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One year after U.S. withdrawal

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One year after U.S. withdrawal

Despite very few – but very vocal – opponents, there is a general consensus that current climate change is occurring mostly as a consequence of human activities. Climate change is having, and will continue to have, serious consequences not only for the planet in general, but on human life in particular. It will lead to a disruption in food production, an increase in epidemics, climatic catastrophes will include droughts, floods, changes in the sea level, rapid and violent swings in weather patterns, costly infrastructure damages, etc.

Because these effects represent a clear and present danger to humans, on April 16, 195 countries, including the U.S., signed the “Paris Agreement” aimed at reducing the human-related activities that generate these climatic changes. The long-term goal was to keep the increase in global average temperatures to well below 2 degrees Celsius above those of the pre-industrial age.

When the agreement was reached by consensus it was heralded as a major victory for humanity in trying to avert a global catastrophe. It was also

considered a great victory for the Obama Administration. Yet, a year ago, on June 1, President Trump – who seems obsessed with obliterating every part of his predecessor’s legacy – decided to withdraw the United States (the world’s second largest emitter of greenhouse gases after China) from the accord because “all the world is laughing at us.”

The action was heavily criticized by world leaders as well as by many in the U.S. who not only pledged to push for reimplementation of the Paris Agreement, but also, in some cases, to go further in efforts to address climate change.

China is on track to outperform its Paris pledge to peak emissions by 2030, as it already has done with its 2020 carbon-intensity target. It has promised to draw 20 percent of its total energy consumption from non-fossil fuels by building more renewable energy infrastructure than in any other country in the world.

India, according to the Climate Action Tracker, an independent scientific analysis produced by three research organizations tracking climate action since 2009, is in line with,

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and even may exceed its pledge of keeping warming to 2 degrees Celsius.

The European Union (made up of 28 countries) and Canada are on track to meet their target of at least 40 percent emissions reductions below 1990 levels by 2030. They have also convened new multilateral forums and advocated for transparency and joint responsibility within the U.N. climate process. France, for example, has made a call for U.S. scientists and engineers working on climate change issues to move to France in order to work on new approaches and technologies aimed at ameliorating this global problem.

The EU has also forged new bonds bilaterally with China since Trump’s announcement, and joined with Canada and China in launching the multilateral Ministerial Meeting on Climate Action, aimed to replace the U.S.-led Major Economies Forum. That forum was created to help pave the way for the Paris accord by giving major

players a venue to iron out differences outside the U.N. climate process.

In the U.S., Trump’s decision has been opposed by more than 550 state legislators from 45 states who together represent a total population of over 298 million constituents. During the past year, states have been working to ensure the United States meets the terms of the Paris Agreement. For example, the Massachusetts’ State House approved a bill mandating the state abide by the Paris Agreement’s greenhouse gas emissions standards. In Washington State, a bill has been introduced to put a price on carbon pollution, a measure similar to eight other states.

At least eight states have introduced legislation to reach 100 percent renewable energy in the coming decades, with Washington State introducing a 100 percent renewable energy bill. It will mandate that all of the state’s electricity be generated carbon free by 2045. California, the state

with the largest population in the country, has enacted laws to require 50 percent of its electricity to originate from renewable energy resources and has doubled the amount of energy efficiency to be achieved by the year 2030.

Hawaii is ensuring more parking spots reserved for electric vehicles (EVs) and that rental car companies transition quicker to those kinds of vehicles. New York and Maryland have implemented incentives for people to transition their cars to EVs, including the ability to receive discounts on tolls or use the carpool lanes.

Maryland now requires that sea level rise be taken into account when building highway projects, while Maine has created a Coastal Hazards Commission that will identify and prepare for future coastal events, such as sea level rise and coastal flooding.

Although these individual and collective actions taken by other countries and states in addressing climate change seem fine and dandy, the consequences of the Trump’s decision are very negative and will have a long-term detrimental impact on the nation. To begin with, a lot of the know-how in

science and technology is moving to other countries, in turn making them more advanced than the U.S. in areas related to climate change science and technology. Not only that, but it is costing jobs in this country since the manufacturing industries related to those technologies are also moving elsewhere.

It was not long ago that we in this country felt pride in being leaders in science and technology, in being admired for our advanced vision and our confidence in our future. Not anymore. Now mediocre leadership, extreme partisan politics, and misinformation generated by science deniers are pushing us backwards. And who knows how much it will cost us to retake a leadership position on the planet. In other words, we are becoming a second-rate actor on the world stage. In the future, when new generations look at what we did – or decided not to do – they will be the ones lamenting our choices.

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