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Making Sense of the Durban Climate Talks

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The hard truth about the this year's climate conference in Durban, South Africa, is that the outcome -- essentially committing to make an agreement a few years down the line to start cutting emissions a decade from now -- is horrendously inadequate for the scale and immediacy of the climate problem we face. It's like planning to buy a fire truck in a few years while your house, and all of your neighbors' houses, are burning down. To fully appreciate the implications of the climate talks, though, a little bit of background is useful.

The U.N. Framework Convention on Climate Change was negotiated in 1992 at a historic meeting convened in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, to address the great environmental challenges of the day. In the Framework Convention, signed and ratified by the United States, the world agreed to take the actions necessary to avoid dangerous climate change. Parties to the Convention also agreed as a matter of fairness that the world's rich, developed countries, having caused the vast majority of emissions responsible for the problem, would take the lead in solving it.

It was not until the 1997 meeting in Kyoto, Japan, that the first concrete, legally binding agreement for reducing emissions was signed: the Kyoto Protocol. The Protocol requires the world's richest countries to reduce emissions an average of 5 percent below 1990 levels by 2012, while developing nations also take steps to reduce emissions without being subject to binding emissions targets as they continue to raise their standard of living.

The Clinton administration extracted many concessions from the rest of the world in exchange for the United States signing on in Kyoto. But before Clinton could submit the treaty for ratification, however, the Senate rejected the equity principles behind the Convention, saying the United States shouldn't agree to reduce its own emissions unless all other countries -- regardless of their responsibility or ability -- were similarly bound. Citing the same excuses, President George W. Bush repudiated the Kyoto Protocol entirely.

Which gets us to our current president. While candidate Barack Obama promised to reject the Bush policies and rejoin the world in seeking a solution to the climate crisis, President Obama's approach has been virtually identical to Bush's. His negotiating team has pursued two primary objectives in the international talks: to refuse any legally binding emissions reduction commitments until all other countries -- but particularly China and India -- do so, and to push back the date for a new agreement. Both of these objectives are deeply immoral and will have disastrous consequences for the planet.

The notion that it is "unfair" for the United States, the world's largest cumulative carbon polluter, to reduce pollution unless all countries take on similar commitments, has gained traction as China and India's greenhouse gas emissions have grown. No one disputes that achieving the deep global emissions reductions necessary will ultimately require large reductions in China and India. China, for its part, has already begun to take dramatic steps to cut emissions from its growing economy, shutting down inefficient older industrial plants and investing heavily in renewable energy. But what is truly unfair is for the U.S. to ask people in countries with a far lower standard of living and far lower emissions per person to take the lead before the United States, the richest country in the world, will reduce its own pollution. The stubborn refusal of the U.S. government to acknowledge the deep equity issues at stake has diminished our nation in the eyes of the world and hindered the international negotiations.

And while politicians delay, the climate crisis waits for no one. This year, we've seen catastrophic weather events, ever-warming temperatures, massive sea-ice melts, food production problems and imperiled species around the globe sliding ever closer to extinction. Over 300,000 people per year already die as a result of climate change, according to the Global Humanitarian Forum. Each year which emissions cuts are delayed makes it that much harder to achieve the emissions reductions that are physically necessary to avert a catastrophically bleak future. The Climate Action Tracker explains some of the real-world implications of delay.

Tragically, the outcome of this year's talks, called the "Durban Platform for Enhanced Action," represents the ascendancy of the misguided U.S. objectives. The Durban Platform initiates the negotiation of a new agreement by 2015 for all countries to reduce emissions beginning in 2020 -- even though scientists keep reminding negotiators that global emissions have to peak well before that date. Waiting until 2020 to cut emissions makes no sense from a physical or a moral perspective.

It is true that agreement on the Durban Platform has once again averted the complete break-down of the U.N. Framework process and has kept the Kyoto Protocol alive for a few more years. This is good, as the U.N. Framework is the only forum for collective global climate action, but it should not be the standard of success, or even progress. What would be worthy of praise is real and tangible action that acknowledges the deep and worsening climate crisis and effects change at a global scale. Nothing else will do, and to get there, we Americans need to hold President Obama to his promise to help lead the world to a real solution.