

Should the U.S. join an international treaty to limit carbon emissions? The little-known answer: we already have. No, this wasn't a secret Obama Administration initiative. The treaty was signed by none other than President George H.W. Bush.

The treaty is called the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change or UNFCCC. The word "framework" can mislead people into thinking that the UNFCCC does nothing more than set the stage for further negotiation. It is indeed a negotiating framework, but it also has substance of its own.

In signing and ratifying the treaty, the United States officially recognized the dangers of climate change. By endorsing the UNFCCC, the United States explicitly committed itself to regulating greenhouse gases. It pledged to take "precautionary measures" to minimize the causes of climate change and to "implement measures to to anticipate, prevent or minimize the causes of climate change and mitigate its adverse effects." In particular, the U.S. made a commitment to limit its greenhouse gas emissions. The amounts of the reductions aren't specified, but the direction of change is clear: fewer emissions.

Nations, like individuals, sometimes break their promises, even when the promises are supposed to be legally binding. But there's no mistake about the basic fact: the United States has made a bipartisan promise to the rest of the world that we would address climate change. The only real debate should be over the means we should use to keep that promise.