

Commentary

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Daniel Callies

Goethe University Frankfurt | Email: daniel.callies@normativeorders.net

Paris agreement is bigger than any one man

On June 1st, President Trump announced his intention to withdraw the United States from the international climate accord known as the Paris Agreement. Paris was the culmination of over two decades of negotiations and boasted 195 signatories representing every country on earth (except for Nicaragua, who felt the treaty was not ambitious enough, and Syria). It's important to note how difficult it is to get nearly every country on earth to agree on almost anything, let alone a commitment to limit climate change to less than two degrees Celsius. This is why US withdrawal from the treaty is so upsetting. It is akin to making a promise and then breaking it. Normally when one breaks a promise there needs to be a compelling rationale. So, what was Trump's explanation for the US exit?

One of the first reasons he cited was the Green Climate Fund. The Green Climate Fund was created in 2010 with the intention of helping the poorest and most vulnerable people of the world adapt to climate change. President Trump claimed that the Green Climate Fund was costing the US a "vast fortune" and that it would "oblige the United States to commit potentially tens of billions of dollars." The truth? The Paris Agreement does not obligate any country to commit money to the Green Climate Fund. The Fund relies on voluntary pledges. The US has pledged only 3 billion USD to the fund, and has paid out only a third of that thus far.¹ To put that

into perspective, 1 billion USD represents less than .025 % of US federal spending for fiscal year 2016. That is, the US has offered up less than three-one-hundredths of a percent of one year's spending to help poor countries adapt to climate change. This is all the more unsatisfactory when we remember that climate change is a problem those same poor countries have contributed to the least, while the US is most likely the largest historical contributor.²

Another major motivation for Trump's decision were the supposed restrictions the Paris Agreement placed upon the US coal industry. Despite what Trump said, the Agreement does not impose top-down restrictions on any country's economy or energy policy. Rather, the Agreement allowed each country to determine, on its own, what it was willing to contribute to the overall goal of limiting climate change and how it go about achieving its individual goal. Countries will report their progress five years down the road and revise their plans accordingly. That said, it's true that the US coal industry has been on the decline, and it will likely continue to be as well. But this is not a result of the Paris

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[http://cait2.wri.org/historical/Country%20GHG%20Emissions?indicator\[\]=%5ETotal%20GHG%20Emissions%20Excluding%20Land-Use%20Change%20and%20Forestry&indicator\[\]=%5ETotal%20GHG%20Emissions%20Including%20Land-Use%20Change%20and%20Forestry&year\[\]=%5E2013&sortIdx=NaN&chartType=geo](http://cait2.wri.org/historical/Country%20GHG%20Emissions?indicator[]=%5ETotal%20GHG%20Emissions%20Excluding%20Land-Use%20Change%20and%20Forestry&indicator[]=%5ETotal%20GHG%20Emissions%20Including%20Land-Use%20Change%20and%20Forestry&year[]=%5E2013&sortIdx=NaN&chartType=geo)

¹ <http://www.greenclimate.fund/home>

Agreement, rather, coal is simply no longer economically competitive with natural gas, and to some extent wind and solar-generated electricity.³ US withdrawal from Paris notwithstanding, the US coal industry will not recover without significant subsidies from the federal government.

Finally, Trump mentioned over and over how “unfair” the Agreement was to the US. However, common-sense principles of fairness point to the opposite conclusion: the US pledge under the Paris Agreement was not nearly ambitious enough.⁴ For instance, if we were to adopt a polluter pays principle of fairness—that is, the idea of “you break it, you buy it”—the US would be on the hook for nearly a third of all mitigation and adaptation costs due to its massive greenhouse gas emissions both past and present. If we were rather to finance mitigation and adaption efforts via an ability to pay principle—that is, the same principle that is used in all progressive tax systems, including the US—then too the United States would have to take on a much greater burden than it pledged to do under the Paris Agreement. The truth of the matter is that the Paris Agreement is indeed inadequate and unfair. But it isn’t the US that is getting the short end of the stick. Rather, the Paris Agreement is unfair to the poorest members of our global community, both current and future, who have been and will continue to bear the greatest hardships of climate change. The US has reaped the benefits of cheap, dirty, fossil-fuel development, and it is now refusing to take on even a small amount of the cost such development has placed upon the global community.

The US announcing its intention to withdraw from Paris represents a symbolic bomb being dropped upon international solidarity, but it is far from being an actual

catastrophe. First, according to Article 28 of the Agreement, the US can’t legally withdraw until November 2020 at the earliest.⁵ By that time there is a good chance that the Democrats will have greater control over the legislature and an even greater chance that someone else will have been elected president of the United States. Second, it is unlikely that Trump’s announcement will do much more harm than his science-denying administration is already doing by slowly dismantling federal climate policy. And, third, while the US is certainly a major player in combating global climate change, reversing the existing US plan for reducing greenhouse gas emissions will contribute about 3 billion tons of additional greenhouse gases over the next few years, compared to nearly 40 billion tons of global emissions each year. Those extra 3 billion tons will impose costs of about 100 billion USD on the global economy, a number that is quite insignificant when compared to world GDP.⁶ And that is not to even mention the likely possibility of other states, major cities, and corporations stepping up to the plate and increasing their action to make up for US shortcomings.

Make no mistake about it, the US walking away from the Agreement is certainly a low point in the global fight against catastrophic climate change. But luckily for both current and future generations, the Paris Agreement is bigger than any one country, and certainly bigger than any one man.

³ <http://theconversation.com/how-bad-could-trumps-paris-agreement-withdrawal-be-a-scientists-perspective-78721>

⁴ <http://www.a-id.org/en/news/adaptation-after-the-paris-negotiations-who-ought-to-foot-the-bill/>

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http://unfccc.int/paris_agreement/items/9485.php

⁶ <http://theconversation.com/how-bad-could-trumps-paris-agreement-withdrawal-be-a-scientists-perspective-78721>