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India a 'clean growth' role model

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India is relying on a combination of renewable energy and energy efficiency measures.



US President Donald Trump (Photo: AP)

It did not come as a surprise when President Donald Trump announced that the United States was pulling out of the Paris Agreement. We've had our fingers crossed for a while now. In a 30-minute-long speech, Mr Trump said: "So we're getting out. But we will start to negotiate, and we will see if we can make a deal that's fair. And if we can, that's great. And if we can't, that's fine". His main argument is that the deal is "unfair" to the US and will result in loss of jobs and decline in economic growth. He has also argued that while the deal prevents the US from building coal power plants, it allows China to build "hundreds of coal plants", and India to "double its coal capacity by 2020". He adds that even if the Paris agreement were implemented fully, it would lead to "only 0.2 degree Celsius reduction in global temperatures by 2100". It will take a detailed report to examine and comment on the various claims made by Mr Trump. The silver lining of his speech is that he did not junk the science of climate change. During the presidential campaign, he had famously claimed that climate change was a hoax.

It is important to put in context Mr Trump's worry about China and India's plans for coal-based power. The US coal-based power generation capacity is 305 GW as against India's 186 GW. China towers over both India and the US with a whopping 940 GW. Even if India was to double its coal generation, it would barely surpass that of the US and would still lag behind China. China has committed to peak its emissions in 2030. Therefore, in theory Mr Trump is correct; China could possibly continue to expand its coal-based generation for the next 13 years. However, there are signs that China's emissions may soon be plateauing given its push for renewables and nuclear power. The US ranks the highest in cumulative historic greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions. It is also the world's second-largest emitter at 6.2 gigatons of CO₂equivalent (GtCO₂e) in 2012. Therefore, the US' withdrawal is a setback to the Paris agreement. The US had committed to reduce its emissions by 26-28 per cent by 2025 from 2005 levels. As per this, the US would have reduced its emissions to about 5 GtCO₂e by 2025.

It will require some analysis to estimate the precise impact of Mr Trump's announcement on the future of US' emissions. Its commitment in Paris mainly depended on the clean power plan (CPP) and vehicle emission standards. If the CPP is rescinded, the emissions would likely increase by 365 MtCO₂e in 2030. However, on the positive side, the federal decision will not deter state actions on clean energy. There is hope as more than 30 US states, including large states such as California, New York, Pennsylvania, Texas, Michigan and Ohio, have announced mandatory renewable energy standards. The UNEP

Emission Gap report has asserted that to limit warming to two degrees Celsius by 2100, global emissions would have to be reduced to 48 Gt CO₂e in 2025 and 42 Gt CO₂e in 2030. As per various estimates, the Paris agreement, if implemented fully, would have limited global aggregate emissions to 56 Giga tons (Gt) CO₂e in 2030. This would have restricted global surface temperature rise to 2.7-3.7 degree Celsius by 2100. The US' withdrawal is likely to increase this by about 0.3 C. Therefore, other countries will have to compensate for the US non-action.

So, what are India's options? It is no way responsible for global warming. In fact, India is among the worst sufferers of the impacts of climate change. India has a huge population living below the poverty line, which still relies on conventional biomass for energy needs. It is the world's fourth-largest emitter of carbon dioxide. However, its emissions at two tonnes per capita are well below those of the US (19) and China (8). In this background, India's nationally determined contributions (NDC) are a firm statement of intent of an alternate growth pathway. India announced its intent to reduce its carbon intensity to GDP by 33-35 per cent by 2030 from 2005 levels. India is relying on a combination of renewable energy and energy efficiency measures. The cost of clean energy has reduced dramatically in the last few years.

The most recent solar power project has projected a cost of Rs 2.44 per kWh, which is even cheaper than coal-based electricity. Similarly, the price of LED bulbs has reportedly reduced to Rs 38 per bulb. It is important to realise that these cost reductions are not because of scientific or technological breakthroughs. It is because of the innovative business models, and the fact that India provides a large-scale market for adoption of technology and innovations. India also has ambitious plans for electric vehicles to reduce dependence on oil imports and reduce local air pollution. Therefore, what India is attempting is a historic and unprecedented experiment. In most developed countries, economic growth came hand-in-hand with a surge in consumption of cheap fossil fuels. Their emissions reached a peak and now they are trying to decarbonise and reduce emissions. Many of these countries paid a heavy environmental and ecological price in terms of air and water quality. India never went through such a fossil-intensive growth phase. Therefore, India is attempting an alternate growth pathway, to achieve quality of life for all by relying on energy efficiency and renewable energy.

This could be an excellent model for other developing countries as well. Should we abandon these plans because the world's biggest carbon dioxide emitter has walked out of the Paris agreement? Most definitely not. In fact, the US' withdrawal has only increased the responsibility on other countries, notably China and India. This global development presents India with an opportunity to take a leadership position in fighting climate change. The danger of anthropogenic climate change is very real. Considering that even a sceptic like Mr Trump has not questioned this fact, it is imperative to step up and take leadership.

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