

This week and next, negotiators are meeting in Poland for the big annual international climate-change meeting. This meeting, formally, is the [24th Conference of the Parties to the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change](#), the 1992 treaty that provides the foundation for all official international action on climate change, and informally is called “COP-24.”

It is now three years since the [2015 Paris meeting](#), which adopted a set of [agreements](#) defining a new framework for international climate action. Paris was widely regarded as a major [source of new hope](#), for two main reasons. First, the agreements were adopted with virtually unanimous support worldwide. And second, because the agreements adopted required, for the first time, action on climate change from all nations, rich and poor. Expectations of the degree and timing of contributions to emission reductions vary with development status, of course – in line with the core principle of “common but differentiated responsibility” from the 1992 Convention – but for the first time, all are in and committed to some degree.

Unfortunately, things have not looked so promising in the three years since Paris – and this somber assessment applies in full force to the present meeting.

This is only partly about the setbacks and reversals in national commitments since then. In addition to the [crazy, head-in-the-sand faction](#) now running Federal policy in the United States, there have also been setbacks, albeit less dramatic and prominent ones, in several other countries: [shortfalls from ambitious emissions-reductions targets](#) and political reaction against strong green policies in Germany; distraction and government weakness in the UK, as Brexit consumes all the air in the room; [reversal of policies following a change of government in Australia](#); [retreat from a proposed fuel tax increase](#) following riots in France; provincial reversal and federal weakening of proposed policies in Canada; and just last week, the [announcement of Brazil's new government](#) that it is withdrawing its offer to host next year's meeting.

These national reversals – bad enough on their own terms – are especially worrisome because the Paris agreements are weaker than is widely recognized. Despite its ambitious targets for limiting global temperature increase, Paris does not specify any particular action by individual nations, but merely defines a framework for subsequent action. Unlike prior international efforts, this framework is highly decentralized, stating that governments must make and report contributions to controlling climate change but leaving what those contributions are – what type of action, how strong or weak, how fast or slow – almost entirely up to each government to specify for itself. The hope was that increasingly strong declarations and actions from governments would spur ever stronger reciprocal action by other governments, in a positive feedback of increasing ambition and achievement. But

realizing this hope, even more than in other international agreements, relies heavily on sustained leadership from national governments in major economies.

What's more, negotiations since Paris have not only failed to achieve further progress, but have in some respects seen the re-emergence of a few large-scale political conflicts that the seeming harmony of Paris papered over. The big ones, all linked to each other, are expectations for emissions cuts, the extent and form of "differentiation," and the role of finance in climate commitments.

On obligations to cut emissions, the initial 1992 [Framework Convention](#) set up a binary distinction between two lists of countries, one of industrialized countries who had emissions-cutting obligations and one of developing countries who did not. This clumsy two-way division of the world, into "have-to's" and "don't-have-to's" was repeated in the 1997 Kyoto Protocol, but has become increasingly anachronistic as countries have developed at widely differing rates. Paris dropped this binary distinction, but did so by letting each country choose its own level and form of emissions cuts, but the resultant voluntary pledges are not nearly strong enough to achieve the Paris global temperature targets. As the urgent need for steep emissions cuts becomes clearer and clearer, the old hard questions of who should do how much are being forcefully re-asserted. Everyone accepts differentiated commitments, meaning that rich countries have to cut more and sooner than poorer ones, but there are sharp disagreements over how much more, how soon, and also over the obligations of the rapidly developing, emerging economies such as China.

The fights over differentiation of commitments also extend to the implementation and procedures of the agreement: how emissions are counted, how to describe what is expected of each country, what procedures apply for monitoring, reporting, and verification, how are national actions and progress subjected to international scrutiny, and so on. There have long been divides on these matters parallel to those on emissions cuts: the same rules procedures for all countries, or more lenient, flexible, and cheaper ones for developing countries. Paris came very close to establishing a set of common procedures for all, but there is now strong pressure to re-impose differentiation on these matters as well.

In particular, one prominent group, the "Like-minded developing countries" or LMDCs, is pressing to restore the anachronistic binary divisions of the 1992 Convention, with weaker oversight and procedures for all developing countries. This powerful group of about 25 countries can be usefully thought of as including two groups: major emerging economies whose serious participation is essential for meaningful global progress on emissions, who will be first in line for stronger expectations if they get separated from the poorer, lower-emitting developing countries (e.g., China, India, Indonesia, Malaysia); and countries who

have mainly acted to block progress, either because they are oil exporters whose economies would be harmed by serious mitigation (e.g., Saudi Arabia, Venezuela, Iran, Iraq, Kuwait) or because – for lack of a better explanation – they like poking a stick in the eye of the naively globalist, save-the-world ambitions of the North (e.g., Nicaragua, Bolivia, Venezuela, Cuba). Brazil, a middle-income developing country that has long positioned itself as constructively engaged in limiting climate change, has not been a member of this group. Here’s a prediction: At this meeting, the new government of Brazil will either announce its intention to withdraw from the Paris agreement, or will join the LMDC group.

Finally, finance: It is long agreed in principle that the industrialized countries should contribute financial assistance for developing countries’ climate responses, both mitigation and adaptation. But the details are perennially contested. How much money, from whom, under whose control? Private investment flows, public development assistance, or some mix? Grant, loan, or some combination? For what purposes, and under whose control? Roughly speaking, the industrialized country payers prefer to pay less, rely more on private capital flows and loans, keep more control, and mainly fund emissions cuts. The developing country recipients prefer to receive more, of which more is ODA and grants, with more control in their hands, to fund both mitigation and adaptation with an emphasis on adaptation. The fights over finance are long-standing: many representatives of industrialized countries think they are just buying mitigation and the developing countries are holding the world for ransom while we all burn; many representatives of developing countries think financial payments are in part compensation for past industrialized-country contributions to climate change, that the funds are theirs to allocate according to their highest development priorities, and that the industrialized countries have repeatedly broken prior promises.

Against this somber background, what are the negotiators in Poland actually doing? Mainly, they are aiming to complete negotiation of the “[Paris Rulebook](#)” – the rules, procedures, and requirements to make the Paris agreements concrete and operational: how are emissions measured, what do nations report and how, what are the expectations for continuing increase in the ambition of national actions, how do the international review processes work, what are the provisions for climate finance (especially post-2025, for which no numerical targets have yet been agreed), and what is the relationship of finance to the rest of the agreement? This meeting is the deadline for completing the rulebook, but progress has been slow and uneven. As of the last negotiating session before this meeting, the draft negotiating text was 307 pages long, with thousands of bracketed passages denoting unresolved disagreements. Finalizing this will be a huge, hard job, made harder by the major points of disagreement, as noted above, that are playing out by proxy in negotiations over specific language at various points in the draft rulebook. The co-chairs of negotiating

groups did yeoman's work in structuring and simplifying the text after the last meeting, identifying major alternatives on multiple key points and going some distance toward having a clear agenda for negotiations at this meeting. They might make it, but it will be a heavy lift for just two weeks work.

While some critics of the process are tossing around "deck chairs on the Titanic" analogies, that is not quite correct, or fair. The work of the Paris rulebook is important. The negotiations are detailed, meticulous, and heavy on procedure – but this work is essential if the Paris agreement is going to have any operational significance in guiding and motivating stronger action. This work has to be done, and done well.

But the fact that this work is only now being done does represent a discouraging state of affairs relative to gravity and growing urgency of the climate problem. National commitments made at and since Paris fall far short of what is needed to meet the Paris temperature targets. In this regard, the elephant in the room – or more aptly, one of the several elephants in the room – is the [September report from the Inter-governmental Panel on Climate Change \(IPCC\) on the implications of the Paris 1.5°C temperature target](#). Despite intensive efforts to shape a positive message, the upshot of this report is two-fold: first, climate-change impacts are likely to be worse than previously projected, to 2°C no longer looks "safe" and even 1.5°C is not free from risk of serious disruptions; and second, current efforts and commitments fall far short of meeting either of these. Current policies are on track toward heating of 3.1 to 3.7°C by 2100, current pledges not yet enacted in policy toward 2.6 to 3.2°C. Current pledges, if fully realized, would hold global emissions roughly constant through 2030, when to be on track to achieving 2°C they need to drop at least 30% by that year, or 45% to be on track to 1.5°C.

The only place at the meeting where this stark reality is on the agenda is at the "[Talanoa dialogue](#)," an informal consultation planned in Paris as an early, interim assessment of collective progress toward the Paris targets. Initially called a "consultative dialog" in Paris, this process was re-titled under last year's Fijian presidency, with the name of a traditional Fijian consultative process intended to be "inclusive, participatory, and transparent." This dialog will of course be a vehicle for lamentations over how far short collective efforts are falling. It will probably, hopefully, also be a vehicle for new announcements of stronger measures and policies by individual governments. But it will have no concrete implications for the actual institutional mechanisms being set up to implement Paris unless the output of this dialog is brought forward to the formal negotiations, in the form of concrete proposals for decisions of the parties, ideally decisions that represent some significant strengthening of ambition, policies, or supporting processes. As of the first day of meetings, there was no sign output of this other than environmental groups calling for it – but it could still happen.

Finally, I can't fail to note the multi-level irony of the location of this year's meeting, both in Poland and in Katowice. Poland is the EU's largest coal producer and second-largest coal consumer (second after ... wait for it ... Germany!) Poland is also the consistently strongest opponent of ambitious EU climate action. Silesia, the region around Katowice, is the main coal-mining area of Poland. The Polish government has in the past year announced one large new coal-fired generating station and several new mines, as part of a ["lignite strategy"](#) to replace declining currently exploited deposits. Giving a reluctant participant in climate action the opportunity to host a climate meeting is a two-edged sword. On the plus side, it is possible that the spotlight, and the desire for a successful outcome, can move the host country to a little more constructive and leading engagement than otherwise, while also allowing them the opportunity to focus on the issues of greatest concern to them. On the other side, the decision also gives the host the opportunity to use their control over the venue and proceedings to slow-walk or distract.

The early signs of the Polish government's engagement in the meetings are not promising. The President used his opening remarks to state his continuing commitment to coal, albeit at gradually declining levels. The private sponsors of the conference include coal companies, and there are [decorative installations of coal](#) around the conference facility. The president has stated that his priorities for the meeting are to negotiate three new political declarations, on forests, electric vehicles, and a "just transition" - the latter of these meaning commitments regarding transition assistance, re-training, and other measures to soften the harm that aggressive emissions controls - if ever achieved - would impose on coal miners and others whose livelihoods depend on fossil-fuel production. This is certainly a worth and important goal, perhaps even an initiative that could ease the present blockage on serious action. But it may also be a distractions, perhaps even (depending on the details) an additional source of blockage. And it's not that the negotiators don't already have too much to do.

So the cognitive dissonance is screaming. It [goes to eleven](#). The only thing that could make it louder - can it go to twelve? - will be the [US side event](#), now planned for next Monday, to remind people how wonderful fossil fuels are, how the world's economy depends on them, and how they have contributed to raising living standards worldwide, especially in the present rich industrialized countries. This would reprise a [similar event](#) the US put on at least year's meeting in Bonn. These claims are of course all true historically - but given the central role of fossil fuels driving climate change, they are no longer true looking forward.

So ... here are my predictions for this meeting. Delegates will make substantial but not total progress on negotiating the rule book - enough progress for a face-saving declaration that the meeting was a success. They will defer the hardest substantive issues embedded in the

rulebook to another meeting, which will be deemed a continuation of this one to avoid the awkward appearance of missing a deadline.

There will also be a few declarations of plans for stronger climate action from national governments. Key ones to watch will be the major western European nations, long among the leading national climate activists, to see how serious, concrete, and ambitious their statements are in the face of all the political difficulties they are now confronting. The most important announcements will probably be from China. As part of its continuing pursuit of serious world leadership, as well as its imperative to manage severe domestic air-quality and health problems, China has repeatedly adopted some of the strongest emissions policies and ambitions in the world, and has thus far [over-achieved its declared targets](#). (Note that this “ambition” is in the context of a rapidly growing developing economy: China’s overall emissions commitment is not for a reduction from present levels, but for a date by which its emissions will peak and start declining. Initially announced as 2030, that peaking date has been most recently estimated as 2023.) This strong ambition and achievement sits in seeming tension with China’s role obstructing strong international action as part of the LMDC coalition: it’s willing to do a lot, but on its own terms, and resists, at least for now, being constrained or coerced by international structures. Also pay attention, of course, for announcements from some of the sub-national governments that have emerged as the strongest leaders in the absence of national leadership, notably but not exclusively California.

Be sure also to watch the drama, or maybe the burlesque, of the four-way collision underway at these meetings: between the borderline crazy posturing of some governments; the intensity of fossil-fuel commitment of others; the real, important, but small-bore work being done in the actual negotiations; and the desperate gravity of the actual climate situation, slowly and inexorably getting worse with each passing year of inaction.

Stay tuned: Emmett Institute folks will report back at the end of the meeting, possibly also with mid-meeting reports in from our colleagues on the ground in Katowice (including my colleague William Boyd, who is attending the COP).