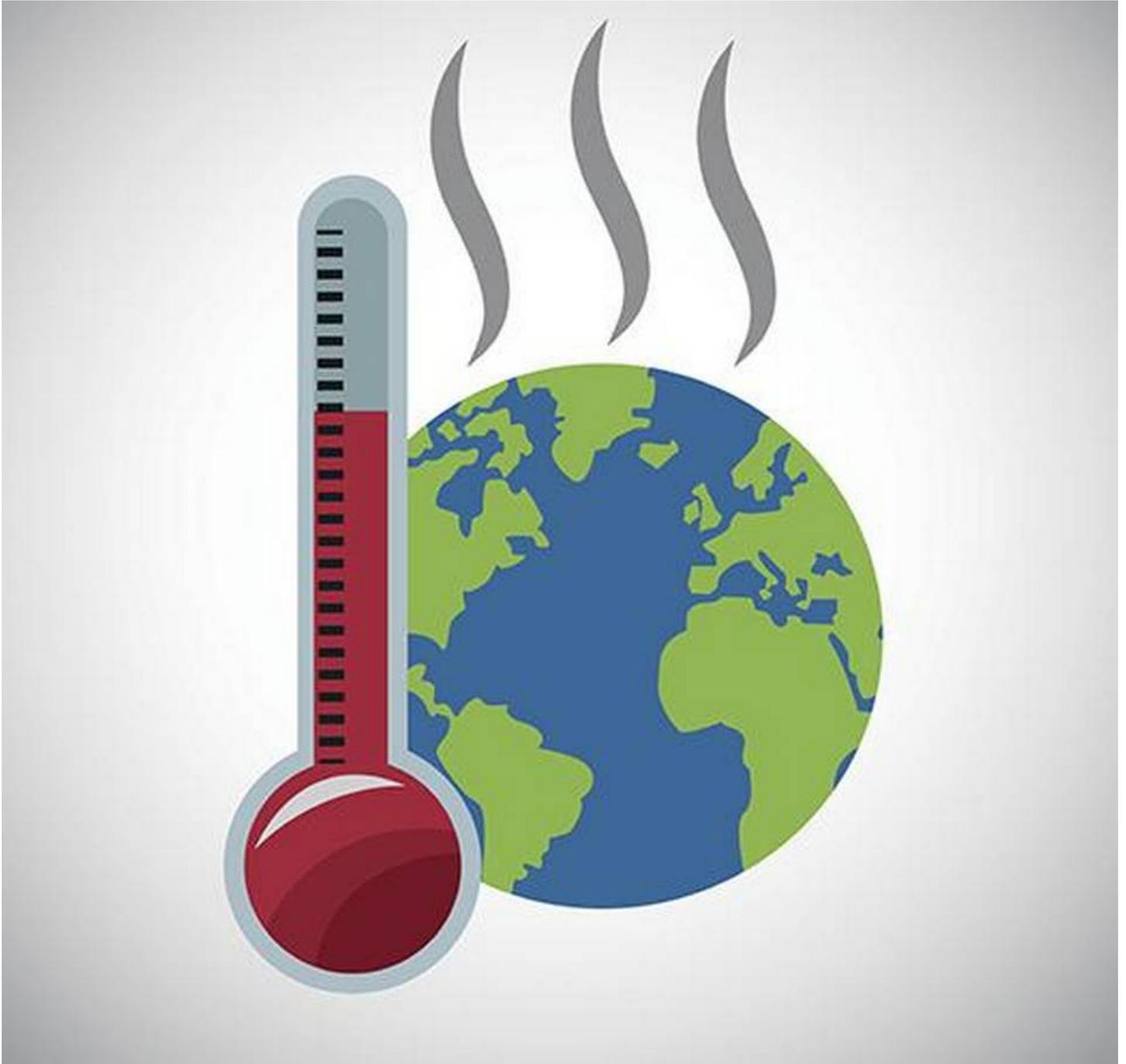


COMMENT

## The climate fight is global



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### The Paris accord requires vigilance by all global actors in view of the U.S.'s changed stance on climate change

**F**armers from Tamil Nadu were gathered in Delhi recently, carrying skulls, apparently belonging to those among them who had committed suicide. They were seeking government assistance following the worst drought in the State in recent times. Concurrently, there are several droughts in many other parts of the world, including Bolivia and

several regions of Sub-Saharan Africa. Scorched lands have led to dying livestock, withering crops, and parched communities.

Several recent extreme events such as wildfires, droughts, severe heatwaves and cyclones in other places have a clear signature of a changing climate, but in many cases these are exacerbated by other institutional failures. None of this has, however, persuaded the present U.S. government that anthropogenic greenhouse gases (GHGs) are responsible for climate change. The U.S. is still the world's second largest annual emitter of GHGs and has generated more than a quarter of the total anthropogenic GHGs in the atmosphere since 1850.

Even though the U.S. has not technically withdrawn from the Paris Agreement from last December, when countries came together and set climate-related targets for themselves, President Donald Trump's recent decisions are a sweeping repudiation of former U.S. President Barack Obama's policies to reduce and limit pollution and GHGs.

The curbs on power plant emissions by the Obama administration – the Clean Power Plan (CPP) – were aimed at reducing the power sector's carbon dioxide emissions by about a third below the 2005 levels by 2030. The regulations would require states and electric utilities to reduce emissions either by deploying renewables, reducing demand or increasing power plant efficiencies.

### **Effect of Trump's actions**

Mr. Trump's orders not only directed federal agencies to cancel or amend policies that might interfere with domestic energy production, but also slashed research budgets for climate change.

In any case, the Environmental Protection Agency's (EPA) CPP has been in the courts for more than a year due to a legal challenge mounted by over half the U.S. states and a number of companies that opposed the rule. Nevertheless, even if Mr. Trump's order to eliminate the CPP were to go into effect, his administration is required by a 2007 U.S. Supreme Court ruling to regulate carbon dioxide. Moreover, the EPA's rules are themselves not easy to reverse by a stroke of the presidential pen, especially given another 2009 EPA finding that GHGs "threaten the public health and welfare of current and future generations".

How far Mr. Trump will continue to push for curbs on climate change reduction in the U.S. and any possible ripple effects from these remain to be seen. Under the circumstances, most commentators believe that his actions will have a limited impact.

Still, the recent moves by its President are a clear signal that the U.S. is no longer interested in curbing GHGs to stabilise the climate and neither is it keen to meet its Paris commitments.

Mr. Trump's actions also demonstrate that allowing countries to write their own Nationally Determined Contributions, seen as an improvement to a global top-down approach, still has to confront the same political problem – continued implementation of the agreement by successive governments within each country. That a major emitter is retreating from its former commitments is of course a danger to the world's climate, but this may not be a big step back if other countries persist with their efforts and if renewables continue to get more affordable as they have recently. This move also provides elbow room for renewable energy businesses elsewhere to pick up the slack in interest within the U.S.

Nonetheless, it does make one wonder how the U.S. or Europe would have responded if another country, say, India, had undertaken similar actions. There may have been little time lost before name-calling and shaming began, following which global trade sanctions would likely have been imposed, or perhaps other kinds of bans or penalties. The chance that any of this will happen now towards the U.S., still a superpower, appears to be slim.

### **Role of sub-national actors**

Nation states are the proper agencies responsible for curbing emissions to the shared global commons. Nevertheless, Mr. Trump's recalcitrance shows that a change in political leadership could lead to the backing out of an international treaty by any signatory. Global agreements are often tenuous and need support and pressure from other actors within and across countries who function at many levels: states, territories or provinces within a country, cities, policy think tanks, scientists, philanthropists, local communities, civil society organisations, investors, transnational groups and multinational industries.

For example, the now global movement created by 350.org and other climate protection advocacy groups in Europe and elsewhere has made impressive progress on many fronts. The regional commitments to reducing GHGs by states in large parts of the U.S., the philanthropies that are supporting improvements in efficiencies and innovations in the climate and energy sector, and cities such as New York and Seattle, which are committed to building a low-carbon future, are all examples of sub-national entities that have a powerful influence. Thus, whether it is Mr. Trump or a Democrat in the White House, the work for these players is quite important. Climate change, like democracy itself, requires vigilance and participation by both state and non-state actors.

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