

# Once again, UN climate meeting comes up empty

Daniel de Vries  
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As United Nations Secretary General Ban Ki-moon opened the Climate Summit in New York this week, he described climate change as the defining issue of our age, warning that “there is no more time for business as usual.” The summit must not be about talk, he urged, but rather about “producing actions that make a difference.”

What world leaders offered up, however, was little more than empty, self-serving pledges that will do nothing to stave off the impact of global warming.

One of the key goals of the meeting had been to build momentum for the Paris Conference in December 2015, which the UN has targeted for a binding agreement on climate change. Fifteen months away, almost no one expects such an agreement to be forthcoming. The Obama administration underscored this last month, saying they intend only to “name and shame” countries into setting voluntary targets, rather than pursuing a legally enforceable treaty.

Tuesday’s summit was the highest-profile effort to bring together leaders of the major countries on the issue of climate change since Copenhagen in 2009, when the last attempt to negotiate a binding agreement ended in debacle. Over 120 heads of state participated in the summit.

However, despite the large numbers of dignitaries, low expectations and rising geopolitical tensions ensured that leaders of several of the most important countries, in terms of both economic output and greenhouse gas emissions, stayed away. Angela Merkel of Germany, Vladimir Putin of Russia, Xi Jinping of China, and Narendra Modi of India, among others, were absent.

A day after initiating the bombing campaign in Syria, President Obama used his remarks to take aim at China. Obama challenged China as the world’s second-largest

economy and biggest greenhouse gas emitter. Like the US, China has a “special responsibility to lead,” he said. “That’s what big nations have to do.”

The US has long since gone back on the past concession that the wealthy industrialized countries, having created the bulk of greenhouse emissions, had greater responsibility than the poorer countries for finding a remedy. Instead, the primary aim of Obama’s international climate policy is to gain a competitive advantage against China. In this respect, his singling out of Beijing can be understood as the “green” component of the US “pivot to Asia.”

While Obama boasted in his speech about the United States “stepping up to the plate” to regulate pollution from power plants, the Environmental Protection Agency quietly announced September 16 that it was delaying implementation of the new rules at least through the end of the year.

The president also bragged that the US was on track to meet its goal of reducing greenhouse gas emissions by 17 percent in 2020. This goal, which is based on a cherry-picked starting point when emissions neared their peak, is nowhere near adequate. The US remains on a trajectory to exceed 1990 emissions by five percent in 2030. The bulk of the recent reductions are attributable to the transition from coal to natural gas in the power sector. Made economically attractive by the boom in hydro-fracking, this development has carried alongside it devastating environmental consequences.

Obama was far from the only leader to make cynical claims of environmental progress. The UK’s David Cameron remarked, “As prime minister, I pledged to lead the greenest government ever and I believe we have kept that promise,” before touting the low-carbon benefits of shale gas exploration.

French President François Hollande was one of the

few to announce any new commitments, pledging \$1 billion over four years to the Green Climate Fund. Formally established at the Cancun climate conference in 2010, the fund is intended to raise \$100 billion a year to finance climate-related projects in so-called developing countries. Four years later, however, the fund remains near empty, with only Germany equaling France's pledge, plus a handful of other countries making smaller donations. The \$1 billion pledge by France is a mere drop in the bucket, equal to roughly half a percent of the country's military spending over the same four-year period.

The Green Climate Fund, like all the "market-based measures" advanced at the UN conference, is based not on what is needed to limit climate change or adapt to its consequences, but on the profit interests of the banks and major corporations. Wall Street is preparing for a bonanza, eying the fund as a vehicle for huge profits at essentially no risk. National governments would provide loan guaranties and subsidies, essentially covering losses in case the climate investments fail, while ensuring windfall profits flow to private companies.

Underscoring the subordination of climate policy to business interests, Tuesday's summit had the largest ever involvement from the private sector. A UN press release highlighted this fact, stating, "In a major departure from the climate negotiations and previous climate summits, the business community and civil society are playing a major role. There were 181 representatives from the business and investment community, including 90 chief executive officers."

Meanwhile, scientists at the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration announced last week that global temperatures this summer were the hottest on record. This year is on track to break the record for the warmest ever, previously set in 2010, they project.

The NOAA announcement is just the latest in a steady stream of reports and assessments highlighting the severity of the climate crisis. While the governmental, business and "civil society" leaders present at the summit near universally admitted this, they once again demonstrated that it is impossible, within the framework of capitalist property relations and the nation-state system, to muster any meaningful response.



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