

As the Stakes Rise, Climate Action Loses Momentum

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Three years ago, I wrote an optimistic essay in these pages on how the 2015 Paris Agreement broke new ground and paved the way for progress on climate change after two wasted decades. My premise was that this bottom-up agreement of commitments by each country, so-called Nationally Determined Contributions (NDCs), offered the best chance of success.

The Paris Agreement was based on countries deciding for themselves what reductions of greenhouse gas emissions they were capable of, and then reporting on their emissions and their actions. If this approach showed that emissions reductions could be achieved at relatively low cost, it would build trust and create momentum for more ambitious goals over time.

The negotiators of this process of pledges and periodic reviews recognized that punishment for noncompliance in the international system was almost inevitably going to be weak. Instead, reporting and peer review—the diplomatic equivalent of sunlight—would allow countries' actions to be evaluated, and those falling short could be named and possibly shamed into increasing their efforts.

Unfortunately, even if the architecture of self-declared country commitments was appropriately pragmatic, subsequent events have undermined the momentum created in Paris and set the international community on a dangerous path toward runaway climate change.

The world is not on track to keep global temperatures from increasing 2 degrees Celsius (3.6 degrees Fahrenheit) above pre-industrial levels, a key goal of the Paris Agreement. Far from it. A recent report by the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) concluded:

Pathways reflecting current NDCs imply global warming of about 3°C by 2100, with warming

continuing afterwards. If the emissions gap is not closed by 2030, it is very plausible that the goal of a well-below 2°C temperature increase is also out of reach.

The UNEP 2018 “emissions gap” report follows the recent publication of a report by the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) on the narrowing pathways to limiting temperature increases to 1.5°C and the potentially extreme consequences of unconstrained emissions.

Many countries are not even meeting their Paris commitments, which were always understood to be inadequate. Emissions went up by 1.6 percent in 2017 and are projected to increase by 2.7 percent in 2018. About half of that is attributable to resurgent emissions in China, which had flatlined between 2014 and 2016 and raised hopes that its coal use and emissions had peaked. They have not. According to the Global Carbon Project, China's emissions are projected to have risen 4.7 percent in 2018 from the previous year.

THE TRUMP EFFECT

Those sobering observations do not take into account the fact that the world's second-largest emitter, the United States, elected Donald Trump as president in 2016. Trump is as hostile to climate action as they come. In June 2017, he pledged to leave the Paris Agreement, though that is not formally possible until November 2020. His antagonism to climate science and the Paris Agreement have cast a pall over global ambition for collective action. In the first year after his announcement, subnational actors like the state of California and nonstate actors including major corporations such as Apple and Google stepped forward and put on a brave face to declare their support for Paris through the We Are Still In coalition.

The Trump administration has been trying to roll back Obama-era regulations on fuel economy standards, methane leakage, and regulation of emissions from power plants. All of these deregulatory measures have been contested in court, and

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the 2018 midterm elections brought to power a number of Democratic governors who will likely pursue a variety of climate mitigation initiatives that may blunt the impact of federal policies.

The Trump administration's agenda is also at odds with the US government's own recently released National Climate Assessment, which found wide-ranging climate risks to the US economy, public health, critical infrastructure, and other areas.

Even though US emissions have trended downward, the signal from the Trump administration gave the green light for other leaders to go wobbly on climate action. The Australian government drifted further away from its Paris commitments, with tussles over climate legislation leading to the prime minister being forced out by his own party and the government ultimately abandoning the measures. The recent election of the far-right provocateur Jair Bolsonaro as Brazil's new president also bodes ill for the agreement and the fate of the Amazon. Bolsonaro retracted his country's offer to host the 2019 global climate negotiations, prompting speculation he might also withdraw from the Paris Agreement. Recent protests in Paris itself over a proposed fuel tax underscore the political challenges of trying to curb emissions.

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THE STAKES IN POLAND

By the time this essay is published, the 24th Conference of Parties (COP) will have concluded in Katowice, Poland. (The COP is the annual meeting held under the 1992 United Nations Framework Agreement on Climate Change). This is the most important climate negotiation since Paris, because the rules for reporting national commitments, emissions reduction actions, and other matters are to be finalized at Katowice.

The key issue under discussion is whether all countries—or at least all the major emitting countries—will have to abide by the same set of rules when it comes to reporting, or if there will be “bifurcated” standards for developed and developing nations. The United States has long wanted unified standards to ensure that countries like China and India have to adhere to standards as rigorous and exhaustive as those for advanced industrialized nations. Although the Trump administration is sending a small negotiating team to Poland, its leverage is undercut by the president's stated in-

tent to withdraw from the agreement. Meanwhile, European countries are also trying to persuade China, India, and other major developing nations to agree to robust reporting standards.

Aside from the inadequacy of emissions reduction efforts and debates over transparency, perhaps the biggest other source of friction heading into Katowice was finance. Developed countries had promised in Copenhagen in 2009 and reaffirmed in 2015 in Paris that they would mobilize \$100 billion per year by 2020 for developing countries, from both public and private sources.

Most estimates suggest that the amount of funding delivered so far remains far short of that goal. A recent assessment of climate finance by the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development estimated that transfers of public funds from developed to developing countries reached \$56.7 billion in 2017. This sounds promising, but critics were quick to question the methodology, noting that two-thirds of that amount was still dedicated to mitigation (that is, to reduce emissions) instead

of adaptation (to prepare for the consequences of climate change). Adaptation is seen as an urgent need for many developing countries that will bear a disproportionate burden of the consequences of climate change despite their relatively small emissions of greenhouse gases. Moreover, a large share of the funds—more than 70 percent—took the form of loans rather than grants and included export credits, which are designed to promote rich countries' exports rather than serve as a source of concessional finance for poor countries.

In the early days of the Katowice conference, advocates from India and other countries pressed for efforts to unlock private-sector finance to support a transition to clean energy. At the same time, developing countries appealed for generous public finance and compensation for so-called loss and damage from climate change.

WHAT NOW?

Recent years have seen increasing recognition that climate change is actually a very big problem consisting of multiple smaller problems. It is an electricity problem, a transportation problem, a forest and land-use problem, and a problem for industry. Because so many different economic activities contribute to climate change, solutions are likely to be specific to different sources and sectors.

While ambitious efforts to decarbonize (that is, wean ourselves off of fossil fuels) by the middle of this century are necessary, it is also useful to think about where piecemeal progress can be made. For example, hydrofluorocarbons (HFCs) are chemicals used in refrigerants. They were originally designed to replace chlorofluorocarbons (CFCs), which were destroying the ozone layer in the 1980s. But HFCs proved to be potent greenhouse chemicals in their own right. Efforts to phase them down have been incorporated into the 1987 Montreal Protocol, the agreement to phase out damaging ozone-depleting chemicals, through the 2016 Kigali Amendment. Similar deals have been reached through the International Maritime Organization and the International Civil Aviation Organization to reduce emissions in shipping and aviation, respectively.

Focused efforts like these have the advantage of bringing together a smaller number of actors, which can make agreements easier to achieve. Sectoral efforts can also bring together coalitions of the relevant—the actors most important for addressing the problem. For sectors where substitutes for climate pollutants and cleaner processes are feasible, such approaches show that it is possible to tailor policies to be sufficiently compatible with the interests of the main players, including private companies.

All of these efforts are relatively new, so it will take some time to assess their effectiveness. They are not immune to changes in the global mood and shifts in momentum. If governments retreat from vigorous action at home, the pressure on business interests to make sector-specific efforts will dissipate. If we can return to a global moment when expectations for action are high, these sectoral processes will be buoyed. It is a hopeful sign that

asset managers overseeing some \$32 trillion in investment funds have called for more robust action by governments to address climate change.

DON'T GIVE UP

The global outlook is certainly darker than it was in 2015. Climate change is not going away and will get worse. Average global temperatures have already increased about 1°C (1.8°F) above what they were at the beginning of the Industrial Revolution. In some places, they have increased by even more. According to the Global Carbon Project, by 2034 global temperatures already may have risen 1.5°C above pre-industrial levels. While the goal of limiting the increase to 1.5° or 2°C above pre-industrial levels looks further out of reach as time passes, humanity cannot afford to give up on reducing emissions.

A strategy based entirely on adaptation to the consequences of climate change would be dangerous and foolhardy. The damage from unconstrained climate change would be too costly and deadly for coastal populations, infrastructure, and agriculture. Parts of the world will become uninhabitable if little is done to reduce greenhouse gas emissions.

The costs and consequences of a 3°C increase would still be very high, but might be manageable. And that surely would be better than a 4°C increase by century's end—which, though unlikely, is conceivable in a world of unconstrained emissions. Further delay will make the decarbonization challenge starker. Given the increasing signs of the effects of climate change, from melting glaciers to record hot temperatures to more frequent extreme weather events, the question is not whether but when humanity will finally realize that it has to address this challenge. ■