

Climate change: a proposed way forward

Leading Western politicians and commentators, supported by prominent climate scientists, regularly express grave concern about the potentially catastrophic consequences of humanity failing to radically and urgently reduce greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions. Developing countries in contrast, and especially major emerging economies such as China, India and South Korea and major OPEC countries, show little serious interest in the issue and seem unconcerned about the continuing expansion of their emissions. Yet developing countries are overwhelmingly responsible for the 60% growth in emissions since the key UN Earth Summit in 1992 and, together with two developed countries (Russia and Japan) that are doing little to reduce their emissions, are today responsible for about 75% of global emissions.¹ They therefore effectively control the trajectory of human emissions – which currently seems to be one of continuing growth.

That would seem to represent an urgent challenge for Western leaders: if they're genuinely serious about emission reduction, they should surely be facing up to the problem and insisting that developing countries change course? But that's hardly happened: any attempts to do something (e.g. at UN climate negotiations) have been feeble.

Why? Well perhaps they're not really as serious about the issue as they maintain. Or perhaps they cannot see a way out of the impasse. I suggest however that there may be a way forward – one that takes account of what I think may be a fundamental misunderstanding: whereas in the West the seriousness of anthropogenic global warming is essentially axiomatic, that seems not to be the case elsewhere. For example, senior climate scientists in China and Russia have expressed uncertainty about whether humans are responsible for increased atmospheric temperatures.² If that were the view of policymakers (and there's some evidence that it is), it could explain their lack of concern about emission reduction.³

¹ Data here: <http://edgar.jrc.ec.europa.eu/overview.php?v=CO2andGHG1970-2016&sort=des8>

² Two examples: Wang *et al.*, 2017 (<https://www.nature.com/articles/srep46091>) and Stozhkov *et al.*, 2017 (<https://link.springer.com/article/10.3103/S1062873817020411>)

³ For example, here's a comment made in 2010 by Xie Zhenhua (who has led China's delegation at recent UN climate conferences): "*There are disputes in the scientific community. We have to have an open attitude to the scientific research. There's an alternative view that climate change is caused by cyclical trends in nature itself. We have to keep an open attitude.*" (<https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/earth/environment/climatechange/7067505/China-has-open-mind-about-cause-of-climate-change.html>)

Therefore a way forward might be for the West to request an urgent (non-UN) conference, involving senior scientists, between the EU and US on the one hand and the major emerging economies and OPEC countries on the other. The principal topic would be a detailed examination of each country's position on climate science – something that's never seriously discussed at top level UN climate negotiations.

The key questions would be these:

- (1) Is mankind responsible for recent increases in atmospheric temperatures?
- (2) If so and if such increases continue unchecked, does humanity face potentially catastrophic consequences?
- (3) If so, can anything be done about it?
- (4) If so, what should be done?
- (5) Who should be doing it?

The aim would be to find enough common ground for a major renegotiation of the 2015 Paris Agreement which effectively exempts developing countries from any obligation – legal, moral or political – to reduce their emissions.⁴

If this fails, what then? Are we all doomed? Well, I've no scientific training and am therefore agnostic about the science. So I don't know. Nonetheless, I allow myself to hope that the sceptics in the West and those climate scientists, e.g. in China and Russia, who take a less apocalyptic view of the science might after all be right.

But, in any case, in the event of failure to achieve clear international agreement on the causes of and action required regarding climate change, I believe the only rational approach for the West would be to establish an optimum way forward in a world where it's increasingly obvious that it's rapidly losing influence, where emissions will rise and where there's nothing it can do to prevent that. I suggest therefore that the West should come to terms with that political reality by focusing on economic strength, underpinned by reliable and affordable energy and on long-term adaptation to whatever climate change may occur.

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⁴ Here for example is a short note of mine about the Agreement:
<https://ipccreport.files.wordpress.com/2016/08/cop-21-developing-countries--2.pdf>

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