

# ISSUE BRIEF

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## U.S. Should Put U.N. Climate Conferences on Ice

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The Conference of the Parties to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) is currently holding its 18th meeting in Doha, Qatar. The two-week conference ending on December 7 is intended to jump-start the stalled negotiations on a successor agreement to the Kyoto Protocol to reduce greenhouse gas emissions. Midway through the meetings, it is clear that very little of substance will transpire, which has been the case for years.

The past four years have demonstrated conclusively that there is no international consensus for action. The U.S. should refuse to attend future U.N. conferences on climate change, call for a moratorium on future conferences unless there is a fundamental shift in position among key countries, and focus its efforts

on alternative forums involving key countries. Further, the U.S. should prevent and remove unilateral attempts to address climate change that have adverse economic effects and no environmental benefit.

**Talking in Circles.** The U.N. has been the central forum for discussing climate change issues for more than two decades. The U.N. led the effort to create the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) in 1988, which released its first report in 1990 and, unsurprisingly, confirmed the global warming theory and laid the foundation for an international agreement to address the issue. The 1992 Rio Earth Summit produced the UNFCCC, wherein countries pledged to consider actions to limit global temperature increases and cope with the resulting impact of climate change.

The high point of UNFCCC efforts was the adoption of the Kyoto Protocol in 1997, which established binding restrictions on greenhouse gas emissions in 37 industrialized countries, including principally the European Community, by an average of 5 percent against 1990 levels over the five-year period 2008–2012.

The U.S. is not a party to the Kyoto Protocol, and supporters of the pact point to this fact to justify

its failure. In reality, even accepting all IPCC model assumptions, shortcomings of the agreement—particularly the exemption of major developing country sources of greenhouse gas emissions, loopholes, and other ruses that allow some developed countries to largely avoid emissions reductions—ensured that the Kyoto Protocol would do virtually nothing to reduce emissions and have no detectable impact on climate change.<sup>1</sup> The bottom line is that even with perfect compliance and U.S. participation, Kyoto would not significantly arrest projected global warming.

The past four years have seen successive annual U.N. conferences (Copenhagen in 2009, Cancun in 2010, Durban in 2011, and Doha this year) frantically trying to reach agreement among nearly 200 countries on a successor to the Kyoto Protocol. In essence, these conferences have succeeded only in wresting vague pledges from developed countries to reduce emissions, contribute funds to help developing countries adapt to climate change, and meet again to try to negotiate a binding treaty by 2015.

**An Unworkable Premise.** The problem is that the basic approach is unworkable. The Kyoto Protocol

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essentially placed the entire economic burden of addressing climate change on a few dozen countries while asking nothing from more than 150 countries. Perhaps this makes sense if the industrialized countries alone could address the issue by reducing emissions, but that is impossible.

The primary source of greenhouse gas emissions is increasingly the developing world. For a number of reasons—including sluggish economies and a shift toward energy sources (such as natural gas, nuclear, or renewable energy) that emit fewer greenhouse gas emissions—most industrialized countries have seen their emissions stabilize or fall. In fact, U.S. emissions are at their lowest level since 1996, according to the U.N.<sup>2</sup> China surpassed the U.S. as the largest source in 2006, and its emissions were 45 percent higher than America's in 2009 (the most recent year available). Other developing countries are also rapidly increasing their emissions as their economies develop.

Developing countries, primarily India and China, have made it quite clear that they have no appetite to slow economic growth or stop using fossil fuels to curb emissions. In fact, according to a recent report from the World Resources Institute, there are proposals to build nearly 1,200

coal-fired power plants worldwide totaling over 1.4 million megawatts. China and India alone account for 76 percent of the proposed build.<sup>3</sup>

For this reason, Canada, Japan, and Russia refused to sign onto a new agreement committing them to emissions reductions unless major developing country emitters were also included. Understandably, they see little benefit in undermining their economic growth and their citizens' prosperity for the sake of a symbolic gesture that, in the end, would not significantly alter the trajectory of emissions growth.

All of this leaves aside, of course, outstanding uncertainty about the accuracy of UNFCCC claims on climate change, the magnitude and pace at which the climate is changing, its causes, and whether the costs of emissions reductions might be better used in other ways. Specifically, the famous “hockey stick” used by the UNFCCC for years to illustrate global warming has been proven to be fabricated,<sup>4</sup> the models used to predict future temperatures have been unable to replicate past temperatures, and global temperatures have stabilized over the past 15 years.<sup>5</sup> Environmentalist Bjorn Lomborg and other experts suggest that the costs of emissions mitigation are prohibitive and that countries

should focus on other, more urgent development problems.<sup>6</sup>

### **U.S. Should Be a Leader.**

Proponents of the U.S. taking action to reduce greenhouse gas emissions often argue that if the U.S. acts, the rest of the world will follow suit. As the developing world has made it clear, this is not the case. Instead, the U.S. is wasting millions of taxpayer dollars attending and financing these conferences and, ironically, encouraging unnecessary emissions from those sent to represent their countries, industries, or interests at these unproductive meetings. Instead, the U.S. should demonstrate real leadership by:

- Undertaking independent efforts to more accurately determine the severity of climate change and verify U.N. claims.
- Working with a smaller group of nations through informal arrangements such as the Major Economies Forum to undertake appropriate steps that are both cost effective and effective in reducing warming.
- Refraining from attending future U.N. climate change conferences and calling for a moratorium on conferences that emphasize financial transfers and reinforce

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1. Christopher C. Horner, Henry I. Miller, and Brett D. Schaefer, “Fixing the Flawed U.N. Approach to International Environmental Policy,” Heritage Foundation *Special Report*, [http://thf\\_media.s3.amazonaws.com/2012/EnvironmentalConservation/Chapter9-Fixing-the-Flawed-UN-Approach-to-International-Environmental-Policy.pdf](http://thf_media.s3.amazonaws.com/2012/EnvironmentalConservation/Chapter9-Fixing-the-Flawed-UN-Approach-to-International-Environmental-Policy.pdf).

2. United Nations Statistics Division, “Carbon Dioxide Emissions (CO<sub>2</sub>), Thousand Metric Tons of CO<sub>2</sub> (CDIAC),” <http://mdgs.un.org/unsd/mdg/SeriesDetail.aspx?srid=749&crd=> (accessed December 4, 2012).

3. Ailun Yang and Yiyun Cui, “Global Coal Risk Assessment: Data Analysis and Market Research,” World Resources Institute, November 2012, <http://www.wri.org/publication/global-coal-risk-assessment> (accessed December 4, 2012).

4. Stephen McIntyre and Ross McKittrick, “Hockey Sticks, Principal Components, and Spurious Significance,” *Geophysical Research Letters*, Vol. 32 (2005), <http://www.agu.org/pubs/crossref/2005/2004GL021750.shtml> (accessed December 5, 2012).

5. David Whitehouse, “2012: The Temperature Standstill Continues,” *The Observatory*, November 29, 2012, <http://www.thegwpf.org/2012-temperature-standstill-continues/> (accessed December 4, 2012).

6. See Copenhagen Consensus Center, <http://www.copenhagenconsensus.com/Default.aspx?ID=1623> (accessed December 4, 2012).

the flawed, ineffective Kyoto methodology of differentiated responsibilities.

- Resisting and ceasing attempts to address climate change unilaterally. This includes removing onerous and unnecessary regulations on fossil fuels that are driving up the cost of energy, stopping wasteful and ineffective attempts to subsidize carbon-free energy sources, and preventing an implementation of a carbon tax. Attempting to address greenhouse gases unilaterally comes at great

cost to the taxpayer and energy consumer for no meaningful environmental impact.

**A More Effective Way.** Efforts to address climate change do not need to be hammered out at a U.N. conference. Indeed, by working with a smaller group of key players, the U.S. is far more likely to negotiate a more effective and less costly strategy to address climate change without the tangents that bog down U.N. negotiations.

Instead of letting the U.N. funnel negotiations toward an unrealistic,

grossly expensive agreement, the U.S. and other key nations should work outside the U.N. to hash out a realistic, effective strategy by which they are prepared to abide.

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