



Short Review Paper

U.S. policy on climate change under Trump: beyond populism and hysteria

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Abstract

The year 2017 saw the United States of America welcome its first climate sceptic President in the White house. The worst fears of many came true when President Trump withdrew from the Paris Climate Agreement in June 2017. Many fear that without United States the gains made on the front of climate change could soon unravel. The paper is an attempt to go beyond the hysteria and make an objective analysis of the centrality of U.S. leadership in combating the phenomenon. While also exploring alternate and less talked about dimensions of the U.S. Policy in which Paris deal might not lose as much as many fear and President Trump might not gain as much as he hopes to achieve.

Keywords: Paris Agreement, Climate Change, U.S. Election, Donald Trump, Global Warming, Climate Change Sceptics.

Introduction

The year 2016 would be remembered for two reasons. The coming together of the world to sign the Paris agreement and the electoral victory of Donald Trump, a self-confessed denier of climate change. Many fear that the election of a person who considers a problem posing existential threat to the mankind nothing more than a Chinese hoax may unravel the international efforts and coalition that has taken years to reach this stage. Can the Paris agreement succeed without the United States? What are the alternatives that could emerge to fill the void created by U.S. withdrawal? An attempt has been made to answer these questions while treating it as a subset of the broader debate about the centrality of U.S. leadership in a world getting more multipolar by the day.

USA and its Importance in the climate change debate is due to a number of factors. These factors can be discussed under the following headings.

Responsibility: There is no denying the fact that developed countries of Europe and North America were the pioneers of the industrial age. They owe a large share of their prosperity and riches to the wealth gathered by exploiting the natural resources of the planet to the limit. Many of these developed states are heirs to former colonial powers that were not averse to the use of foul means in their attempts to maximise their profits. This included appalling over exploitation of the indigenous resources of the colonies and many a times irreparable damage to their natural heritage.

Hence it would not be an exaggeration to say that the developed countries have been contributing a much greater share to the climate change, even before we were aware of the existence of such a phenomenon. Countries of the developing world like

China, India, Mexico, Brazil etc. joined the race only in the second half of the 20th century. This doesn't absolve the developing states of their sins and duties but at the same time historical and present big polluters in the developed world must not be allowed to hide behind pollution figures of China and other developing nations. This makes the proposals of equal burden sharing not only unjust but also unacceptable to the developing countries. They perceive it as a move by the West to thwart their economic progress and keep them tangled in the web of Western or better said U.S. hegemony for years to come.

The norms of international politics state that national interest reigns supreme over any other consideration and no country could be seen as signing for commitments that harm its national interests. The issue of climate change offers a slight exception to this norm. In case of climate change the national interest of the states is so tightly aligned with the global interest that states across the globe are forced to come to the negotiating table every year. CoP21 was one such platform where after years of deliberations a consensus had finally emerged. The world finally seems to be looking in the right direction. It is here that the United States, the second biggest carbon emitter in the world after China with a per capita carbon emission of 16.4 metric tons¹ has a much greater responsibility to shoulder.

Leverage: In the Post-Cold War era the influence of United States and leverage it enjoys is hard to match for any other nation. Challenges and resistance to this hegemonic leadership may be rising up fast but the ability of U.S. in bring behemoths like China and other nations to the negotiating table remains unparalleled in comparison to any of the big power.

Climate change mitigation is one such arena which offered a unique opportunity for an established superpower and a rising superpower to cooperate in an unprecedented manner. President

Obama was aware of this potential of climate change to bring China and U.S.A. to cooperate. Hence he referred to the joint endorsement of the deal as a 'rare harmony' between the two states² with often opposing worldviews. But his successor, Mr. Trump, by pulling of the Paris Agreement has put an end to any prospects of such future cooperation.

Funds and Technology: In the aftermath of the Second World War the United States came up with the Marshall Plan to bring the devastated European economies back on their feet. Under its aegis approximately \$13 billion were provided to finance the recovery of Western Europe³. It was not a pure act of goodwill or generosity since American economic prosperity was also tightly linked to a Europe with heavier pockets. But even this selfish model served both the parties well and had a major role to heal the scars of the war.

Shifting to the present times when it the environment that lays into ruins, the world faces a self-created and self-perpetuated (just like wars) enemy in form of climate change. This time the task is not to strengthen a handful of countries but the whole world against a phenomenon that poses an existential threat to the whole mankind. Keeping this in mind the rich and developed countries have pledged \$100 billion per year by 2020 to help the developing countries shift to using green energy and become active participants in climate change mitigation⁴. This ambitious pledge is nothing short of a modern day Global Marshall Plan.

This is no small commitment by any means and the U.S. withdrawal, the largest economy (by GDP) worth 18.56 trillion dollars⁵ has surely dealt it a heavy blow. This is when the other half of the developed world across the Atlantic in form of European Union (GDP- \$16.39 trillion)⁶ is still suffering from the 'Brexit Hangover'. Having lost an economy as strong as the United Kingdom, which in 2015-16 made an estimated gross contribution of £13.6 billion to the EU budget⁷ is bound to have far reaching consequences. Considering these facts it would be no surprise if the EU members decided to cut their expenditures and keep the strings of their purse tight. An emerging alternative is that of China which was quick to step into U.S.A's shoes. But their generosity towards the climate fund and commitment to the cause remains to be seen.

An Uncertain Gamble

By deciding to opt out of this 21st century alliance against a common threat, USA also risks losing its claims to global leadership. A global leader cannot choose to be selective in the choice of issues it would like to counter. Countries like China and India are already making impressive progress when it comes to enhancing and adopting eco-friendly technologies. Last year, for the first time in history, investment in renewable (excluding large hydro projects) in developing countries outweighed that in developed economies. A total of \$156 billion has been committed by developing countries like China, India

and Brazil to renewable energy which marks a 19% increase over 2014 figures. The developed countries on the other hand invested \$130 billion, a decline of 8%. This turnaround was largely caused by China, which lifted its investment by 17% to \$102.9 billion, or 36% of the world total⁸.

The economic opportunities provided by discovery of shale gas are likely to dominate the decision making of the Trump led U.S. administration. But before declaring the hydrocarbon boom as a silver bullet for all of America's economic woes the U.S. President must pay heed to words of caution from those who beg to differ. To quote Vikram S. Mehta, "there has been a structural improvement in the efficiency of oil usage and that whilst the absolute consumption of oil will increase as countries transition towards a more energy intensive developmental model, the rate of growth of demand will be lower than historical trends. Demand will not be as powerful a force as it has been in the past"⁹. This compounded with the sluggish growth in China and other developing markets may not bring in the bounty that Republicans are hoping for.

President Trump may find it hard to turn the populist rhetoric of bringing back the jobs in old sectors into reality. Experts and sceptics claim that creating the manufacturing boom and jobs of the 1950s and 60s would be impossible in today's technology driven world. Ironically it is the renewable energy models that can show the way. A report published by International Renewable Energy Agency (IRENA) reveals that the global renewable energy employment increased by 5% in 2015 to reach 8.1 million with solar PV emerging as the largest renewable energy employer and provided 2.8 million jobs worldwide, an 11% increase over 2014¹⁰.

It is worth mentioning that in the United States, a growing wind and solar energy sector has seen employment increase by 6% in 2015, creating jobs 769,000 individuals. Employment in solar energy continued its rapid expansion – growing by almost 22% in 2015. Employment opportunities in solar industry grew 12 times as fast as overall job creation in the U.S. economy and easily surpassed those in oil and gas extraction (187,200) or coal mining (67,929)¹⁰.

Each century has its sources of power, for 19th century it was coal, for 20th century it was oil and as the data clearly points out, the 21st century belongs to the renewable. This is where the scope of expansion, job creation and making money lies. In the end Mr. Trump's move to promote one industry at the expense of the other may put many employed in the clean energy sector out of work and prove to be zero sum game.

Rays of Hope

After sending many ominous signals such as appointing Mr. Scott Pruitt, a climate sceptic to head US Environmental Protection Agency, President Trump finally withdrew from the Paris Climate Agreement. While doing so he made it clear that

anything which is perceived as a hurdle to his “Make America Great Again” policy would meet the same fate. It has been established beyond doubt that President Trump does not share the world view of President Obama and his other predecessors which sought American leadership in all global affairs. Mr. Trump seems to have narrowed down his attention to just: economy and military prowess. But as with every unfortunate scenario, the U.S withdrawal has a silver lining too. With Trump led USA shying away from the commitments made by Barack Obama, the other nations might become more proactive. EU’s fast track ratification of the Paris agreement which surprised many is a step in the right direction. Isolation faced by the United States at the recent Hamburg G20 summit on the issue of climate change is a clear rejection of President Trump’s brand of high handed diplomacy. Decisions taken by the President in his first few months have been criticized for their random, shifting, populist, xenophobic undertones and a lack of foresight. The prioritisation of his “Make America great again” policy, over other long-term strategic interests of the country is emerging as a serious threat to the liberal world order. Hence the EU, China, India and many other nations by reassuring their commitment to the Paris agreement have sent the right signal. By making it clear that Mr. Trump with his 62 million voters (about 3 million less than the Democrat Hilary Clinton)¹¹ would not be allowed to decide the fate of 7 billion residents of the planet, they have set the tone for future climate negotiations.

Conclusion

The past century belonged to the United States of America. But the 2016 U.S election has raised some serious doubts about America’s ability to sustain and save its remarkable legacy. Unlike the Cold War era where this legacy faced an external threat, in the Post-Cold War era it has been brought into question from inside. Trump presidency so far has done little to dispel these doubts. By weighing existential threats like climate change in the scale of economics President Trump has alienated American allies and played into the hands of his foes. For making America stronger and richer, the Trump administration has forsaken the future of humanity as collateral damage. A reckless gamble indeed! Whether he loses or wins in the long run is for the future to decide. But when history of his tenure is penned down, Mr. Trump will always find himself on the wrong side of it.

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