Innovation Vital to Realizing the Spirit of the Green New Deal

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The recently unveiled Green New Deal (GND) resolution has evoked intense responses from all sides, rekindling arguments on polarizing issues and igniting new debates. While some critics of the GND contend that the framework lacks pragmatism and concrete details, the resolution's amorphous quality may be advantageous with respect to adjusting to the ebbs and flows of technological progress and innovation—indispensable elements for effective and durable decarbonization efforts.

Overview of the Green New Deal

Since the GND was introduced on February 7th by Representative Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez (D-NY), the grand proposal has remained a subject of heated debate within Washington and garnered visceral reactions from all circles, ranging from effusive praise to outright hostility. The GND resolution is non-binding and thus cannot be made into law or create new programs, although this has not rendered it immune from controversy.

The main environmental objective of the GND is to achieve net-zero greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions within a ten-year period. While the goal is aggressive by any standard, it is actually a moderated version of previous proposals, which reportedly called for completely eliminating "the emissions from the transportation, agriculture and industrial sectors." The resolution directly cites the findings of the "Special Report on Global Warming of 1.5°C" by the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) as the primary justification for this net-zero target. The IPCC study states that "global reductions in greenhouse gas emissions from human sources of 40 to 60 percent from 2010 levels by 2030" and "net-zero global emissions by 2050" will be necessary in order to prevent the most severe effects of anthropogenic climate change.

The defining characteristic of the resolution may be its massive breadth, as it unequivocally transcends matters of climate and environmental protection by addressing the myriad issues related to socioeconomic justice, including but not limited to: wage

stagnation, income inequality, unemployment, access to universal healthcare, racial and gender discrimination, and so forth. The resolution's unifying link between these two broad, seemingly unrelated themes is the concept of "frontline and vulnerable communities," which argues that those least responsible for carbon pollution are the most endangered by its consequences.

While some claim that grappling problems of economic and social justice is a vehicle to bring the climate issue to the forefront of the public consciousness, many of the resolution's detractors—typically from the opposite end of the political spectrum—allege the opposite: that the GND is a pretext for nationalizing large segments of the U.S. economy and an unnecessary and dangerous government intrusion into American society and life.

Can Ambiguity Translate into Flexibility?

The GND's scope is rivaled only by its ambiguity—a prime example of this is the resolution's call for meeting 100% of the nation's power using "clean, renewable, and zero-emission energy sources," arguably opening the door for but not explicitly endorsing non-renewable energy sources such as nuclear power and fossil generation with carbon capture systems. While the nebulous wording of this directive was perhaps motivated by political convenience, the text nevertheless implies support for (or at minimum, acknowledgement of) a position widely held by the world's foremost scientists and technical experts—that a broad portfolio of technologies will be necessary to achieve meaningful decarbonization. Ambiguity, in this instance, might thus be considered one of the resolution's positive features.

The need to deploy a diversity of low-carbon technological solutions has been repeatedly affirmed by leading academics, researchers, writers, and NGOs. Coalitions of prominent climate scientists have authored open letters to policymakers arguing for the necessity of employing the complete array of available clean energy technologies; one such letter states, "To solve the climate problem, policy must be based on facts and not on prejudice. The climate system cares about greenhouse gas emissions - not about whether energy comes from renewable power or abundant nuclear power... The climate issue is too important for us to delude ourselves with wishful thinking. Throwing tools such as nuclear out of the box constrains humanity's options and makes climate mitigation more likely to fail."

Not only does the carbon mitigation toolkit need to be utilized exhaustively, the tools themselves will require further development and refinement. Innovation will be needed to allow low-carbon technologies to be deployed at a scale sufficient to address the challenges laid out in the GND resolution. Efforts to make clean energy technologies more scalable, cost-effective, viable, and sustainable are ongoing at tech startups, universities, private and national laboratories, etc. The resolution is explicit about "*making public investments in the research and development of new clean and renewable energy technologies and industries*," and it can be reasonably argued that the federal government has a role to play in supporting and facilitating such R&D activities.

Taking into account the uncertainty of the pace of R&D progress, what may be invaluable then is some medium to translate the resolution's ambiguity into flexibility—perhaps

institutionalizing pathways that allow future initiatives to change course according to technological developments and breakthroughs. Thus, while some will continue to disparage the resolution for its lack of detail and concreteness, leaving many matters unsaid and undetermined may ultimately be essential, all things considered.

Avoiding Pitfalls and Gathering Consensus

The GND resolution faces formidable political hurdles—there is no consensus on the proposal within the Democratic Party (House Speaker Nancy Pelosi dismissively referred to the plan as the "Green Dream") and staunch resistance from the Republican-controlled Senate is virtually predestined.

While some opposition to the resolution should be unsurprising given partisan discord, the GND's proponents have sparked the greatest uproar when they have attempted to be prescriptive and delve into specifics and details. A resolution fact sheet that discussed aspirations for 100% power generation from renewables and eliminating air travel by building high-speed rail at scale (since taken down from Ocasio-Cortez's website) elicited significant backlash and derision as being impractical and unrealistic. As argued, preserving a degree of imprecision for the time being may not only be politically sensible, but would, in due course, be in the best interests of global decarbonization.

At the end of the day, innovation is the critical catalyst to averting the threats posed by both climate change and ill-conceived climate action. In his recent testimony before the Senate Energy and Natural Resources Committee, Jay Faison (Founder of the ClearPath Foundation) asserted: "Some would argue that we have the technologies that we need to solve for climate change. If that was the case, we would not be as concerned about climate change as we are today because the solution would be clear, imminent and deployable. Unfortunately, that's not the situation we face."

Through supporting and facilitating R&D efforts, the U.S. can sustain its prosperity and protect the environment without resorting to measures such as energy austerity, thereby truly preventing the environmental, social, and economic disruptions that the resolution argues would occur under the status quo.

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