

NTS Bulletin January 2016**COP 21: Diplomatic milestone or half measure?**

*By Centre for Non-Traditional Security (NTS) Studies
S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies (RSIS)
Singapore*

Year 2015 ended with scenes of congratulatory jubilation in Paris. The world had for once come together to deliver what is now referred to as the Paris Agreement at the end of the 21st United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) Conference of Parties (or COP 21). Hailed as the first truly universal and unanimous agreement on climate, it was celebrated as progress in humanity's collective fight against climate change. But what did the 197 countries agree on? What should we make of it? And does it go far enough?

Without a doubt stakes in Paris were high; a lot of attention was on whether the world would finally come to a unanimous agreement after many failures in the past, the most notable being in Copenhagen in 2009. There was no guarantee that Paris would be any different. However after multiple revisions and iterations to the core text of the agreement, every single delegation was finally able to find it acceptable.

Finally an agreement

Hailed as "historic, durable and ambitious" the Paris Agreement saw all parties (both developed and developing countries) agree to limit their collective emissions such that the effects of global warming would not exceed 2 degree Celsius, with a further aspiration to try and keep it within 1.5 degrees above pre-industrial levels. Similarly, financing of US\$100 billion per year (starting in 2020) is to be provided to poorer countries (by the developed world) to help them cut their emissions and cope with the impacts of extreme weather. There would also be provisions for countries already affected by extreme weather to gain urgent aid. Both these finance mechanisms are to be separate from existing and other forms of non-climate related foreign aid.

There were a few other notable achievements at COP21. As per the agreement beginning 2020, all countries will be required to regularly report their emissions and progress in nationally determined contributions (NDCs) towards reducing greenhouse gas emissions. Likewise countries will have to reaffirm their NDCs every five years and "represent a

progression” from previous commitments. Lastly, it was agreed to take steps towards establishing and promoting carbon trading.

Not far enough

Despite the achievement made in Paris, there are some major concerns. The first and most notable of issues is that the agreement is not technically binding; in other words there is no legal mechanism to ensure that countries adhere to the commitments made. This is both in terms of promised reductions in emissions as well as the annual \$100 billion climate funding pledged. Secondly, the sum of all existing NDCs is expected to lead to warming of between 2.7 and 3 degrees Celsius, which is above the 2 degree threshold that scientists predict is the point beyond which catastrophic climate impacts will become irreversible.

Many groups, especially in more vulnerable countries, believe that the agreement does not go far enough. From the streets of Paris to the Philippines, hundreds of civil society groups, environmental NGOs and ordinary citizens participated in protests and demonstrations highlighting the weakness of an agreement that should have been much bolder and legally enforceable if we are to seriously check the impact of climate change. Many also worry that the promised money, should it materialise, would not be nearly enough to protect the vulnerable populations of poorer countries from climate related disasters like flooding, drought, heatwaves and sea-level rises. The fact that it is non-legally binding also means there are no guarantees that future governments do not renege on the commitments made in the agreement.

The legacy of Paris

Overall, the Paris Agreement produced at COP 21 was a major political and diplomatic success which the negotiators, and hosts France, should be proud of. From an environmental standpoint however the Paris Agreement is probably far from something worthy of the self-congratulatory praises and jubilations witnessed. Nonetheless COP 21 will go down in history as the first time the world at least agreed to acknowledge and show some resolve on the issue of climate change. And maybe just that in itself is a small victory for humanity.

Recommended Readings

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