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Perhaps the most fearsome weapon of mass destruction.” That’s how US Secretary of State John Kerry recently called climate change—a statement that represents a remarkable turnaround for a country that not only refused to sign the Kyoto Protocol but at one point even withdrew support from it.

The Kyoto accords were the first international agreement that recognized global warming as a threat to human life everywhere, and laid out a commitment by nations to reduce their greenhouse gas emission within a specified period of time to stave off the phenomenon. As many as 141 nations signed the Protocol, but not America and Australia.

It was then US Vice President Al Gore that spearheaded the establishment of the accords in 1997. President Bill Clinton went along and signed the agreement, but the US Senate withheld ratification, saying it would be too costly for US business to comply with the new emissions requirements. When George W. Bush became president, he went a step further. He pulled the United States out of the Protocol, calling it “an unrealistic and ever-tightening straitjacket” that would impose too much cost on the US economy.

The real reason, of course, was political. Bush, a Republican, was backed by Big Business and the wealthy (“the haves and have-mores,” he once joked at a speaking engagement), who were overwhelmingly opposed to the science of climate change, and any policies arising from it that would impact on their business bottom lines.

Even now, the American Right is still staunchly in denial, especially after large swaths of the North American continent endured subzero temperatures early this year due to an extreme weather condition called the polar vortex. What global warming, Fox News and its cohorts crowed, when the country in fact was freezing?

But many scientists say the polar vortex was but a piece in a worldwide pattern of bigger, stronger, more destructive weather phenomena—either extreme heat or extreme cold, or too much rain or too little of it—that have come in the wake of the planet heating up to an unprecedented degree. And as more countries continue their drive to industrialization, following the example of countries like the United States (which is said to account for as much as 25 percent of worldwide greenhouse emissions), the ever-increasing presence of carbon dioxide, methane and nitrous oxide in the atmosphere will further destabilize the situation and bring the planet closer to catastrophe.

Supertyphoon “Yolanda/Haiyan,” the strongest on record to hit land, appears now to be a prelude to more terrifying things. Only a few months after it devastated Central Philippines, the world has seen the jaw-dropping sight of floods in arid Riyadh, the river Thames in Britain breaking its banks and inundating the English countryside at record levels, Australia experiencing widespread drought, heat waves and wildfires brought on by its hottest-ever year, and the American South getting a taste of bitter cold when blizzards and sleet hit such normally humid places as Atlanta and Florida.

The storm surge that nearly obliterated Tacloban City was a stark warning. As more glaciers melt with the overheating atmosphere, ocean levels will rise, potentially flooding coastal cities worldwide.

The increasingly warped weather will deliver even more calamitous destruction by way of category 5 typhoons or hurricanes, or massive drought that would decimate farmlands and human settlements, driving huge populations to hunger and misery.

Now the United States, after its craven refusal to join the international community in jump-starting the fight against global warming with the Kyoto Protocol, is belatedly sounding the alarm, calling for an “ambitious” new climate deal by 2015 that would replace the Protocol, which expired in 2012 without ever seeing the US government’s signature on its rolls.

But any new accord on climate change cannot work if First World countries like America and Australia continue to hold the option to cop out of the deal. Neither would it amount to much if other top greenhouse gas producers such as India and China are excluded from legally binding standards that less-developed countries have to comply with.

The deal expected to be hammered out in Paris in December 2015 should be far-reaching enough, and enforceable enough, to make a real dent in the effort to halt the deterioration of the planet. Otherwise, more Yolandas can be expected—and not just in the Philippines.

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