an interview with *The Washington Post* in April, Mr. Podesta provided further clarity on his relationship to the SPEC office. He stated, “I am still at the White House but coordinating with them [the SPEC office] in these international negotiations.”⁸ Additionally, despite the White House’s assertion that Mr. Podesta would coordinate “interagency” efforts, he has met with foreign leaders on at least two occasions since assuming his new position.⁹

Just last week, the State Department announced that Mr. Podesta would be hosting Chinese Special Envoy for Climate Change, Liu Zhenmin, from May 8th to 9th in Washington D.C. to commence the first meeting of the US-China Working Group on Enhancing Climate Action in the 2020s (“Working Group”).¹⁰

This Working Group was re-established in November 2023 following Secretary Kerry’s climate summit with then-Chinese Special Envoy for Climate Change, Xie Zhenhua, in Sunnylands, California. Secretary Kerry and PRC Envoy Xie released a joint statement following the climate talks, which stated, in part, “The Working Group is co-led by the *two special envoys on climate change*, with the appropriate participation of officials from the relevant ministries and government agencies of the two countries.”¹¹

Mr. Podesta’s coordination with the SPEC office and international representation of the United States in meetings with foreign leaders to discuss international climate policy appear to

⁶ *Id.*

⁷ See, e.g., Colleen Long & Matthew Daly, *John Podesta Will Take Over for John Kerry as Top International Adviser on Climate Change*, ASSOC. PRESS, Jan. 31, 2024, <https://apnews.com/article/biden-podesta-climate-3da3fdd2b9d4fba542ff16f87eb4f10e>; Release, The White House, Statement from National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan on John Podesta, Jan. 31, 2024, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2024/01/31/statement-from-national-security-advisor-jake-sullivan-on-john-podesta/>.

⁸ WASH. POST, *Transcript: This is Climate Summit: A National Climate Agenda*, Apr. 11, 2024, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/washington-post-live/2024/04/11/transcript-this-is-climate-summit-national-climate-agenda/>.

⁹ Press Release, Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, Meeting between Foreign Minister KAMIKAWA and The Honorable John Podesta, Senior Advisor to the President of the United States of America, MR. 14, 2024, https://www.mofa.go.jp/press/release/pressite_000001_00211.html; See, Zack Colman & Karl Mathiesen, *US and China enter new phase in climate diplomacy*, E&E, May 7, 2024, <https://subscriber.politicopro.com/article/eenews/2024/05/07/us-and-china-enter-new-phase-in-climate-diplomacy-ee-00155666>.

¹⁰ Press Release, U.S. Department of State, *United States Hosts PRC Special Envoy for Climate Change*, May 6, 2024, <https://www.state.gov/united-states-hosts-prc-special-envoy-for-climate-change/>.

¹¹ Press Release, U.S. Department of State, *Sunnylands Statement on Enhancing Cooperation to Address the Climate Crisis*, Nov. 14, 2023, (emphasis added) <https://www.state.gov/sunnylands-statement-on-enhancing-cooperation-to-address-the-climate-crisis/#:~:text=The%20United%20States%20and%20China%20decide%20to%20operationalize%20the%20Working,climate%20actions%20in%20the%202020s.>

far exceed the characterization of Mr. Podesta's role in the initial response to the Committees as merely leading "interagency coordination" for the administration's international climate policy.

In light of this apparent overlap of duties between what Secretary Kerry undertook as the SPEC and what Mr. Podesta is now undertaking as a "Senior Advisor," we request information on the roles and responsibilities of the SPEC and the Senior Advisor to the President for International Climate Policy, as well as information on ongoing or planned coordination between these two entities. As leaders of the Committees with primary responsibility over climate policy at the domestic and international levels, we require more information from the administration to exercise our oversight responsibilities, as well as to ensure the American people clearly understand who is making decisions and international climate commitments that could have major impacts on their well-being and livelihoods.

We ask that you answer the following questions by May 30, 2024:

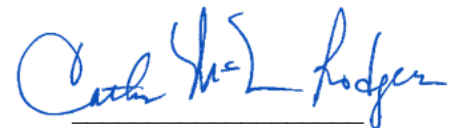
1. Please provide a description of the roles and responsibilities of the SPEC, as well as an organizational chart of the SPEC's office and the total number of employees in the office.
2. Do you agree that the SPEC is a position that requires Senate confirmation?¹² To your knowledge, does President Biden plan to nominate someone to the position of SPEC?
3. Is anyone currently leading the SPEC's office in an acting capacity? If so, please provide the name and title of this person.
4. Since January 31, 2024, when Mr. Podesta assumed his new role as Senior Advisor, how many meetings have occurred between employees or officials in the SPEC's office and Mr. Podesta? Please provide the dates and names and titles of the attendees of those meetings, including any foreign officials that attended the meetings.
5. What information, assistance, or support, does the State Department provide to the Senior Advisor to the President for International Climate Policy?

Thank you for your cooperation in this matter.

Sincerely,



Michael T. McCaul
Chair
House Foreign Affairs Committee



Cathy McMorris Rodgers
Chair
House Energy & Commerce
Committee

¹² National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2022, Pub. L. No. 117-81, § 5105 (2021) (requiring that any "Special Envoy" or other position performing a similar function be subject to confirmation with the advice and consent of the Senate).

Handwritten signature of James E. Risch in blue ink, featuring a large, stylized 'J' and 'R'.

James E. Risch
Ranking Member
Senate Foreign Relations Committee

Handwritten signature of Shelley Moore Capito in blue ink, written in a cursive style.

Shelley Moore Capito
Ranking Member
Senate Environment & Public
Works Committee