

# **ISSUES IN PERSPECTIVE**

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## ***Thinking Realistically about the Paris Agreement on the Environment***

On Friday, 22 April 2016, representatives from 167 nations gathered in New York City to sign the Paris Climate Accord, negotiated in December 2015. Among other things, the signers agreed to slow greenhouse gas emissions. It has been hailed as a pivotal agreement to combat climate change, and President Obama regards it as one of his most important achievements. How should we think about this agreement and will it actually make a difference?

President Obama's domestic climate program was essential in getting other nations on board in Paris, but his program is in shambles because the Supreme Court in February temporarily shelved his Clean Power Plan. Further, hundreds of coal-burning plants in developing nations are still planned for construction and energy companies are still investing in fossil fuels. The overall goal of the Accord to limit warming of the planet to 3.6 degrees Fahrenheit or 2 degrees Celsius above the preindustrial level is honestly far beyond reach.

Let's examine six key players in the Paris Accord:

- The US pledged that it would curb greenhouse gas pollution 26 to 28% from 2005 levels by 2025. Because of the February Supreme Court ruling, this goal is in serious jeopardy, plus the presidential election raises serious doubts as to whether the next president will even desire to meet this goal.
- India pledged to increase solar power generation to 100 gigawatts by 2022, up from about 3 gigawatts generated last year. India has also announced its intent to double the tax on coal. Both of these policies could make solar energy competitive with coal in India.
- The European Union pledged to cut emissions by at least 40% by 2030. But the EU leadership is fractured over the migrant crisis and over Britain's threat to leave the EU. Member states of the EU are finding it difficult to reach consensus on these climate change goals. Poland is very dependent on coal for its power and the steel industry remains important within the EU.
- Brazil is in chaos right now. Its president is near impeachment and possible removal from office. It is in the middle of the worst economic downturn in 25 years and the government is planning on hosting the Olympic Games this summer. All of this makes it very doubtful that Brazil can meet its pledge of reducing the country's emissions 43% from 2005 levels by 2030. It is also questionable that Brazil will even have the funds to develop new renewable energy sources.
- Russia has refused to make any binding pledges to reduce greenhouse gas emissions. But Russia is already on track to reduce its emissions by 70% from a baseline of 1990. Russia's problem is a depressed economy and a nation that desperately needs modernizing in terms of its economy.

- Indonesia is one of the largest greenhouse gas polluters as a result of mass deforestation. It has pledged to cut its emissions 29% by 2030. Indonesia's political situation is complicated and its economy and public policy issues relating to emissions and climate change are often confusing. Whether it can honor this pledge is doubtful at best.

Whether the funds promised by the wealthy nations in this Accord to help finance the pledges of the poorer nations will be forthcoming is not guaranteed, and is one of the great uncertainties of this Accord. If this money is not forthcoming, poorer nations such as India, Brazil and Indonesia will be tempted to abandon their pledges and the Accord will in effect be worthless. The Paris Accord is thus fragile at best, easily reversible at worst.

The ambitious Paris Accord of 2016 must be balanced with a degree of skepticism about the "settled science" on the human causation of climate change. For example, Steven F. Howard, visiting scholar at the University of Colorado, helps us put all of the news about climate change in perspective. He demonstrates that the third National Climate Assessment that the White House released in early May 2014 generated alarming headlines in the media and came on the heels of the United Nations Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change's most recent report, which also generated the same type of headlines. The National Climate Assessment report is 829 pages long, and has an additional 137 page "highlights" summary. The report was produced by "more than 300 experts guided by a 60-member Federal Advisory Committee." The report argues that significant economic impacts of human-caused climate change in the US are already occurring: "Corn producers in Iowa, oyster growers in Washington State, and maple syrup producers in Vermont are all observing climate-related changes that are outside of recent experience." Howard argues that "these are less scientific facts than they are political statements. While climate change can indeed be measured in economic terms, proof that they are 'human-caused' is far from definitive." Howard also shows that the "mitigation" chapter in the report "implicitly recognizes the unreality of the conventional climate agenda and it concludes with an acknowledgement that we need much more research on affordable low-and non-carbon energy sources along with more basic climate science research into key 'uncertainties.' Anyone else who talks this way gets called a 'denier.'" Such "refreshing realism" was totally ignored in the alarmist media as it covered the National Climate Assessment report.

Also, consider these facts:

- If climate change is a "settled science," then why do its predictions keep changing? Columnist Charles Krauthammer recently observed that the great physicist Freeman Dyson argues that climate change scientists deal with the fluid dynamics of the atmosphere and oceans, but ignore the effect of biology (i.e., vegetation and topsoil) on climate. Further, atmospheric scientists Richard McNider and John Christy maintain that climate scientists deal with climate models that have been "consistently and spectacularly wrong in their predictions."
- The climate change advocates predict more extreme weather such as hurricanes and tornadoes as a result of global warming. But, as Krauthammer demonstrates, in all of 2012, only one hurricane made the US landfall. And 2013 saw the fewest Atlantic hurricanes in 30 years. In fact, in the last half-century, one-third fewer major hurricanes have hit the US

than in the previous century. Further, in terms of tornadoes, last year saw the fewest in a quarter-century. And the last 30 years (of presumed global warming) have seen a 30% decrease in extreme tornado activity (F-3 and above) versus the previous 30 years.

- Between 1998 and 2013, the Earth's surface temperature rose at a rate of 0.04 degrees Centigrade a decade, far slower than the 0.18 degrees Centigrade increase in the 1990s. Meanwhile, emissions of carbon dioxide (which would be expected to push temperatures upward) rose uninterruptedly.
- *The Economist* recently published an article which focused on important factors that could have a much deeper impact on Earth's climate than we realize. These are factors that are rarely discussed and are never mentioned in media reports on Earth's climate. (1) The sun's power output fluctuates slightly over a cycle that lasts about 11 years. The current cycle seems to have gone on longer than normal. Why? We do not exactly know. So for the last decade, less heat has been reaching Earth than usual. What is the effect of this on the Earth's temperature? Rarely is this even mentioned. And, of course, this has nothing to do with human activity and its effect on Earth's temperature. (2) Pollution throws aerosols (particles such as soot, and suspended droplets of things like sulphuric acid) into the air, where they reflect sunlight back into space. The more there are, the greater their cooling effect. This then is about cooling, not warming of the Earth. (3) Volcanoes do the same thing, so increased volcanic activity has a cooling effect on Earth. The point of all this is that current climate models underplay the delayed solar cycle and the effect of pollution that actually produces a cooling effect, not a warming effect on Earth.

As I read all of this material, I began to reflect on the claims of President Obama, many environmental groups, the National Climate Assessment report, the UN's Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change and even the ambitious goals of the recently signed Paris Accord. Climate change science is not a "settled science." One cannot speak in absolute terms about the complexities and nuances of Earth's climate and make the bold, absolute claim that human activity is singularly causing global warming and leading to greater and more catastrophic storms, including hurricanes and tornadoes. The data simply does not bear this out. That there is the reality of climate change is a given; that we know absolutely all of its complex causes is not.

See Justin Gillis and Coral Davenport, "Leaders Meet to Sign a Climate Pact Fraught with Uncertainties," *New York Times* (22 April 2016), on which, in terms of the Paris Accord, this essay is very dependent; George Will in the *Washington Post* (22 April 2016); Steven F. Hayward in the *Wall Street Journal* (8 May 2014); Charles Krauthammer in [www.washingtonpost.com](http://www.washingtonpost.com) (25 February 2014); and *The Economist* (8 March 2014), pp. 81-82.