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U.S. Intransigence and the Climate Change Reality

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ABSTRACT

This essay is a response to the U.S. decision to withdraw from the Paris Agreement and a rejoinder to Donald Trump's allegations against India and China. It argues that U.S. intransigence poses a serious threat to the multilateral efforts to redress the climate change crisis.

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President Donald Trump announced the withdrawal of the U.S. from the Paris Agreement in June this year. He said,

I am fighting every day for the great people of this country. Therefore, in order to fulfill my solemn duty to protect America and its citizens, the United States will withdraw from the Paris Climate Accord ... [applause] Thank you, thank you ... So, we're getting out ... Thus, as of today, the United States will cease all implementation of the non-binding Paris Accord and the draconian financial and economic burdens the agreement imposes on our country. This includes ending the implementation of the nationally determined contribution and, very importantly, the Green Climate Fund which is costing the United States a vast fortune ... For example, under the agreement, China will be able to increase these emissions by a staggering number of years—thirteen. They can do whatever they want for thirteen years. Not us. India makes its participation contingent on receiving billions and billions and billions of dollars in foreign aid from developed countries. (White House 2017)

Trump's announcement of withdrawal from the Paris Agreement, or his diatribe against India and China, was by no means a surprise. The U.S. has always been seeking to subvert the global multilateral initiatives aiming to address the vexing global problems. Those who express surprise at the U.S. withdrawal seem to be unaware that the U.S. was not a Party to the Kyoto Protocol, the global accord under the UNFCCC (UN Framework Convention on Climate Change) that the Paris Agreement is to succeed when its extended period expires in 2020. Obama, who had raised a lot of hopes during the

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election campaign for his first term, could not bring the U.S. to ratify the Kyoto Protocol.

Kyoto Protocol is not the only global environmental treaty that the U.S. has refused to ratify. U.S. is not Party to the universal Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD), claiming this would harm U.S. economic interests. The U.S. is not Party to the Biosafety Protocol to regulate transboundary movement of genetically modified organisms. Nor is the U.S. Party to the Nagoya Protocol on access to biodiversity and related benefit sharing. Not to the Basel Convention on Transboundary Movement of Hazardous Wastes, either. The current withdrawal is quite in line with a consistent national policy of the U.S.—a policy of undermining the global community and disregarding global concerns.

The Paris Agreement itself is a charade of an international solution to the global warming crisis. Indeed, it takes several steps back from the Kyoto Protocol provisions. The Paris Agreement puts no binding commitments on developed countries that have historically caused the largest levels of carbon emissions and continue to hold high per capita carbon emission records. They only need to submit a national climate plan of “intended nationally determined contributions” (INDC). The carbon emission reduction targets for developed countries are voluntary. The binding commitments of Kyoto protocol are undone thus in the Paris Agreement. It is virtually impossible to keep the global average temperature increase within 2, and much less the aspirational 1.5, degree centigrade above the pre-industrial level with no binding commitments on industrialised economies. In its decision adopting the Paris Agreement, the UNFCCC’s fifteenth meeting of the Conference of Parties (CoP) noted that the projected level of carbon dioxide in 2030 would be a lethal 55 gigatonnes, and that

much greater emission reduction efforts will be required than those associated with the intended nationally determined contributions in order to hold the increase in the global average temperature to below 2°C above pre-industrial levels by reducing emissions to 40 gigatonnes. (UNFCCC 2015)

This cannot be achieved unless the developed countries, the U.S. in particular, agree to mandatory emission reductions. Even with its inadequacies, the Paris Agreement is the only multilateral mechanism currently available with which to address the climate change crisis.

The Agreement does not put a target date for achieving the temperature reduction goal. It leaves the benchmark pre-industrial temperature ambiguous, without mentioning the temperature measurement then or agreeing on the year of the start of the industrial period. The equity factor is down the drain, and so is the “common but differentiated responsibility” that has been fundamental to climate change negotiations, glaringly missing in the operative parts of the Paris Agreement. Common but differentiated

responsibility was central to the 1992 Rio Declaration of the UN Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED) (also known as the “Earth Summit”), the UNFCCC and the Kyoto Protocol.

India has played a key role in shaping the Rio Declaration and the UNFCCC the way these are. However, this role has been progressively shrinking with the country’s increasing commitment to corporate globalisation, and has come to a near halt with the neo-fascist Narendra Modi regime. The Indian government’s claim of introducing “climate justice” into the Paris Agreement was rather outlandish. It is barely there in the preamble as “... and noting the importance for some of the concept of ‘climate justice,’ when taking action to address climate change.” India has heavily yielded to western mechanisation in the negotiations and its claim of success in “climate justice” actually caricatures the concept as being important to only some countries. Climate justice and equity are missing from all operative provisions of the Paris Agreement text.

The Indian leadership remained silent when the constitutional head of a foreign country publicly made false allegations against India. India looked like an orphan nation. The new population of sham patriots that are on a tyrannical war against Indians other than themselves remained silent, proving their patriotism to be a travesty. Even the opposition remained blissfully quiet, unable to give a fitting response to the U.S. tyrant. India’s recent wavering in the climate negotiations has been sealed by the Modi regime. India ridiculously yielded to the U.S. characterisation of “major economies” replacing the binary of developed–developing countries. “Major economies” had been a U.S. trick since George W. Bush to encompass India and China in binding commitments (though this lingo was not included in the Paris Agreement).

While India’s leadership kept a studied silence on Trump’s insinuations, owing to its subservience to the Trump regime, the fact remains that India’s per capita carbon emissions are at one-tenth of those of the U.S. When the U.S. per capita emissions were at 16.5 metric tonnes, India’s were only at 1.7, and nearly all developing countries have similar or even lower rate of carbon emission as India (World Bank 2014). For example, Indonesia is at 1.8 metric tonnes, Sri Lanka 0.9, Colombia 1.8, Ethiopia at 0.1 carbon emissions per capita, while Germany is at 8.9, Japan 9.5, Canada 15.1, and so on. China’s per capita emission, at 7.5 t, is much lower than that of the U.S.

The current levels of the U.S.’ per capita emissions are dwarfed by the country’s huge levels of carbon emissions in the past. The global climate crisis is primarily the result of the historical carbon emissions by the industrial economies exhausting the resilience of the environment, and therefore reparations for the same are due from these players. Reparations to the poor in the developing world who are the primary victims of climate change—the sinking

islands of Munrothuruthu on the southern Kerala coast and Ghoramara island in the Indian Sundarbans are symbolic of climate change tyranny on the people.

We should not, however, lose sight of the fact that there exists a huge disparity in per capita carbon emission generation between the rich and poor in India. In the world's most iniquitous society, the rich shall not be allowed to use the huge mass of the poor as a shield in accentuating the climate crisis. Was India asking for "billions and billions of dollars," as Trump has alleged? India has never asked for nor received anything like that. No other developing country did. But the developed world has a fundamental obligation to compensate for the global climate change crisis. And they have reluctantly agreed to partly fulfil this obligation, hence their commitment in the UNFCCC, Kyoto Protocol as well as the Paris Agreement to provide financial assistance to developing countries, especially the least developed countries and small island nations. This was the result of the collective negotiations of the G77, the umbrella of developing countries at UN negotiations, and India was only following the informed position of the G77. India never asked for "billions and billions of dollars."

The Paris Agreement does not mention any figures, but simply asks developed countries to provide financial assistance to developing countries in order to meet their carbon reduction targets. The CoP decision adopting the Paris Agreement mentions a yearly need of US\$100 billion in support of developing countries. This is by no means the sole responsibility of the U.S. but of all developed countries, as they have agreed, and the beneficiary is not India alone but over 130 countries. Compare this figure with the US\$350 billion one developing country (Saudi Arabia) paid the U.S. alone recently arms purchases!

The haemorrhage of money is actually happening in the reverse way. Would Trump dare look at the figures of the billions and billions of dollars of profit repatriated by U.S. companies from India and other developing countries to the U.S. If Trump was referring to overseas development assistance (ODA), he is well advised to read the 1989 Presidential Report to the U.S. Congress, which plainly stated that for every dollar U.S. invested in aid it was getting back eight dollars. No country has ever truly benefitted from the ODA other than the donor countries.

Forget the billions and billions for India, the U.S. is not paying even the mandatory annual contribution to the UN even though the U.S. is the primary beneficiary of UN expenditure. Despite Trump's misleading statement from his war mongering speech to the UN General Assembly in September, where he said that the U.S. is paying for 22 percent of the UN budget, the U.S. does not pay its dues even after the General Assembly has conceded to the U.S. demand for consensus decision-making (instead of the simple or two-thirds majority) on financial issues. Indeed, a U.S. Permanent

Representative to the UN herself had admitted this in a candid moment. Mrs Madeleine Albright, who later rose to become the U.S. Secretary of State, admitted to an international audience in Geneva on 1 December 1995:

It is tragic and ironic that one of the principal threats to the United Nations comes from political elements in the very country which helped create it ... the forces of isolation and reaction, once on the fringe of our political system, are growing more powerful as they reach the mainstream and populate the halls of our Congress. (South Commission 1997)

The deluge coming with Trump is only the culmination of the U.S. position of hegemony.

The intransigence of the U.S. poses a serious threat to the global environment, both by impairing the environmental resilience of the planet and by depleting the biodiversity. The community of nations ought to consider meaningful ways of addressing this threat, including provisions for boycotts.

Disclosure Statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

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