

Is the US a Climate Outlaw?

Written by Rodger A Payne

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RODGER A PAYNE, OCT 30 2011

Thanks to Stephen McGlinchey, Lead Editor of e-IR, I gave a talk at Cardiff University's School of European Studies on 20 October on the topic "Is the US a Climate Outlaw? Can it be 'Scared Straight'?"

In this post, I'm just going to address the first question, which is the title of this blog post. Indeed, I'm planning to draw upon this talk for three posts because I actually sketched a case for both "yes" and "no" responses to the first question, "Is the U.S. a climate outlaw?"

This decision may seem strange because the answer to that question probably seems obvious to many people: "YES! The U.S. is a climate outlaw." Indeed, I even wrote a short op-ed piece years ago, "Is an Outlaw State Calling the Shots?" In that essay, I noted that the powerful U.S. was not joining the rest of the world in agreeing to regulate greenhouse gas emissions. Indeed, the U.S. was (and still is) evading a plethora of norms, arguably reflecting an outside-the-law status on the Mine Ban Treaty, the International Criminal Court, the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty, Convention for the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women, etc.

Bill Clinton's administration helped negotiate the Kyoto Protocol, and the former U.S. President signed the deal, but it was never forwarded to the U.S. Senate for ratification. Worse, the U.S. had no intention of meeting emissions cuts required by the new international norm. Indeed, the U.S. Senate acted preemptively in the summer of 1997 and voted 95-0 in favor of the Byrd-Hagel Resolution, which warned the administration not to bother the legislative body with a treaty if it did not regulate emissions from China — and if it "would result in serious harm to the economy of the United States."

In aggregate, since the beginning of the industrial revolution, the U.S. has emitted more greenhouse gases than has any other state. With less than 5% of the world's population, the U.S. manages to emit nearly 20% of greenhouse gases. Until the recent boom in China's emissions, the U.S. share was significantly higher. U.S. per capita emissions still dwarf China's.

America is a sprawling country with millions of cars and big homes, air conditioning is a natural right, and cheap gasoline fuels over-consumption.

Through virtually the entire negotiation period for the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change and its follow-up meetings — more than 20 years — the U.S. has been the top polluter in the world. It is the only state to sign Kyoto that has not ratified the deal, which went into effect in 2002. Though the goal of the agreement was to reduce emissions from a 1990 baseline (the U.S. target was a modest 7% reduction), U.S. emissions have actually increased about 1% annually from 1990 through 2007. The 2008 economic collapse reduced emissions, but not because of overt U.S. policy changes.

George W. Bush called Kyoto "fatally flawed" (echoing a line Ronald Reagan used about SALT II). His top climate negotiator, Paula Dobriansky, was booed at Bali in 2007 for announcing American opposition to climate deals post-Kyoto.

While Barack Obama's election seemed promising to many environmentalists, it seems clear nearly three years into

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his term that the real U.S. position on global climate matters is not all that much better. The global deals struck at Copenhagen and Cancun are merely voluntary and do not include mechanisms for limiting emissions. In practice, the Congress failed to complete climate change legislation prior to the 2010 midterm elections when Republicans hostile to such legislation took over control of the House of Representatives. Public opinion polls reveal that a large portion of Americans don't even believe in the science of global warming.

Meanwhile, Europe has announced plans to reduce greenhouse gas emissions by 20% by 2020 and China has been investing in all sorts of green energy technologies.

Based on this record, how can the U.S. be viewed as anything but a climate outlaw?

Next post, I'll make the case that the U.S. is not a climate outlaw.

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