



# THE WOODS HOLE RESEARCH CENTER

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## **Taking Climate Change Seriously Means Taking The Kyoto Protocol Seriously**

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When the private sector launched a multi-million dollar campaign to discredit the science of climate change and argue against the adoption of the Kyoto Protocol in 1997, better judgment on the part of the then administration prevailed. This judgment held that measures contemplated under the Kyoto Protocol are essential in furthering the objective contained in the Framework Convention on Climate Change, signed and ratified by the United States in 1992. It was the presidency of George H.W. Bush that signed the Convention and took some pride in being the first industrialized country in the world to have ratified it.

Under this Convention the Parties have agreed to stabilize the greenhouse gas concentrations in the atmosphere at a level that would be safe for humans and ecosystems. The Parties have also agreed that it is a global problem and while action to reduce greenhouse gases should be undertaken by all countries, the industrialized countries that are responsible for the largest share of the emissions should take the first step. The Kyoto Protocol is that first step.

The presidency of George W. Bush is unequivocal in assailing the Kyoto Protocol. Often cited in defense of this position is that a US Senate resolution, passed by 95-0, in 1997 was explicit in their rejection of the Kyoto Protocol because it did not apply to all countries the same way and it placed an unfair economic burden on U.S. industry.

What is not said, though, is that the US government worked hard to ensure that the reduction commitments can be met easily through both domestic action and by acquiring credits for joint activities with developing countries in the realm of improvements in resource use including energy and forests, particularly in countries such as Brazil, China and India.

While the "non-binding" resolution is referred to repeatedly, what is seldom mentioned is the "binding" advice and consent given unanimously by the US Senate in 1992 to ratify the first climate agreement, the Convention on Climate Change itself.

The administration's concern that the Protocol does not treat all countries the same way is misplaced. Treaties are designed to differentiate among nations. The Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty, for example, created very different obligations for the five recognized nuclear weapon states from those for the rest of the world. Numerous security agreements treat large and small states differently; trade and investment treaties apply differently to rich and poor countries. The 1987 Montreal Protocol on Substances that Deplete the Ozone Layer is working quite successfully to reduce emissions of chlorofluorocarbons and is drawing few complaints from the private sector. That treaty goes so far as to define "developing countries" and provides for their differentiated treatment.

It is not in the least bit unfair that a climate change treaty and its protocol dealing with global pollution impose different obligations on industrialized nations that have been generating huge amounts of harmful gases for generations, and poor countries just starting on the road to modernization. Interestingly, even among the industrialized countries listed as having "commitments" under the Protocol, some have agreed to reduce more, some less and yet others either have agreed to remain at the same level as in 1990 or to allow their emissions to increase. Differentiation is the norm, not the exception.



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None of this discussion is to suggest that the Kyoto Protocol is a perfect agreement. International agreements seldom are. Historically, it is the industrialized countries that have worked hard to bring developing countries to the negotiating table to agree to a series of measures on global environmental issues. The reason behind is that, industrialized countries could not deal with it without the help of the developing countries, which have the potential for undoing whatever good is done by the industrialized countries. Similar logic applies with global warming.

"Withdrawing" from the Kyoto Protocol is not the way to fix its problems. The Protocol provided in the first instance a method for the industrialized countries to meet their targets and provided for periodic review to take stock of progress and to address whatever further actions might be needed by the global community. If the objective is to initiate positive action by the developing countries, the necessary steps are not to withdraw from the Kyoto Protocol but to be an integral part of its implementation and further the actions that are already underway in developing countries to reduce the growth of their greenhouse gas emissions.