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Warming Poles Should Cool It

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Today, at the urging of Britain, the United Nation's Security Council will, for the first time, take up the challenge of global warming. While some people may see hope in this development, I cringe at the thought.

There are myriad much more immediate, dire, certain, and -- relative to climate change -- simple to comprehend and solve, problems facing the world today that the U.N. Security Council has proven to be completely inept, unsuited or unwilling to address. The genocide in Darfur, the political collapse in Zimbabwe, persistent -- but largely preventable -- diseases such as malaria and most water-borne illnesses, the nuclear crises in Iran and North Korea, and the near collapse of the world's fisheries all come to mind.

Are we to presume the Security Council can't solve these relatively localized (except for the fisheries) problems but has the wisdom to solve the much less certain, much more complex problem of global climate change; an issue with implications for world population growth, development and energy use

now and for 100 years hence? It's not as if the U.N. has ignored global warming until now. The first international agreement was forged by the U.N. at the Earth Summit in 1990, at which industrialized countries vowed to reduce greenhouse gas emissions to 1990 levels by the year 2000. Then again in 1997, when it became apparent the countries involved would fail to meet these relatively modest commitments, industrialized countries signed the Kyoto Protocol, an agreement to make even deeper cuts: reducing emissions an average of 5 percent below 1990 levels between 2008 and 2012. Recent emission estimates and measurements indicate greenhouse gas emissions in developed countries are increasing, not decreasing. So they will fail once again.

Of course, current climate change agreements don't cover many of the world's largest greenhouse gas emitters, including the U.S. and China. The U.S. decided not to sign on to the treaty because it felt it would harm the economy and because developing countries were not participants. China, expected to be the largest emitter of greenhouse

gasses by the end of 2007, has steadfastly refused to make any commitments to reduce greenhouse gas emissions.

Amazingly, all this talk of how to prevent global warming has become almost completely disconnected from what we can actually do. According to the National Center for Atmospheric Research, if all Kyoto signatories met their greenhouse gas reduction targets -- no cheating allowed -- it would only slow the estimated future warming between .07 and 0.19 degrees Celsius. In other words, it would take between 5 and 13 additional Kyoto-style agreements to prevent a mere 1 degree of warming. No government dare suggest the type of draconian energy rationing that would be required to meet this goal.

Ultimately, the Security Council negotiations are likely to result in, at most, a vacuous statement about the need for meaningful action, with no meaningful action taken. Why? China has already said that, for the purposes of climate change agreements, it will always be a developing country, unwilling to require energy cuts at the expense of continued

economic growth. Russia, with its economy finally growing again, will also likely reject deeper emissions reductions.

The U.S. will argue, rightly, that technological innovation and adaptation are the only appropriate responses to the challenges posed by a warmer world. They will also continue to reject any agreement that

would harm the economy and/or that did not include cuts by fast-growing developing countries like China and India.

In the end, Britain and France will be left alone to argue for further emission reductions though the European Union, of which they are a part, is failing to meet its own current commitments. As a result,

future generations may not suffer after all from a new international mandate that only serves to slow economic growth, keeping the poorest of the poor in poverty. Perhaps I'll stop cringing and cheer.

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