

Peru climate change negotiations again dominated by great power rivalries

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16 December 2014

The latest United Nations climate summit, the 20th Conference of the Parties (COP20), concluded in the Peruvian capital of Lima on the weekend without agreement on reducing global carbon emissions.

This failure to take any significant measures to address an already escalating environmental crisis sees Lima join the long list of failed UN summits following the Copenhagen debacle in 2009. Recently elected American President Barack Obama and other world leaders then met amid great fanfare, but were unable to agree on a binding post-Kyoto treaty amid rancorous divisions between the US and rival powers, including China and Russia.

A high-level summit is scheduled in Paris next December, but Washington has pre-emptively scotched suggestions that a binding treaty will even be attempted. Instead, each national government will develop “voluntary” plans to reduce greenhouse gas emissions.

The outlines of what will likely eventuate in Paris were evident in Lima. After the Peruvian summit was extended by two days, delegates finally agreed to a statement that sought to balance the rival concerns of the major powers, while committing each of them to nothing.

A five-page statement, dubbed the Lima Call for Climate Action, explained that governments will submit a plan on their targeted emissions reductions by March 31 “for those ready to do so,” together with an explanation of the domestic legislation to be enacted to achieve these cuts. Nothing is binding.

Demands issued by the European Union for monitoring and verification mechanisms for governments’ submitted emissions plans were rejected by China as a threat to its sovereignty. The Lima text watered down a section of an initial draft that specified that governments “shall provide” various details, including annual targets and explanations of the methods used to calculate national emissions. The final version now merely states “may provide.”

Washington and its allies, including Australia and Canada, achieved their goal of tying further emissions reductions within their countries to similar commitments made by so-called developing countries, including China, India, and Brazil.

The Lima statement included reference to a 2015 agreement based on “the principle of common but differentiated responsibilities and respective capabilities, in light of different national circumstances.” This is different to the Kyoto Protocol, under which almost all of the countries assigned binding emissions reductions targets were advanced capitalist economies, with other states only asked to make voluntary steps.

The Obama administration has long insisted that this division must be eliminated. US Secretary of State John Kerry delivered a speech in Lima declaring that “the fact is we simply don’t have enough time to go back and forth about who has the responsibility to act ... today more than half of global emissions are coming from developing nations, so it is imperative that they act too.”

Washington’s real agenda is not to reach an effective global climate change agreement but to ensure that rival powers do not gain any economic or geostrategic advantage through a post-Kyoto pact. Reacting to the deepening crisis of American capitalism and erosion of its world hegemony, the Obama administration has launched its provocative “pivot” to the Asia-Pacific, aimed at undermining and militarily encircling China. At the same time, it is aggressively confronting Russia, having installed a fascist-backed government in Ukraine, and stoking military tensions throughout Eastern Europe as a means of bolstering American imperialism’s influence across the Eurasian landmass.

This is the geopolitical context within which the futile negotiations for a new climate change treaty have proceeded. While each national ruling class seeks to promote its own corporate interests and to gain strategic

ground against its rivals, evidence of the environmental catastrophe confronting humanity continues to mount.

Last month, the UN's International Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) issued another summary of the latest research conducted by thousands of climate scientists around the world. The IPCC reported that under "business as usual" forecasts, average world temperatures would rise by around 4°C by the end of the century. This would result in "severe and widespread impacts on unique and threatened systems, substantial species extinction, large risks to global and regional food security, consequential constraints on common human activities, increased likelihood of triggering tipping points, and limited potential for adaptation in some places."

As delegates began meeting in Lima, the World Meteorological Organisation reported that 2014 is currently tied for the hottest year on record.

The IPCC estimated that to restrict global warming to no more than 2°C above pre-industrial levels, global emissions will need to decline by 40 to 70 percent between 2010 and 2050, with net carbon emissions falling to zero by the year 2100. Several climate scientists, however, have warned that permitting a 2°C temperature rise risks severe environmental events, so that carbon emissions need to be slashed more rapidly.

None of this alarming scientific evidence has altered the stance of the major capitalist powers. The Lima meeting and preparations for the Paris summit next year have served to underscore the impossibility of resolving the climate change crisis within the framework of the profit system, in which corporate interests and inter-imperialist rivalries stymie the necessary reorganisation of the global economy and rational utilisation of existing and potential technologies.



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