



# Trump's Climate of Injustice

By pulling out of the Paris climate agreement, the US president has revealed that the world's worst polluter has written off everything it owes to the developing world

**:: Sreeram Chaulia**

**U**S president Donald Trump's decision to withdraw from the Paris climate change accord is a huge setback to multilateral efforts to slow down global warming. It is a disastrous abdication of America's responsibility at a time when collective international action is desperately needed to save the battered environment.

The shock value of US' pullout from the Paris agreement, for which it had lobbied hard just two years ago when Barack Obama was in charge, is extreme because America prided itself since 1945 as a builder of global institutions to maintain stability, prosperity and sustainability.

Trump's retreat into selfish and narrow populism, dramatised by his claim that "I was elected to represent Pittsburgh, not Paris", is a fall from former greatness. The magnanimous superpower which had played a pivotal underwriter role in the formation and success of the United Nations, the World Trade Organization, and the Group of Twenty (G20) has today forfeited the world's respect.

Trump's denial of climate change as a hoax, his atavistic faith in fossil fuel-based economic growth, and his refusal to financially assist developing countries to transition to green energy amount to rejection of science and violation of climate justice.

The US has historically been the worst polluter. The legacy of emissions which motored its economic rise since the late 19th century exceeds the combined carbon dioxide released by the rest of the world put together. America's cumulative greenhouse discharge is so massive that it will remain in the atmosphere for thousands of years and keep tampering with nature, weather patterns and the planetary ecosystem.

Although China overtook the US in the last decade as the largest polluter in absolute terms, the latter still dumps a staggering 5 billion tonnes of carbon dioxide per annum into the air, that is 14% of the world's contemporary emissions.

In per capita terms, Trump's US accounts for 16% of the world's total current emissions, while China is responsible for 7% and India for just 1.9%. Trump's brazenness in claiming that the US is being cheated by other countries in the name of climate change shows in these statistics. The



chief offender is crying foul.

Trump's exit from the Paris Accord and removal of all Obama-era restrictions on polluting industries in the US could release 3 billion tonnes of additional carbon into the atmosphere per year, taking the overall share of America's climate injustice to even more egregious levels.

## Dire Repercussions

Like regressive taxation, Trump's scrapping of the Paris agreement will skew the scales against poor nations that are the principal sufferers of melting glaciers, rising sea levels and progressively hotter years. There cannot be a starker example of the rich exploiting the poor for eons and then kicking them in the teeth.

Trump's rant that India is extracting "billions and billions" of dollars from wealthy nations using climate change mitigation and adaptation as an excuse reveals an America that has written off everything that it owes to the developing world. By repudiating its massive ecological debt, the US is incurring a mortal blow to its standing as a credible interlocutor and partner in global governance. Putting 'America First' in a way that hurts everyone else has ironically left America last in

the company of Syria and Nicaragua as the only three member states of the UN outside the climate change regime.

Although the technical process of the US' exit from the Paris system will take years, the damage that would happen in the interim is tragic. The Paris agreement is actually not a very demanding treaty from an environmentalist perspective. It is a voluntary deal where each country, including the US, committed to cutting greenhouse gases as per its sovereign will. Now, even this half measure to halt temperatures from rising above 2<sup>o</sup> Celsius from pre-industrial levels is being watered down.

History will not forgive Trump for jeopardising painstakingly-built international consensus on a path to preserving humanity. He is of course not the first reactionary American leader to decamp from a global good cause. In 2001, then-president George W Bush renounced the Kyoto Protocol on global warming after it had been earlier signed by the Bill Clinton administration. In 2002, Bush 'unsigned' the US from the International Criminal Court so as to keep American military personnel safely out of reach of global justice for war crimes.

Just as Obama steered the Paris Accord, only for it to be abjured by Trump, president Woodrow Wilson had championed the creation of the League of Nations after World War I, but the Republican-led Congress of that time prevented America from joining the world body. With the

US staying outside the League, few vigorous institutional checks remained to prevent the outbreak of World War II.

Even if the Paris Accord does not unravel completely due to the American exit, the ongoing harm to the environment is all set to intensify as long as Trump is in power. His legacy will be to leave the US isolated and backward. ■

*The author is a professor and dean at the Jindal School of International Affairs*

**America's cumulative greenhouse discharge is so massive that it will remain in the atmosphere for thousands of years and keep tampering with nature, weather patterns and the planetary ecosystem**

