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# The Glasgow Summit Fails to Transform Global Climate Action

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*Image Attribute: Climate activists dressed as world leaders protest on the River Clyde outside the COP26 venue in Glasgow on November 9. / Source: Jeff J Mitchell/Getty Images*

Before the beginning of the 26th Conference of Parties (COP-26) in Glasgow, a report released by the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), referred to as **“code red for humanity”** by the UN Secretary-General had set the tone for the meeting of world leaders, bureaucrats, businesses, civil society actors, climate activists, and others. Even though calls for ambitious climate action had picked up momentum as the summit neared, expectations were low due to various reasons – primarily the ongoing pandemic crisis. The COVID-19 pandemic has already caused large-scale socio-

economic devastation across the world and the global health crisis is not yet over as new variants are still emerging and vaccination drive continues to be hampered by structural factors in the developing world.

It is at this juncture that the climate crisis has reached its tipping point. Scientists have reminded the policymakers that the actions that humanity takes in this decade will be of paramount significance for the present and future generations. The important aspect that needs to be recognized here is that they have also given hope that we could still achieve the target of restricting temperature rise to 1.5 degrees Celsius if unprecedented climate action is undertaken by countries in the next nine years. The onus however lies on the industrialized countries to lead from the front with action on all fronts – mitigation, finance, technology, etc. On the contrary, the conference laid bare global inequities, especially in the manner in which undue pressure was put on developing countries such as India to act as much as the industrialized countries, while the latter remained largely non-committal about many issues, including loss and damage.

## The Relevance of COP-26

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The 26th COP was scheduled to be held in 2020 but was postponed because of the COVID-19 pandemic. Amidst demands of postponement by civil societies and many small developing states, COP-26 nevertheless took place with necessary COVID-19 precautions because of the urgency of the situation.

The Paris Agreement (reached COP-21) is considered a milestone in the UNFCCC's efforts to combat climate change because it was at this conference that both developed and developing countries came together and declared Nationally Determined Contributions (NDCs) to reduce their emissions. The initial NDCs were not sufficient to achieve the 2 °C or 1.5 °C target and thus it was required on the part of countries to declare new or updated NDCs by 2020. However, only a few countries did so, and the Glasgow Summit is where new commitments were awaited. It was the first test of the ambition raising (ratchet) mechanism.

It is important to note that scientists have recommended a **45 percent reduction** in emissions from 2010 levels to achieve the 1.5 °C target and the policies that countries have been pursuing seem to be insufficient to achieve the same. It was thus expected in Glasgow that some sound and concrete commitments would be reached. There were high expectations from countries such as China and the United States (US). China has already agreed to peak its emissions by 2030 and it declared a net-zero emissions target by 2060. The US, on the other hand, under former President Trump had opted out of the Paris Agreement. Ever since President Joe Biden took over, the US has been actively pursuing climate diplomacy; and thus, bringing the US back on board the global climate order was one of the important aims of the summit.

The Glasgow Summit started with the agenda of seeking net-zero targets to keep the goal of 1.5 °C within reach. Recognizing the fact that the climate will continue to change, the summit also aimed at developing adaptation mechanisms. It also stressed the necessity of mobilizing finance from developed countries and international financial institutions. Finalizing the Paris rulebook and accelerating coordination and collaboration among different stakeholders, be it the nation-states, private sector, civil society, etc. were also identified as priorities at the Summit.

## What was achieved at the Glasgow Summit?

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The major achievements of the Summit are the announcements on the part of world leaders on issues of deforestation, coal, and methane emissions. One of the biggest announcements came from India when Prime Minister Narendra Modi unexpectedly declared the country's net-zero target. He announced five new targets for India, which he labeled '**Panchamrita**'. These include: *"get non-fossil energy capacity to 500 gigawatts by 2030"*, *"meet 50 percent of the country's energy requirements till 2030 with renewable energy"*, *"reduce projected carbon emissions by one billion tonnes by 2030"*, *"reduce the carbon intensity of the country's economy by 45 percent by 2030"*, and most importantly, *"achieve net-zero by 2070"*.

This announcement was celebrated by most as India is the third-largest GHG emitter and being a developing country (with the second largest population), its emission reduction targets play a crucial role in the achievement of global targets. India, since the Paris Agreement came into effect, has presented itself as an agenda-setter and Prime Minister (PM) Modi continued the trend even in Glasgow. The commitment further reinforced India's position as a part of the solution to the transnational issue of climate change. It is important to underline here that PM Modi also stressed the criticality of climate finance to achieve the said targets and urged the developed nations to provide 1 trillion USD. He insisted on creating a tracking system to monitor finance mobilization. India's commitment was also criticized by a few according to whom, a 2070 target was too late, as the UN has called for the world to achieve net-zero by 2050. This criticism is unfounded as India cannot be expected to set an earlier target when most industrialized countries have set 2050 as their targets; and since international climate action needs to take equity and climate justice (operationalized through common but differentiated responsibilities and respective capabilities or CBDR-RC) into consideration, it is rather unfair for anyone to expect India to act at the same pace as those with historical responsibility and a dubious record of broken promises on all fronts.

The other highlight was the return of the US on the table. At COP-26, President Biden expressed with determination the return of the US and stressed its role to lead by example. He announced 2050 as US' net-zero target year and efforts to quadruple contribution to climate finance by 2024. The US along with the EU also announced the Global Methane Pledge to cut down methane emissions by 30 percent (from 2020 levels)

by the end of this decade. More than 100 countries have committed to collectively achieving the goal.

The agreement on **deforestation** came as the first major step in the summit. More than 100 countries declared to end and reverse deforestation by 2030. More than 30 financial companies have also pledged to stop investing in activities that lead to deforestation. Around 1.1 billion Euros will be dedicated to the protection of the tropical rainforest in the Congo Basin. Brazil, which has made headlines for large-scale deforestation in the last few years, is also a signatory to this deal. This agreement gives some reasons for hope about various issues such as that the inclusion of indigenous peoples, participation of countries such as Indonesia and Brazil, and the scale of finance. However, one must not forget that similar pledges were made back in 2014 in the **New York Declaration** (without Russia and Brazil), and it has completely failed at slowing deforestation worldwide.

There are 31 new or updated NDC pledges, with the major ones coming from Saudi Arabia, China, and other non-G20 members. Thus, the summit strengthened the ratchet mechanism of the Paris Agreement. One of the biggest outcomes of COP-26 was the agreement reached on **Article 6** of the Paris Agreement – with regard to carbon market – bringing to an end uncertainties over the future of Certified Emissions Reductions under the Kyoto Protocol, rules to avoid double counting, and raising funding for adaptation through carbon trading tax. The summit can be considered historic also because for the first time there have been discussions and commitments on the part of countries to “phase out” coal and fossil fuel subsidies. The agreement also calls for big polluting nations to come up with stronger emission reduction pledges by 2022, although in the end, “*phase out*” was replaced with “*phase down*”. A plan to coordinate the introduction of clean energy technologies across the globe with the aim of bringing a reduction in their cost has also been adopted. All these major pledges and commitments bring a glimmer of hope, but the reality is that we are still far away from transformative climate action that can bring real change on the ground.

## **The Future of the Global Climate Order**

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The final draft of the Glasgow climate pact was concluded with a compromise on the wording about coal phase-down, and this dilution invited criticism on the part of the small island developing countries and climate activists. Bhupender Yadav, India’s Minister of Environment, Forest, and Climate Change highlighted the concerns of most developing countries and insisted on the replacement of ‘phase out’ with ‘phase down’. Although India was vilified for adopting this stance towards the end of the negotiations, the same phrase, ‘phase down’ was used in the G-20 statement (released in Rome) and in the **US-China bilateral agreement**.

Moreover, there have been no discussions on other fossil fuels, mainly oil and natural gas, which India had demanded. India has also been highlighting its role in achieving the short-term targets, unlike many other developed countries which are still harping on their

long-term net-zero targets to avoid near-term accountability. The UN Secretary-General also called out the fact that the goals envisaged with regard to cutting carbon emissions under the Kyoto Protocol, mobilizing \$100 billion as climate finance annually to be provided to poor countries, and utilizing half of this climate fund for adaptation purposes, have not been achieved.

The Glasgow Summit was marred by the lack of representation from various island countries and lackluster and uncooperative moves by several countries. Many Pacific Island countries could not send their delegations, which itself was unprecedented for the UNFCCC that is historically known for being inclusive and representative. The last-minute drama over the wording also came as a great disappointment for these countries. At the same time, countries such as Russia, China, and Saudi Arabia, all major GHG contributors, were not represented by their heads of state(s). Australia refused to sign the methane reduction pledge.

The mobilization of climate finance also remains unclear. This is pivotal because the fulfillment of commitments on the part of developing countries depends on the climate finance provided by the industrialized countries. Island nations and many Least Developed Countries (LDCs) expressed their disappointment on the final day of the summit. The format of the summit yet again did not include the legitimate social concerns of many of the developing countries. And yet often, the blame was squarely put on the global South without any concrete achievements over previous promises. The success or failure of the Agreement depends on the actions countries undertake to fulfill their commitments and further raise their ambition in the coming years. The pledges made at the summit are considered to be insufficient to limit the temperature rise to 1.5 °C, but as **US Climate Envoy John Kerry observed**, “It was always unlikely that the Glasgow Summit would result in a decision that was somehow going to end the crisis, but the starting pistol has been fired.”

### **About the Author**

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