

# THE PARIS AGREEMENT IS NO PANACEA

Relevant for: Environment | Topic: Environmental Degradation - GHGs, Ozone Depletion and Climate Change

Nothing that U.S. President Donald Trump touched turned into gold, except perhaps his business empire, but ironically, he was the alchemist who turned the [Paris Agreement](#), once considered the product of a conspiracy hatched by the U.S. and China to change the course of negotiations away from the [Rio Declaration \(1992\)](#) and the [Kyoto Protocol \(1997\)](#), into a holy grail worth pursuing. Many developing countries, including India, which hesitated to sign the Agreement because it had exempted developed countries from their mandatory obligations to reduce greenhouse gas emissions, turned into its devout supporters the moment Mr. Trump denounced it as a hoax and [announced his decision to withdraw](#) from it. Today, the Paris Agreement is deemed as the panacea for all environmental ills when the truth is that it is a repudiation of the principles of “common but differentiated responsibilities” and “the polluter must pay”.

Mr. Trump was not the only one who called the Paris Agreement a hoax. Many scientists and environmentalists expressed deep disappointment when it was adopted, as the national and international actions envisaged under it were far below the optimum levels. They did not add up to limiting the rise of global temperature to below 2°C, the minimum necessary to save the globe from disastrous consequences. It merely opened a new path to protect the lifestyles of industrialised nations by denying the developing countries their right to development.

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The most hopeful time for global cooperation in protection of the planet was between the time of the [Stockholm Conference \(1972\)](#) and the time of the Rio Conference (1992). That was when mounting scientific evidence about the role of anthropogenic emissions in global warming led to political initiatives to harmonise development and environment. Former Prime Minister [Indira Gandhi's resounding address at Stockholm](#) declaring poverty as the worst polluter reverberated in many conference halls. The historic consensus in Rio led to the adoption of the [UN Framework Convention on Climate Change \(UNFCCC\)](#), which was a model global instrument balancing the right to development of the developing countries and the obligations of the developed countries. A distinction was made between the “luxury emissions” of the developed countries, which were reduced mandatorily, and the survival emissions of the developed countries, which were allowed to increase. Moreover, a huge financial package was approved to develop environment-friendly technologies in developing countries.

But by the time the [Conference of the Parties was held in Berlin in 1995](#), the developed countries had backed off from their commitments. They made a determined effort to impose mandatory cuts on developing countries. Though the G-77 was split, we managed to maintain the Rio principles with the assistance of the Chairperson, Angela Merkel.

The Kyoto Protocol enshrined the Rio principles. It fixed emission targets for developed countries and a complex set of provisions was included to satisfy their interests. But it was never ratified by the U.S. Congress and the U.S. withdrew its support in 2001. The end of the Kyoto Protocol and the abandonment of the spirit of the Rio principles were reflected in the [Copenhagen Accord \(2009\)](#), engineered by the U.S. and China and sold to some key countries including India on the argument that a global climate action plan would be possible only if all reductions of the greenhouse gases were made voluntary.

Also read | [U.S. manipulated climate accord in Copenhagen: WikiLeaks](#)

The basic terms of the Copenhagen Accord were brokered directly by a handful of key country leaders including the U.S., China, India and Brazil on the final day of the conference. It took another full day of tense negotiations to arrive at a procedural compromise allowing the deal to be formalised over the bitter objections of a few governments. There was a virtual revolt by the developing countries, but the Paris Agreement was virtually born in Copenhagen, and [adopted later in 2015](#).

The Paris Agreement marked a fundamental change in the principles of Rio and for the first time brought all nations into a common cause to undertake ambitious efforts to combat climate change. It requires all parties to put forward their best efforts through nationally determined contributions (NDCs) and to strengthen these efforts in the years ahead. This includes all parties to report regularly on their emissions and on their implementation efforts.

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The Paris Agreement moved away from the principle of common but differentiated responsibilities and all countries were placed on an equal footing by making reduction of greenhouse gas emissions voluntary. The NDCs so far submitted will not result in the desired objective of limiting increase of global warming to below 2°C. The Paris Agreement requires that all countries — rich, poor, developed, and developing — slash greenhouse gas emissions. But no language is included on the commitments the countries should make. Nations can voluntarily set their emissions targets and incur no penalties for falling short of their targets. It sets forth a requirement for countries to announce their next round of targets every five years, but does not include a specific requirement to achieve them.

The scientific community has already rejected the Paris Agreement as a solution. Further temperature rise, even of 1.5°C, may result in catastrophic and irreversible changes. At 1.5°C, [70%-90% of coral reefs across the world would die](#). At 2°C, none would be left. Even a 1°C hotter planet is not a steady state, says a report of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC). The techno-optimism that the wonders of technology will be able to find answers to the dilemma we face without our having to alter our patterns of living is a delusion. The IPCC report acknowledges that “the pathways to avoiding an even hotter world would require a swift and complete transformation not just of the global economy but of society too”. This will only be possible if the world rejects nationalism and parochialism and adopts collaborative responses to the crisis. The Paris Agreement falls short of that imperative.

Also read | [New IPCC report warns of dire threat to oceans](#)

U.S. President-elect Joe Biden has declared that the U.S. will have the most progressive position on climate change in the nation’s history. He has already laid out a clean energy and infrastructure plan, a commitment to return to the Paris Agreement, and a goal of net-zero emissions by 2050. The appointment of former Secretary of State John Kerry as Climate Change Envoy is a clear indication of the importance that Mr. Biden attaches to addressing global warming issues. Having been one of the architects of the Paris Agreement, Mr. Kerry must be aware of its merits and deficiencies. It is hoped that he will also be aware of the development imperatives of the developing nations. If Mr. Kerry and Mr. Biden insist on matching cuts by the developing countries as a conditionality to return to the Paris Agreement, the whole debate of equity and climate justice will emerge, with India and the U.S. on opposing sides.

*T.P. Sreenivasan, a former Ambassador, was the Vice Chairman of the first Conference of Parties to the UNFFCC from 1992 to 1995*

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