

Opinion

THE US WITHDRAWAL FROM THE PARIS CLIMATE AGREEMENT: WHAT LIES AHEAD AND WHO FILLS THE VACUUM?

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¹Today, the US pulled out of the Paris Climate Agreement, citing that it would undermine its economy, take away jobs, pose litigation risks, and put the US in a permanent disadvantageous position vis-a-vis other countries. By doing so, President Trump was fulfilling his election promise to support the nation's coal industry, and had the Trump administration not exited the accord, it would have come into imminent direct conflict with the promise he made to the people during the campaign. Hence, the exit was expected.

Trump's argument is that even if all signatory nations fully complied with the Paris agreement, it would only reduce global warming by a tiny fraction of a percentage by 2100, a gain which could be wiped out in just 14 days of carbon emission by China. The Trump administration saw no benefit in an accord that required billions of dollars in Green Climate Fund commitment to support developing nations, while requiring the US to shut down its own coal plants and at the same time allowing countries like China and India to continue and even build new ones. However, these claims appear to be exaggerated, as it was the past US Obama administration that had submitted an individual plan for the steps it would undertake to tackle greenhouse gas emissions, and not something that was imposed by Paris. Under that pact, the countries could alter their plans if a country's internal circumstances demanded such flexibility.

The ASEAN region has suffered from the impacts of global warming, which has affected its biodiversity, health, and energy and water security, among other things. The ASEAN nations signed the Paris agreement on 22 April 2016 and through INDCs (Intended Nationally Determined Contributions) pledged to regularly communicate the steps they would take (or have taken) to reduce the effects of climate change in their countries. The ASEAN nations have noted that climate change should be in accordance with broader Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). SDGs, an initiative of the UN, consists of 17 goals that include ending hunger and poverty, ensuring healthy lives, providing quality education, combating climate change, and preservation of forests and oceans.

Back in America, withdrawal has found support. Just a few days back, 22 Republicans in a joint letter had urged Trump to withdraw from the accord, as they felt that in its current format it undermined US interests. However, those in favour of the accord (and most are) have rejected's Trump rationale and have rather emphasised that while keeping the climate safe, clean energy would also improve the economy and create millions of jobs. Additionally, it would be cheaper than conventional energy sources. However, the Trump administration feels that the US needs all forms of energy in addition to renewable sources to meet its energy demands should the economy grow by over 3 – 4 %. Trump is ready to renegotiate the agreement, but with Macron and others coming strongly against it, renegotiations are unlikely.

¹ Written on June 1 2017, the day US exited the Paris Climate agreement. The Opinion piece was originally hosted on the AEI website. First published here.

Given all this, the big question remains: Without US support, what will be the fate of the Paris Climate Agreement? Which country will now take the lead?

The Paris Climate Agreement (Paris 2015, or CoP 21, CMP11), within UN Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC), is an unprecedented global effort in combating the deleterious effects of climate change. The agreement opened for signing on 22 April 2016 and has been since signed by 195 nations and ratified by 148 as of June 2017.

While global greenhouse gas emissions have increased manifold since the 1900s, carbon emissions alone have risen by 90% since the 1970s. The fallout from these emissions has resulted in thinning of polar ice, rising sea levels, global warming, and unpredictable weather conditions, leading to incalculable economic and health risks. China and USA are among the highest polluting nations, contributing about 38% collectively to global greenhouse emissions. The Paris effort is intended to limit global warming to under 2% above pre-industrial levels by gradually cutting down on carbon emissions and ultimately heading towards a 0% carbon emission. Utilization of other forms of renewable and clean energy such as solar, wind, geothermal energy is central to the idea.

US has now joined the league of just 2 other nations – Syria and Nicaragua - that have not signed the accord. The US's exit may be an opportunity for other countries to come together more closely. But this has to be cautiously undertaken; in the past, the US has provided firm and definite leadership in major world matters. The US is one of the largest contributors to the Green Climate Fund, and its exit would surely hurt the budget of USD 100 billion per year promised by the developed world to the developing (especially the least developed) nations. Thus, global effort is likely to be severely hampered due to the US pull-out.

In the absence of US, the China is now expected to play a more dominant role. However, China is the world's largest polluter and is still a developing nation. The world cannot have much hope that China, in terms of contribution to the Fund, would manage to singlehandedly fill the void. However, a close EU-China climate change alliance is in the works now and together they might fill the void. The US exit also affords China an opportunity to exert more world influence, which it has bolstered further with its OBOR and other initiatives. The ASEAN itself is unlikely to make any sudden moves. A shift in power centrality towards China may be good news to the ASEAN, which has been over the past few years strengthening its relations with China, and is likely to look to China for leadership (w.r.t. Climate) in the region.

The exit does not mean that US would manage to immediately free itself from the arrangement. Should any country wish to opt out, the accord requires it to remain in the pact for 3 years and then additional 1 year before they can finally exit. Hence, it won't be until 2020 that the US finally gets out. In case the leadership changes in the next US elections, scheduled in 2020, the equation may again change, so it's still a wait-and-see situation.

Trump is treading a dangerous path; his protectionist policy is isolating the US from the rest of the world. The exit of the US from the accord would bring a setback to multilateralism as well. The US since the 1940s has led the world through multilateralism in matters of peace and security, trade, human rights, and environmental protection. These have brought immense benefits in the form of a successful international economy. Trump's "America first" policy cannot succeed unless it is interwoven with the shared values of this highly interconnected world. The US exit has nonetheless shaken the system, and only time will tell if the resolve gets stronger or if greater cracks in governance emerge.