

# The Paris Agreement: An International Foundation for Green Policy

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## Introduction

In December 2015, representatives from 196 countries gathered in Paris to sign the most comprehensive plan on climate change in history, the Paris Agreement. On November 4, 2016, the legally binding document officially entered into force. The Paris Agreement primarily aims to limit the global temperature increase from global pre-industrial levels to 2 °C, but preferably 1.5 °C. The difference of 0.5 °C is huge. The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change — established by the United Nations Environment Programme and the World Meteorological Organization to independently assess the risks of climate change — projects that this difference might cause “up to several hundred million more people to become exposed to climate-related risks and poverty.”

Admittedly, though, coordinating individual countries’ reductions of carbon emissions is a monumental task. To that end, the agreement aims to provide a framework that assures transparency, accountability, the achievement of targets, and financial support for developing countries in climate mitigation and adaptation. The crux of this are nationally determined contributions (NDCs), plans that parties submit every five years outlining how they are combating the climate crisis. Furthermore, to encourage transparency, two non-profit organizations created the Climate Action Tracker (CAT), an independent scientific analysis system that follows the actions of governments and compares them with pledges. Currently, the CAT tracks 36 countries and the European Union, who are collectively responsible for 80% of global emissions. In addition to the CAT, though each party’s NDC is not legally binding, Article 13 of the agreement obliges the parties to have their progress assessed by experts every

two years. Being the most crucial part of the tracking process, Article 13 contributes incredibly to accountability. Finally, the Paris Agreement established financial and institutional support for developing countries, which are often more reliant on fossil fuels and less prepared to rapidly curtail their use. In the agreement, developed countries pledged to allocate \$100 billion per year to help developing countries by 2020. And, the agreement also covers so-called “capacity-building actions,” the process of obtaining resources needed to fight climate change. Allocated to the least developed countries and those most vulnerable to climate change, capacity-building actions include technology development and deployment, climate financing, and education, training, and public awareness efforts.

### **Limitations and Criticisms of the Paris Agreement**

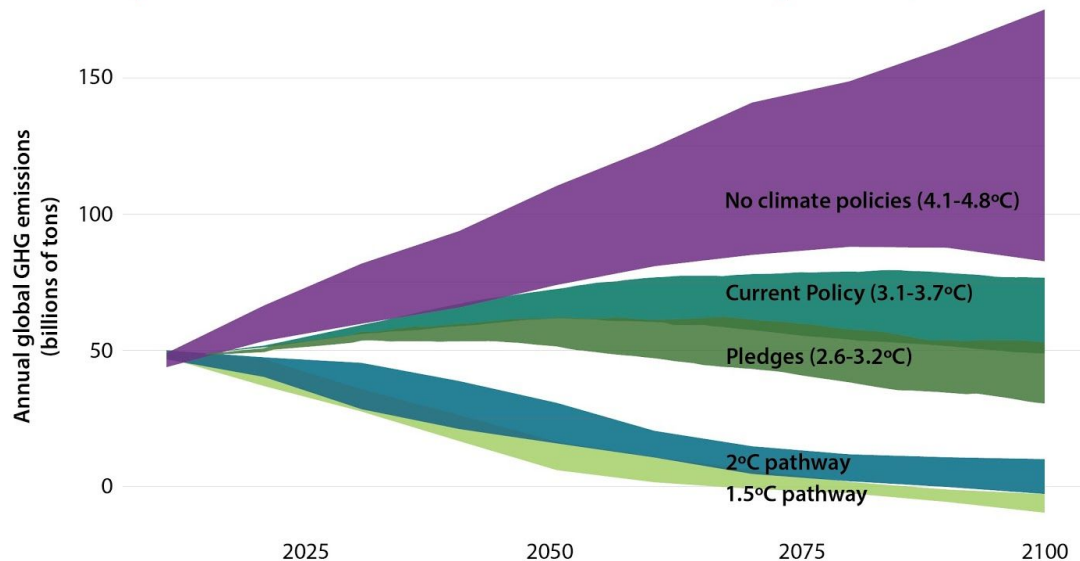
Despite the initial broad support of the agreement, some political groups have mobilized against the treaty. Much to the ire of activists, a number of signatories to the agreement have yet to ratify it, including Turkey, Iran, and Iraq. In the United States, Republicans, under the leadership of former President Trump, even withdrew from the agreement, although current President Biden recommitted the country to the agreement. For example, the most ardent opponents of the treaty have criticized the cost of transitioning to a green economy. While it is true that green policy requires significant upfront costs, the investment is worth it in the long term as it will create jobs and avoid climate-related externalities. Furthermore, “the creation of millions of jobs will generate the income and tax revenues needed to repay any borrowing.” wrote Ann Pettifor, world-renowned political economist and author of *The Case for the Green New Deal*.

More relevant, however, are debates about the efficacy of the Paris Agreement. For instance, developed countries have fallen short of the \$100 billion a year goal for supporting developing countries. More, the Independent Expert Group on Climate Finance has said that developed countries should be expanding their efforts well above the \$100 billion goal. And, domestic and international gridlock has made rapid decarbonization efforts limited in effect in many places, despite the efforts of climate activists.

Furthermore, the lack of enforcement mechanisms in the agreement is worrisome. Many countries are lagging behind their pledges of carbon-neutrality and ill-prepared, politically and economically, to implement sweeping climate reforms. According to many researchers, even if

countries were able to fully actualize their current pledges, it would not be enough. Current pledges would still lead to a 2.7-degree temperature rise by 2100, according to the CAT. Such an increase would still have catastrophic impacts on the planet, including the melt of Antarctic and Greenland ice sheets, and greatly exceed the goal of 1.5 °C and bottom-line of 2 °C.

Historical and Projected Annual Global GHG Emissions under Selected Policy Scenarios, 2010–2100



Source: Ritchie and Roser 2017.

Note: These temperature estimates are relative to preindustrial temperatures. "Pledges" refers to the pledges made in the 2015 Paris Agreement.

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Finally, the agreement also fails to prepare us for the secondary effects of the climate crisis. Climate change fuels forced migration and can exacerbate social and geopolitical tensions. According to Michael B. Gerrard, founder and Director of the Sabin Center for Climate Change Law at Columbia Law School, "persistent drought forced as many as 1.5 million Syrian farmers to move to overcrowded cities, contributing to social turmoil and ultimately a civil war that drove hundreds of thousands of people to attempt to cross the Mediterranean into Europe. Drought also worsened refugee crises in the Sahel, the Horn of Africa, and other parts of the continent." To avoid the militarization of the climate crisis in the future, diplomatic solutions, like the Paris Agreement must be sought sooner rather than later.

### Achievements of the Treaty

Although there remains much room for improvement in the international fight against climate change, the Paris Agreement has had significant impacts in the five years since its adoption.

### *I. Normalization of Net-Zero Targets*

Since the proposal of the Paris Agreement, net-zero targets have spread around the world. The Paris Agreement created this trend, as many signatories set carbon neutrality goals. Begun by the European Union and the United Kingdom, carbon neutrality goals spread to China, Japan, South Korea, and Australia. Under the Biden administration, the US is expected to join the movement by both declaring the climate crisis a national emergency and promising carbon neutrality by 2030. All in all, over 100 countries have joined an alliance calling for net-zero emissions by 2050. Since, according to the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, “to have a 50% chance of keeping global warming in check, global emissions need to reach net-zero by 2050,” these pledges are an important consequence of the Paris Agreement.

### *II. Popularization of Clean Energy*

More, the Paris Agreement was a clear proclamation in favor of replacing fossil fuel with clean energy. In 2020, many landmark actions were taken in this regard. Coal generation in the United States dramatically fell in the first half of the year; in Europe, coal plant retirements overtook the creation of new jobs; and, COVID-19 led to the decline of global coal consumption. Besides, renewable energy has become increasingly affordable and lithium-ion batteries have served to electrify previously dirty industries. For instance, these have fueled President Biden’s plans for a carbon-free power sector by 2035.

### *III. New Action Mechanisms*

Although the agreement has no central enforcement policy, alternate actors are embracing the Paris vision. Financial regulators; the world’s largest banks such as JPMorgan, HSBC, and Morgan Stanley; city authorities; and state governments are among the institutions creating new green policies. In December 2019, a day after climate activist Greta Thunberg called for investors to “follow the science”, dozens of new companies joined the “Business Ambition for 1.5°C” campaign. New signatories included 177 companies representing 5.8 million employees. As of 2019, the 177 companies “have a combined market capitalization of

over US\$2.8 trillion, and represent annual direct emissions equivalent to the annual total CO<sub>2</sub> emissions of France.”

Furthermore, the Paris Agreement drew attention to the seriousness of climate change and started a new era of activism: climate activism. Led by youth activists such as Greta Thunberg, the movement flourished in 2019. Millions of teenagers from all around the world coordinated global school strikes for the climate. On September 21, 2019, at the UN Climate Action Summit, Greta Thunberg expressed the anger and disappointment of the youth:

*I shouldn't be up here. I should be back in school on the other side of the ocean. Yet you all come to us young people for hope. How dare you! ...You have stolen my dreams and my childhood with your empty words. And yet I'm one of the lucky ones. People are suffering. People are dying. Entire ecosystems are collapsing. We are at the beginning of mass extinction, and all you can talk about is money and fairy tales of eternal economic growth. How dare you!*

## Conclusion

All in all, the Paris Agreement codified the urgency of climate change. With its pearls and pitfalls, it aims to save the planet. It acknowledges that denial is not a policy, unlike the politicians all over the world. Some may disagree, but the agreement and the new era of activism it created raised awareness about the issue. It might be the first step toward a greener future, and it is an international foundation for green policy. As humanity failed to protect its only home, embracing the Paris vision is the least we can do to fight for our future.

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