

2021 Climate Summit: “revving up the engine” for COP-26 in Glasgow

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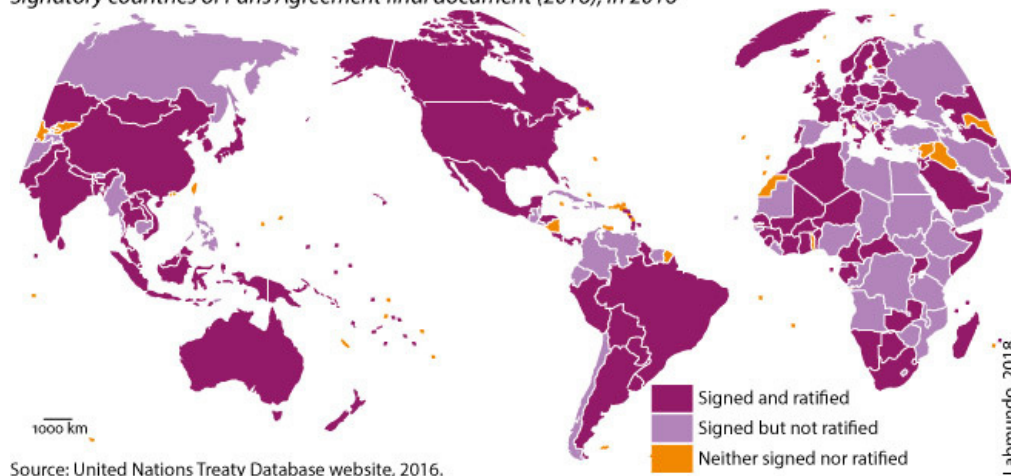
The eyes of the world community are once again set upon the fight against global warming, thanks to the Climate Summit hosted by the US government. After former president Donald Trump announced Washington’s withdrawal from the Paris Agreement, the United States resumed its leadership position in the climate change mitigation and adaptation movement.

The Summit was the first US diplomatic initiative after its official withdrawal from the Paris Agreement in November 2020. In January 2021, President Joe Biden signed the country’s return to the agreement and the Summit represented a dress rehearsal for the political games that are expected to take place during the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change Conference of the Parties (COP26) to be held in November 2021, in Glasgow.

Turning a new page in American climate policy, President Biden appointed former Secretary of State John Kerry as Special Presidential Envoy for Climate. This decision conveys an important diplomatic message, as Kerry had been a key player in previous negotiations in 2015 and during the Copenhagen Conference. Seeking to resume its leadership in terms of climate change mitigation and adaptation, the United States announced a reduction of its greenhouse gas emissions of up to 50% by 2030, shaping up the largest concession ever made by Washington. Carbon neutrality was at the center of the priorities of the Summit, with the US seeking to advance the target date from 2060 to 2050. The US government committed to the new target date, as did Brazil, Canada, Japan, and the European Union.

PARIS AGREEMENT

Signatory countries of Paris Agreement final document (2016), in 2016

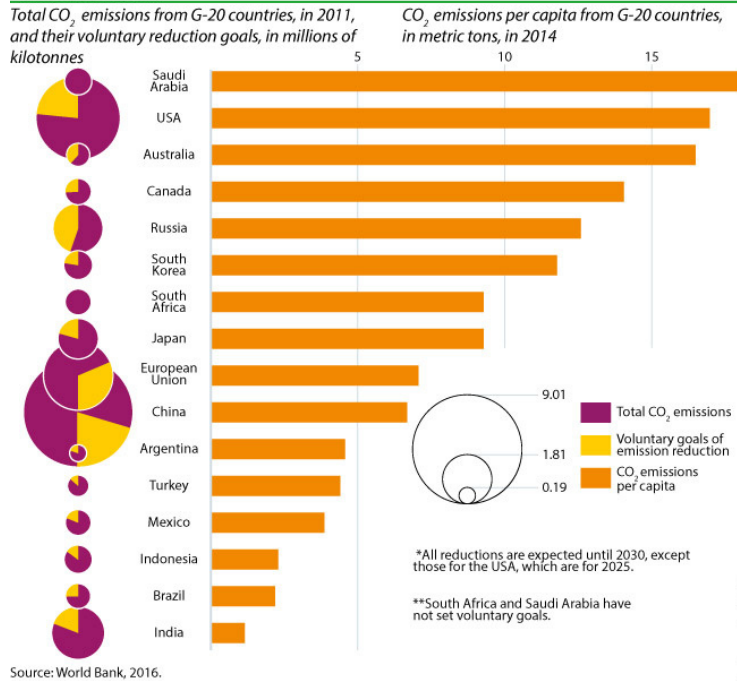


The Chinese government, in contrast, maintained its neutrality proposal for 2060 and the goal of reaching peak of emissions by 2030, remaining faithful to the concessions announced in September 2020 by President Xi Jinping at the UN General Assembly. China is currently the world's largest emitter of greenhouse gases, accounting for 28% of emissions according to the International Energy Agency. However, the country is not the leader in per capita emissions, where it trails behind countries like the US, Russia, and Canada.

Seeking to signal a proactive stance for the COP26 negotiations, the Chinese government announced the return of its special envoy for climate issues Xie Zhenhua. One of China's most respected experts on the subject, Xie is a veteran negotiator who had been involved in previous China-US bilateral agreements on climate mitigation, both in 2014 and 2015. In addition, Xie and Kerry have a long-standing relationship, an aspect that experts interpret as a positive demonstration of the Chinese government's ambitious commitments towards a global climate agreement.

Although the issue of carbon neutrality is not included as a central issue in China's new five-year plan, the country introduced for the first time a schedule of actions for control and reduction of coal consumption, determining the 14th and 15th planes, respectively, as the bases for the achievement of that goal. This decision is an important milestone in the evolution of Beijing's climate mitigation goals. It is important to point out that this proposal did not include a target for the complete elimination of coal consumption nation-wide, nor did China commit to avoid exporting these emissions to other countries – a critical remark that Beijing has so far received from many partners in relation to its Belt and Road Initiative projects.

CLIMATE CHANGE



The Chinese president, however, sought to strengthen the status of China as a developing country by referring, in his address, to the principle of common but differentiated responsibilities (CBDR). This principle is one of the pillars of Chinese climate diplomacy. Alongside Brazil, India and South Africa, the country negotiated the inclusion of this principle in the 1992 Framework Conference and in the 1995 Paris Agreement. In addition to China, Brazil and South Africa also referred to the principle in their official speeches.

Unlike its partners in the BASIC group, the address of Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi made no reference to the CBDR principle. However, the country announced a partnership with the United States government for investments in green technologies and energy, entitled India-US Climate and clean energy Agenda 2030 partnership. Despite pressure from the United States and the United Kingdom to adhere to a 2050 carbon neutrality proposal, India made no commitment in this regard and did not follow the Chinese government's proposal for 2060 either.

Like India, Russian President Vladimir Putin did not commit to the 2050 target; however, he announced a substantial limitation on Moscow's emissions by that year. Still, one of the most important points in Putin's address was his reference to global efforts to reduce methane emissions, a greenhouse gas that is 84 times more potent than carbon dioxide in terms of global warming, according to UN data. Used in refrigerators and air conditioning units, methane can remain in the atmosphere for more than 100 years and is one of the major challenges that must be addressed in the mitigation of harmful effects of climate change.

In his official address to the Climate Summit, French President Emmanuel Macron pointed out the urgency of the climate crisis, classifying the year 2030 as the new 2050, demanding that climate change mitigation actions be implemented as soon as possible. Together with President of the European Commission, Ursula von der Leyen, and German President, Angela Merkel, the French President announced their joint commitment to a “Green Deal” project, with investments in technological development, renewable energy and sustainable development projects.

The Summit showed that the urgent nature of the climate crisis requires increasingly solid and ambitious national commitments. The return of the United States to the multilateral climate protection scene brings hope that countries may be closer to reaching the goal of a maximum increase of 1.5 degrees C in global average annual temperatures. The Chinese choice to appoint one of its most renowned experts in climate diplomacy to conduct the negotiations also signaled a positive and cooperative stance; however, the new Chinese five-year plan raises concerns about how willing the country is to take more ambitious steps.

With the United States and the European Union seeking to invest in a green economic recovery in the post-pandemic context and China increasingly willing to cooperate, environmental and climate protection finally seems to be at the heart of the concerns and ambitions of world leaders. This symbolizes the long-awaited hope that the world can overcome old habits and advance towards a less energy-centered and more sustainable future. Brazil, once again, seems to stand out in the field of international politics as a negative role model.

Rio de Janeiro, 30 April 2021. (Translated from Portuguese by Ana. C. Maranhão Godoy)