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■ AQ FEATURE

The Irrelevance of Global Climate Talks

BY [Steven Cohen](#)

After 20 years, it's time to consider a new strategy.

Climate change has been called the biggest global challenge of the current generation. As scientific uncertainty has diminished, climate change has emerged as an important item on the international institutional agenda.

But efforts to reduce greenhouse gas emissions and minimize the effects of human-caused climate change through binding international agreements often miss key emitter nations or lack follow-up by signatory countries when negotiators return home. Moreover, the legitimacy of such negotiations and their conclusions is called into question, since they often lead to national policies that are partial, complex and hard to verify.

Does that mean international global climate meetings are a failure?

It depends on how you define success. The talks have been instrumental in setting the global climate agenda, but when it comes to actually reducing global emissions, setting binding targets, or developing global mechanisms for funding, technology transfer and enforcement, they have generally been a waste of time.

The principal reason is their structure, which makes it difficult to develop meaningful, enforceable policy.

Since the problem of climate change is global, it makes sense to set goals and limits on a global scale to better track progress and ensure that emissions do not reach dangerous levels. In a perfect world, these would be easy to achieve. However, agreeing upon the best course of action to meet reductions and gaining buy-in from every country is exceedingly difficult.

The basic problem is the distinct self-interest of developed and still-developing nations.

History of the Global Climate Talks

The structural problems were evident from the earliest attempt to set global standards for the environment. Following the Rio Earth Summit in June 1992, the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) was established to “stabilize the greenhouse gas concentration in the atmosphere to prevent dangerous anthropogenic, or human-caused, interference with the world’s climate system.”¹ The Convention came into effect in March 1994 and has 195 signatories today.²

However, it did not set mandatory limits on greenhouse gas emissions for individual countries and contained no method of enforcement. To account for differences in levels of economic development, the treaty applied the principle of “common but differentiated responsibilities.” The principle established a common responsibility to protect the planet from the impacts of climate change, but at the same time recognized that individual countries had different levels of responsibility for contributing to global climate change, and different abilities for alleviating it. The treaty specified that developed countries (Annex I) should reduce their emissions to 1990 levels by 2000, while less developed countries (Annex II) were only required to provide assistance to the reduction goals of Annex I countries.

It set three obligations, imposed principally on developed nations:

A gradual return to 1990 levels of greenhouse gas emissions;

Provision of financial resources and technology to developing countries to promote sustainable development;

Provision of data on emissions and mitigation efforts.

In 1997, international negotiations led to the Kyoto Protocol, which required signatory countries to reduce emissions by an average of 5.2 percent below 1990 levels by 2012. During the first commitment period, 37 industrialized countries and the European Community signed on, and it became international law in 2005. The first commitment period started in 2008 and ended in 2012, and the second commitment period lasts from 2013 to 2020.

Under the Protocol, countries must meet their targets mainly through national measures.³ However, additional means are offered, including the Clean Development Mechanism, which allows developed countries to meet their targets by implementing emissions reduction projects in developing countries.

The Protocol did not assign targets for developing countries. Instead, these countries agreed to reduce emissions and commit to renewable energy by improving energy efficiency and reducing deforestation. Because of this, though the United States signed the Kyoto Treaty, it was never introduced to the U.S. Senate for ratification. Instead, by a 95-0 vote, the Senate passed an amendment in 1997 expressly requesting that the U.S. not enter into any treaty requiring reductions that could prove damaging to the economy or that would not hold developing nations to the same commitment schedule as developed countries.

Without the world's then-leading emitter, the Protocol's effectiveness was limited from the start.



All mayoral hands on deck: (from left) Mayors Ecktar Wuerzner of Heidelberg, Franklin Tau of Johannesburg, Won Soon Park of Seoul, Eduardo Paes of Rio de Janeiro, Michael Bloomberg of New York, Babatunde Fashola of Lagos, Gilberto Kassab of Sao Paulo, and Mauricio Macri of Buenos Aires at the Rio +C4o meeting on June 19, 2012. Photo: Felipe Dana/AP



Several attempts have been made since Kyoto to secure missing countries (the U.S.) and make the commitments more aggressive. But little progress has been made in developing agreements with real teeth.

The 2009 United Nations Climate Change Conference in Copenhagen, Denmark, included the 15th Conference of the Parties to the UNFCCC and the 5th Meeting of the Parties to the Kyoto Protocol

and was perhaps the most hyped of recent meetings. This was due in no small part to the presence of President Barack Obama at the negotiating table and the hope—based on his comments during the presidential campaign—that the U.S. might emerge as a new leader in climate change.

Those hopes failed to materialize.

The Copenhagen Accord, drafted at the conference, endorsed the continuation of the Kyoto Protocol, but did not contain binding commitments for reducing greenhouse gas emissions. Despite some important discussions on deforestation, forest degradation and climate adaptation, disagreement remained over the “common but differentiated” responsibility between developed and developing nations.

Obama, on behalf of the U.S., pledged to reduce greenhouse gas emissions by 17 percent by 2020—the lowest of all national pledges. Since it never produced a legally binding treaty—as many had hoped—the Copenhagen summit was widely considered a failure.

With far less fanfare, international talks continued with the goal of concluding a successor to the Kyoto Protocol. But at the 2012 UN Climate Change Conference in Doha, Qatar, all the parties could agree to was to extend the life of the Kyoto Protocol until 2020.

The UN Conference on Sustainable Development, also known as Rio+20, held in Rio de Janeiro in June 2012, was the 20-year follow-up to the 1992 Earth Summit. The primary result of the conference was the non-binding document, “The Future We Want,” in which the 192 heads of state in attendance renewed their political commitment to sustainable development and declared their commitment to the promotion of a sustainable future. Though welcome, a public commitment without a binding agreement remains simply rhetoric.

By the Rio+20 conference, only the EU members at the time of the original Kyoto Summit and Canada, Poland, Hungary, Japan, and Croatia had reduced their emissions at or above the original 5 percent target.⁴ Though it is not bound to the Kyoto Protocol, the U.S. also met this (low) target.

But even this reduction is most likely the result of a decline in the global economy during that time, rather than national efforts at emissions reduction. Further, aggregate global emissions continued to increase during the same time—largely due to the rapid development of China and India.

None of this is to say that international climate talks have been a complete bust. To understand their value, we need to place them in context and see them for what they are—and what they are not.

While not as lofty as the original expectations, international climate talks have succeeded in increasing public awareness of the issues and bringing new items to the political agenda. By convening governments, they have elevated the importance of climate change to the highest levels of government. While there is still much to communicate to the public about the science, the risks, and the costs of mitigation and adaptation, climate change over the past 20 years has entered the mainstream political dialogue.

Further, these forums serve as information exchanges among national policymakers, experts, local and regional leaders, and private, non-profit and NGO leaders. This network has become a platform to share ideas, new technologies, new science, and best practices, and to foster important relationships.

No Silver Bullet

While international talks—particularly high-profile ones like Copenhagen and Rio+20—are important worldwide teaching moments on the problem of climate change, they also create unrealistic political pressure for a quick and easy solution to the problem. There is no silver bullet, and the process can't be solved over the course of a few days of international negotiations every year.

Nevertheless, the talks are hyped up in the weeks leading up to the conferences, with expectations each year that “this will be the year” that something meaningful gets done. At each meeting, thousands of influential people from around the world gather to negotiate and influence global policy. Rhetoric flies for a week or two, negotiators bargain long into the night, and a modest, unenforceable agreement is finally brought up for a vote.

Critical nations are still at odds over central issues, such as the point at which developing countries should be required to meet emissions reductions. Sovereignty rules, and national interest will always trump global interest. This makes it difficult to get countries to comply with rules established at the international level—particularly when such rules go against their short-term economic interests.

Obviously, one of the countries that has come under the greatest criticism for its failure to deliver on its promises in these international negotiations has been the United States.

After failing to sign on to the Kyoto Protocol, the U.S. has since made only lukewarm commitments during recent negotiations—despite a president who supports action on climate change. The ultra-partisan Congress of the past few years makes it difficult to get even moderate, popular measures passed—let alone move forward on the hot-button issue of climate change.⁵

The U.S. Congress has become highly politicized around the issue of climate change. Despite broad international acceptance of climate science, the U.S. Congress has waged an ideological battle out of what should be seen as a practical issue. Climate change deniers are often given equal weight as climate scientists in mainstream media, and some politicians continue to downplay increasingly clear scientific evidence and oppose the idea of regulation as a solution.

The growing partisan politics in the U.S. Congress has delayed the confirmation of Obama's appointment of a new Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) administrator while also shifting federal policy on climate change to a weakened EPA.

Despite efforts to stop it, the EPA continues to slowly move ahead with regulating emissions under the Clean Air Act. The EPA uses national energy data, data on national agricultural activities and other national statistics to provide a comprehensive accounting of total greenhouse gas emissions for all human-generated sources in the United States.⁶ In accordance with the UNFCCC convention, it prepares an annual report called the Inventory of U.S. Greenhouse Gas Emissions and Sinks. This report tracks total annual U.S. emissions and removals by source, economic sector and greenhouse gas, going back to 1990. Maintaining the inventory is an important starting point, but to reduce emissions, the EPA must be able to issue regulations. This is where it's struggled.

In May 2010, the agency issued the U.S.'s first regulations for greenhouse gases: rules for passenger vehicles. But lawsuits and legislative and budget attacks from Congress have slowed down its efforts to go further.

Earlier this year, the EPA announced that it was delaying the issuance of new rules limiting greenhouse gas emissions from new power plants, originally scheduled to be finished in April 2013—and has given no new deadline for their completion. They would have been the first federal greenhouse gas restrictions on the power sector, and would have prevented any new coal-fired power plants from being built—significantly affecting national emissions.

Unfortunately, the rules limiting emissions for new power plants must be completed before rules for existing ones can be applied. So while the agency reworks the rules on new power plants, establishing rules for existing power plants—a more complex task—is also pushed back. As a result, action has been left largely to the states and local governments, leaving a patchwork quality to the regulations.

Immediate partisan politics aside, though, the very long-term intangible nature of climate change makes it difficult to mobilize and sustain domestic support for climate change policy. The dangers relating to climate change will mostly become apparent in the future and are difficult to predict with specificity. Issues like water pollution and toxic waste provoke faster and more active public responses than climate change because they have an immediate impact on lives. In addition, while the benefits of climate policies will also generally be felt in the future, or not noticed at all if successful, the changes necessary to reduce emissions—like a carbon tax—immediately affect day-to-day lives.

However, as the U.S. public begins to feel the impacts of climate change affecting their lives, support for government action may be growing. Persistent droughts, extended heat waves and the power of superstorms like Hurricane Sandy on coastal cities are beginning to change the way Americans think about and understand climate. This also sets the stage for a potentially more fruitful avenue for shaping both domestic and international policy.

Beyond the UN

On a global level, the lack of political support in the U.S. and internationally is tied to the critical question of when developing nations must begin to reduce their emissions—a question not adequately addressed under the current UN framework. This issue is tied to growth and development—making it a critical economic issue, not just an environmental issue. For this reason, two fundamental shifts in how climate talks are conducted need to be adopted.

The first is to shift the forum. Climate talks have become too important for the world's more powerful nations to assign negotiations to the UN's deliberative bodies. As the implications of global climate policy become clearer, the UN has become increasingly irrelevant as a decision-making venue.

The second shift is to broaden the scope of players and negotiators involved in the discussions. Due in part to the agenda-setting capacity of these talks, climate change has assumed a place at the center of community, corporate, and national and local policymaking. It is no longer a second-tier issue relegated to “environmental types,” but a key issue affecting profits, economic growth and political power.

Moving the issue beyond the UN auspices will signal that the world's global policy-makers finally recognize the centrality and priority of these issues. As the global economy develops, it becomes increasingly important that global rules of the game be established and made enforceable. We not only need

to ensure that companies can compete on a level playing field, but that poor people are not asked to trade off food and shelter against exposure to toxins. This will require new forms of global governance that go beyond current institutional capacities.

This is not something the UN is set up to do, nor is there another organization in place today that could. It will likely take a crisis or similar precipitating event to create an actionable body capable of addressing the inherent sovereignty issues that prevent real progress on climate change at the international level.

National self-interest still dominates the international policy arena—including in the UN. However, signs of change are emerging. With the growth of global corporations and some coordinated global governance around the economy, we see the beginnings of true international cooperation. Economic policy ought to be tied to the climate conversation because of its significant impact on the global economy. Political power that doesn't reflect economic power means very little. When we can get a small group of a dozen global economic leaders in a room thinking about the climate issue as an economic policy priority, we will have a form of global governance that can make real change.

At the same time, important movements and changes are occurring below the global level. While national governments are wrestling over pledges and commitments on the world stage, real climate or emissions reduction goals can be achieved through local and, occasionally, national efforts. Even in the U.S. this is happening widely and successfully.

Cities, in particular, have stepped up to the plate. Recognizing their unique vulnerabilities and opportunities, they are enacting far-sighted climate policy initiatives. The C40 Cities Climate Leadership Group that brings together city leaders to discuss policy around the topic highlights some of the most pioneering efforts at urban climate policy across the globe. For example, New York City, in PlaNYC 2030—its long-term sustainability plan—pledged to reduce its greenhouse gas emissions by more than 30 percent by 2030—and laid out plans, programs and laws to get it there.

Additionally, the growing cost of fossil fuels has stimulated investment in renewable energy, edging the global economy closer to commercially viable alternatives. These trends could help provide an alternate route to climate mitigation, even without international treaties.

In the short term, substantive action on climate policy and management will involve regulation at local levels as well as advances in technology.

Change will come about because renewable energy will become less expensive, more reliable and more convenient than fossil fuels. Regulation, carbon taxes and treaties may hasten the process, but a focus on research and development and new technology would be a far better approach than international spectacles and cocktail parties. Innovations in smaller and more efficient solar cells, more advanced battery technology, smart grids, and carbon capture and storage are all examples of technologies that, with additional scientific breakthroughs, could substantially change the conversation.

The need, however, for international cooperation will remain. We are increasingly part of a global and interconnected world. International negotiations highlight areas of mutual self-interest and agreement among nations. The transition to a fossil-fuel-free-economy will not be easy and will not happen quickly.

But a critical step has been taken. A fossil-fuel-free-economy is nearly universal goal. Fossil fuels, by definition, are finite. We need to transition to another method to fuel our growing economy. We need to develop a low-cost and convenient technology that will bring about this transition. Like cell phones replacing land lines, the technology will come—and when it does, the transition will follow.

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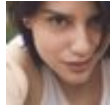
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