Article

The Paris Agreement's Crucial Test

Why 2025 Is a Pivotal Year for Climate Action

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Humans survive. Whether it is pandemics, volcanic eruptions, or the ice age; humans endure and survive. With the effects of global warming at the door, human survival is once again threatened.

Simon Stiell, UN Climate Change Executive Secretary, warned in 2022, that we are "nowhere near the scale and pace of emission reductions required" to limit global warming to 1.5°C. If the earth reaches 1.5°C, scientists predict that 70-90% of coral reefs will disappear; storms, heat waves, and droughts will become more extreme; major disruptions in existing ecosystems will put stress on $11 trillion in ecosystem services provided by the waterbodies around the world; at least 50% of worldwide agricultural output might be compromised rendering climate conditions unfavourable for food production. Every hundredth of a degree increase that is averted makes a profound impact. The true test of mankind will not be our ability to endure the storm, but our willingness to change its trajectory.

Despite the threats, the global community has thus far failed to meet the objectives laid out in Article 2 of the Paris Agreement. Despite UN attempts to mitigate the effects of global warming, the current efforts by States to limit the global temperature increase to 1.5°C are insufficient according to the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP). Given these alarming trends and the international community's response, the Paris Agreement has never been more crucial.

Why the Paris Agreement?

The Paris Agreement, adopted in 2015, is a landmark international treaty that unites 196 Member States in their efforts to mitigate climate change by cutting greenhouse gas emissions and capping the global temperature rise at 1.5°C.

The 1.5°C target is informed by the IPCC's Special Report on 'Global Warming of 1.5°C', which found that a sustained global temperature rise of 1.5°C above pre-industrial levels would pose significant risks to certain regions and vulnerable ecosystems. Framed as a critical "defense line," the report maintained that staying below this threshold could help avoid the most severe and irreversible climate impacts expected with a 2°C increase.

In addition to the IPCC report, the most vulnerable island nations strongly advocated for the 1.5°C target, emphasizing that it is critical to their very survival. Before 2018, however, this threshold was largely dismissed by many developed and more industrialized countries. 2°C was seen as a more moderate, realistic aim. Although the official recognition of the 1.5°C threshold did not make meeting it any easier, it did fundamentally shift the weight of evidence. Rather than compelling champions of the 1.5°C objective to prove its viability, it forced supporters of the 2°C to defend the probable ramifications for vulnerable groups. The Paris Agreement thus has had a positive effect on state politics as it normalized the 1.5°C goal.

The Paris Agreement equally creates tools and mechanisms to allay the effects of global warming and improve international collaboration. Under Article 4(2), it requires the signatory States to develop and submit their Nationally Determined Contributions (NDCs). These NDCs outline the State's commitment to mitigating the effects of greenhouse gas emissions.

The Paris Agreement also acknowledges the differing capacities and responsibilities of States, granting the developing countries more flexibility and time to regulate their emissions while respecting their developmental priorities. Article 4(4) stipulates that developed countries should undertake economy-wide absolute emission reduction targets while developing countries should continue enhancing their mitigation efforts and gradually aim to move towards economy-wide absolute emission reduction targets.

Importantly, this difference does not exonerate developing countries from achieving their best possible limits on emissions. Instead, the member parties 'shall' put forward and adhere to their NDCs with the 'highest possible ambition', which serves as an objective standard rather than a subjective one. According to Article 4(3), the discretion of States Parties in determining their NDCs is constrained by various factors, including the principle of common but differentiated responsibilities (CBDR) and respective capabilities. However, the notion of 'highest possible ambition' along with the common temperature goal act as substantive constraints on the otherwise flexible structure of NDCs. While the phrase 'the highest possible ambition' does not constitute a specific legal obligation under the Paris Agreement, it constitutes a normative benchmark for interpreting states' due diligence obligations under the UNFCCC, as well as obligations arising from other sources of international and domestic law.

Finally, the Paris Agreement's popularity translates into a form of peer pressure. The EU for example has made adherence to the Paris Agreement a prerequisite for entering into trade agreements since 2019. Before the Paris Agreement was signed the global temperature was estimated to rise to 3.5 ℃ by 2100. Now the estimated rise is 2.9℃. Despite encountering setbacks, the Paris Agreement represents the most viable framework for mitigating the effects of climate change on a global scale.

Why Act Now?

The year 2025 serves as a critical milestone in global climate efforts. This is because the UN's Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), one of the most trusted and authoritative assessors of global warming, states that global greenhouse gas emissions must peak by 2025 and then drop drastically by 43% (as compared to 2019 levels) by 2030 for a liveable future. Failing to peak emissions by 2025 would make the 1.5°C target unattainable, according to the IPCC.

Some scientists believe in fact that we may have already breached the 1.5°C threshold. Although global temperatures had briefly surpassed this threshold in the past, 2024 marked the first time the global temperature exceeded 1.5°C for an entire calendar year. Experts caution that delaying climate action further may lock us into an irreversible course with a point of no return.

2024 was the warmest year the Earth has experienced since the systematic monitoring began in 1880. A year before that, UN Secretary-General, Antonio Guterres claimed that the era of global warming is over and the era of global boiling has arrived. According to the Global Carbon Project, CO_2 emissions increased by 1.1% in 2023, setting a new record of 37.4 billion tonnes (Gt). An even more concerning finding, however, was that forests, plants, and soil absorbed almost little to no carbon in 2023. This precipitous and completely unexpected fall has introduced enormous uncertainty into climate change projections.

In furtherance of the 1.5°C goal, the Paris Agreement Implementation and Compliance Committee (PAICC) convened from the 17th to 19th April 2024 to develop strategies to assist States in preparing for critical climate action milestones associated with the Paris Agreement. The PAICC emphasized the importance of submitting three key reports by 2025: Nationally Determined Contributions (NDCs) that have to be submitted by the States by 10th February 2025, Biennial Communications and Biennial Transparency Reports (BTRs), both of which are to be submitted by 31st December 2024.

NDCs – the Heart and Soul of the Paris Agreement and Other Support Mechanisms

Within the international environmental framework, NDCs act as a cardinal reminder of States' obligations toward mitigating the impact of climate change. Fulfilling these obligations demands transformative changes in

the way we live, produce, and consume. NDCs form the heartbeat of the Paris Agreement because they align national planning with international climate goals by translating global targets into concrete, actionable commitments at the national level. Additionally, these national climate plans may serve as both national investment and development plans, assisting countries in making a significant move towards greener, more sustainable growth.

The Paris Agreement requires the Member States to update their NDCs every five years with increasingly higher ambitions. The first update took place in 2015 followed by a second one in 2020-21. However, the two NDC reports have fallen short of corresponding with the 1.5°C objective. This deficiency makes the next iteration of 2025 more important, as it represents the evaluation before the ultimate 2030 deadline which serves as the benchmark for reaching net zero emissions by 2050.

The first Global Stock-take (GST1) at COP 28 demonstrated that the world was well off-course to meet the 1.5°C target, underscoring the weakening pulse of climate mitigation efforts. The States were expected to update their NDCs to include targets for 2035, with a submission deadline of 10th February 2025. Disappointingly, only 13 out of the 195 signatories to the Paris Agreement met this deadline.

A mechanism that can be utilized to achieve the NDCs equitably would be biennial communications. Biennial communications, in recognition of Article 9(5) of the Paris Agreement, were introduced to provide information on various forms of financial support that the developed nations would provide to the developing countries as per their obligations under Articles 9(1) and 9(3) of the Paris Agreement. In the first two Biennial meetings, talks have constantly underlined developed countries' resolve to collectively mobilize $100 billion per year by 2020 and continuing through 2025. However, this goal was met for the first time only after two years in 2022 with $115.9 billion being mobilized in climate finance for developing countries. In its latest iteration, the USA claimed that it raised international public climate finance to over $11 billion annually, including a six-fold increase in adaptation funding to over $3 billion. Similarly, the EU maintained that they are the leaders in climate finance with over EUR 23 billion contributed in 2022 and have redirected its focus to Green Deal commitments.

Additionally, Article 13(4) of the Paris Agreement puts an obligation on the Member States to publish biennial transparency reports (BTR). The format mandates the States to provide a national inventory report of Greenhouse emissions, progress in implementing and achieving its NDCs, information regarding climate change and its impact, capacity-building needs, and areas of improvement.

The first BTRs were published on 31st December 2024 with an impressive 104 member States illustrating their respective goals and the progress they have made so far. In States like Pakistan, where pollution levels are often high, BTR submissions help evaluate progress in combating climate change, allowing more realistic NDCs.

These mechanisms exist to strengthen the resolve of the States in the form of stronger and stricter commitments. As COP30 approaches, these state publications serve as a critical indicator of the international community's commitment and progress toward achieving the 1.5°C objective.

Significance Of COP30

All eyes are now on COP30 which is to be held in November 2025 in Belem, Brazil. COP30 is an important milestone because it marks the summit where the NDC Synthesis Report should be published. The NDC Synthesis Report provides a global view of the climate action efforts by combining and analyzing all NDCs that have been submitted. This will determine the actions and commitments of the states for the next five years.

COP29, while increasing the financial goal to $300 billion, failed to reach an agreement on how to scale up the financial aid for 'developing countries'. Instead, it announced 'Baku to Belem Roadmap to 1.3T' which will see COP 29 and 30 Presidencies, Azerbaijan and Brazil, work together through 2025 to present a menu of options at COP 30 to raise resources to get to $1.3 trillion for developing countries. It is of critical importance that an agreement be made on how to mobilize this financial target by COP30. While COP29 was dubbed as the

"Finance COP", COP30 needs to become the "Implementation COP" as dubbed by Helder Barbalho, governor of host Para state for COP30.

COP30 must catalyze political action, prioritizing people and the planet over profits. The urgency of this moment cannot be overstated. Member States must use the 2025 milestone to transform their commitments into concrete actions, bringing the 1.5°C target within reach. The survival of the earth depends on decisions made today. The time for action is now.

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