

Headline: Our Paris commitment matters

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Today, the Paris Agreement on Climate Change enters into force, 30 days after the date when at least 55 signatories accounting for at least 55 percent of estimated total global greenhouse gas emissions ratified it, which was achieved on Oct. 5.

Our country played a prominent and influential role leading to that agreement, hailed as a victory for the planet and the future of humanity. It was the Philippines that chaired the Climate Vulnerable Forum (CVF), composed of countries most vulnerable to the adverse effects of climate change. We likewise chaired the V20 ("Vulnerable 20") group of finance ministers representing 20 of the most vulnerable nations in the world. These forums provided the conscience in the long and difficult negotiations that culminated in the Paris Agreement. Reeling from the loss of thousands of lives and untold damage to property wrought by Supertyphoon "Yolanda" that captured the world's attention, we effectively led "the much-needed emotional plea for a decarbonized world," as renewable energy advocate and practitioner Federico "Piki" Lopez described it in a recent speech. He went on: "The power of that voice grows only if we show the will and a credible pathway toward decarbonizing our own economy. Conversely, that power dies when our actions are not consistent with that voice.... We have to start walking that talk if we want the rest of the world to heed those urgent calls."

It is in this light that former president Fidel V. Ramos has given President Duterte his latest advice—for us to ratify rather than rebuke the Paris Agreement, which the latter had earlier described as "stupid" and "absurd." It is sad that we who had stuck our neck out to fight for the agreement could not even sit at the table of the Conference of Parties as the pact now enters into force. Rather than be among the first to ratify it, as would have been logical given the way we championed it, and as most in the CVF did, we are now declaring that we will not honor the agreement we signed, with the President conveniently disowning the signature. It's not only sad but also embarrassingly cavalier of us as a nation to say so.

This posture reeks of the worst that we lament of ourselves as Filipinos, that we create rules of behavior via laws and regulations, and then take them to be mere "suggestions." I'm reminded of an incident on All Saints Day, when we tried to park behind a couple of cars on the roadside near the cemetery, only to be accosted by a cop who said it was a no-parking zone. Puzzled, I asked why they let the other two cars park there. "Oh, those belong to policemen," he said nonchalantly. As for the Paris pact, we didn't only sign it; we also fought hard for it—only to now declare loudly that we will not honor it.

Yes, it is true that our contribution to carbon emissions is tiny, compared to those coming out of the United States, China and Europe. And so, critics ask, why bother to curb our own emissions and, consequently, our ability to grow our economy? But this cannot be a valid argument, for at least two reasons. One, many experts believe that even if all the Paris emission targets are met, we're still headed for a world up to 3 degrees Centigrade warmer, beyond the 2-degree target cap. This implies that much more still needs to be done, and every little bit counts. Two, being responsible for our energy future need not imply sacrificing growth and development. There's a win-win possible here, if we only get out of traditional mindsets that paint our energy path to be a simple choice between cheap black (coal) and costly white (clean and renewable energy).

In truth, cheap black vs costly white is not the choice we face. The cost lines are already crossing, and under certain circumstances, white could be no costlier than black. There is also a gray zone (that includes natural gas, hydro and geothermal power) that provides other viable options we can take. I've examined the options and associated numbers, and am now convinced that we can uphold our Paris commitment without having to sacrifice future growth and development.

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