

Tough trade-offs on the road to Paris: What hopes for a 2015 climate agreement?

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A close reading of international climate politics points to subtle but important changes in the diplomatic process and the positions of major actors, writes [Robert Falkner](#). However, it looks like differentiation and flexibility in national commitments will be the price to pay for a climate agreement that includes all major emitters.



So here we go again. World leaders gather at a UN summit to pledge serious action against global warming. Legal experts haggle over the fine print in a draft treaty that is supposed to wrap up many years of painstaking negotiations. And the world holds its breath to see if climate diplomacy can clinch the deal that will protect the Earth's climate.

Sounds familiar? We've been here before. It happened in the run-up to the 2009 climate summit in Copenhagen, which was meant to deliver a legally binding treaty on reducing carbon emissions. And it's happening again, this year and next. In September, UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon kicked off the diplomatic circus with a [climate summit](#) in New York. Later this year, negotiators will meet in Lima for the annual conference of parties to the [UNFCCC](#), and all this will culminate in the much-anticipated summit in Paris in late 2015. The Copenhagen conference failed to produce the breakthrough that environmental campaigners had hoped for. Will the Paris conference be any different?

It doesn't take much knowledge of diplomacy to feel cynical about the climate talks. Global warming continues unabated while the UN negotiations drag on. [According to NASA](#), last month was the warmest month and the last six months were the warmest middle of the year since 1880. Yet governments around the world show no hurry to rein in the emissions that are causing global warming. BP's latest energy market analysis predicts a rise in global energy consumption by 41 per cent between 2012 and 2035. Unless the world gets serious about the transition to clean energy sources, and soon, most of the future rise in energy demand will be met by climate-destroying fossil fuels.

How much, then, can we expect from the current climate negotiations? Based on past experience and the state of the talks, the answer seems to be: not much. The UN climate summit in September was meant to corral world leaders into making more ambitious pledges on emissions cuts. In the end, the summit saw rousing speeches by Barack Obama and David Cameron, but the Chinese, Russian and Indian premiers snubbed the crucial informal dialogue session, and other world leaders such as Russia's Putin and Germany's Merkel stayed away from the summit altogether. Unless the political leaders of the main emitters collectively raise the level of ambition, diplomats will have a hard time patching up the countless holes in the draft treaty that is to be adopted in Paris.

Yet, a closer reading of international climate politics points to subtle but important changes in the diplomatic process and the positions of major actors. They don't justify feverish expectations of a diplomatic breakthrough, but offer the glimmer of hope for a more realistic international approach.

Significant changes can be detected in the case of the two leading emitters, the United States and China. In the past, both played it safe and refrained from making commitments to reduce their own emissions. The US refused to ratify the [Kyoto Protocol](#), on the grounds that it did not oblige emerging economies to take any action. And China, a party to the Kyoto treaty, clung to its longstanding position that all industrialised countries, and especially the US, had to move first on emission reductions before it could consider capping its own emissions growth. But while this US-Chinese 'game of chicken' held back serious negotiations in the past, it no longer seems to be an insurmountable

roadblock. Having failed to introduce a carbon cap-and-trade system in the US, the Obama administration has recently used regulatory tools to restrict emissions from coal-based energy production. America's greenhouse gas emissions have started to fall, and the US has re-engaged in the multilateral negotiations with the clear intention of reaching a comprehensive agreement in Paris.

China, too, has started to approach the climate challenge more seriously, driven by the realization that record economic growth has come at the cost of an unprecedented environmental crisis. The political leadership in Beijing now openly recognizes that rampant pollution undermines the regime's legitimacy at home and abroad. The country's 12th Five-Year Plan adopted in 2011 already contains a large section with policies on reducing energy and carbon intensity in the economy, increasing non-fossil energy as part of the energy mix and establishing a carbon trading system. More recently, China has indicated it is also willing to negotiate international commitments on capping the future growth of emissions, though Chinese negotiators remain coy about putting specific numbers and targets on the table. Still, bilateral cooperation with the US on climate and clean energy is at an all-time high, and a US-Chinese agreement on the main parameters of a future climate treaty could unblock the international negotiations.

Europe, meanwhile, continues to play the role of pace setter in the negotiations, pushing for a strong international accord. Recent wrangling over the EU's future emissions targets and a lacklustre carbon market may have taken the shine off Europe's leadership role. Yet, it remains the case that the EU is the only major actor in the industrialised world that is willing to set ambitious emission reductions targets, and to enshrine them in a legally binding treaty.

But there is the rub. If the US and China agree to an international agreement with commitments to emission reductions, they will insist that these commitments are made in the form of non-binding pledges. The US administration lacks support in Congress to ratify a treaty with legally binding targets, while the Chinese government is unwilling to tie itself into an inflexible emissions regime that might impede future economic growth. Both insist that country pledges for emission cuts need to be bottom-up, based on domestic support and not mandated by international law. Other countries will find it difficult to agree to a treaty architecture that leaves countries to determine their own level of ambition when it comes to mitigation. But differentiation and flexibility in national commitments will be the price to pay for a climate agreement that includes all major emitters. Will the EU and developing countries accept this price?

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