

World leaders converge on Poland for climate summit

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Delegates from more than 200 countries are meeting in Katowice, Poland, in the annual United Nations ritual to discuss international climate change policy. This year's conference is the third since the Paris Agreement. Dubbed "Paris 2.0," it is devoted to working out the implementation details of the 2015 accord.

Despite ample evidence that the Paris agreement itself is woefully inadequate, ambitions for Katowice remain low, with no expectation of a new round of more stringent pledges by nations this year. With US President Donald Trump in the process of withdrawing the world's second largest polluter from Paris (the US remains a participant until at least 2020, the first opportunity for formal withdrawal), the conference is more likely to test the very survival of the agreement. Skepticism or outright opposition to Paris has grown from governments of key countries including Russia, Brazil and Australia.

Despite the technocratic content of much of the Katowice negotiations, the geopolitical stakes are high. Climate negotiations over the past couple of decades have played a prominent role in shaping the international economic rulebook. The Trump administration's emphasis on naked national interests over any pretense of international cooperation has triggered sharp rebukes, particularly from Europe. French President Emmanuel Macron, for instance, used the platform of the UN General Assembly this past September to warn that trade pacts shouldn't include countries that do not abide by the Paris Agreement.

At a conference session on Monday, Trump's top White House adviser on energy, Wells Griffith, praised the use of fossil fuels, particularly coal, in what amounted to a deliberate provocation against the Katowice meeting. Griffith directly counterposed

profits and military advantage to environmental survival, declaring, "We strongly believe that no country should have to sacrifice economic prosperity or energy security in pursuit of environmental sustainability."

This deliberate flouting of international opinion follows the Group of 20 summit in Argentina, when 19 of the 20 leaders present, all but Trump, gave a verbal commitment to action on climate change, while Trump dismissed the issue.

Halfway through the Katowice conference, signs of increasing dysfunction have already emerged. On Saturday, the United States, Russia, Saudi Arabia and Kuwait scuttled plans to "welcome" a report from the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change on the impacts of a global temperature rise of 1.5 degrees Celsius. The report warned that time has nearly run out to put the world on a path to avoid disastrous climate impacts.

The group of nations objected to the word "welcome," which would implicitly endorse the findings. They proposed instead to merely "note" the report.

"I think it was a key moment," Union of Concerned Scientists Director Alden Meyer told the Associated Press. "The fact that a group of four countries were trying to diminish the value and importance of a scientific report they themselves, with all other countries, requested three years ago in Paris is pretty remarkable."

That the gathering of nations assembled in Poland could not reach consensus to acknowledge the scientific realities of climate change reflects deep divisions over national interests and profitability of national industries—divisions that extend well beyond the four countries distinguishing themselves Saturday.

Scientists have pointed out that the current aggregate of all voluntary commitments under Paris are more likely to lead to a catastrophic warming of 3°C rather than the stated goals of 2°C or 1.5°C.

Even so, many of the major polluters are falling well behind their self-determined goals. The United Nations Environment Program (UNEP) released a study on the eve of Katowice highlighting that a majority of G-20 nations are not on a path to fulfilling their 2030 commitments.

At the global level, carbon emissions show no signs of peaking. Last year, emissions reached a record high after temporarily stabilizing, the report noted. Emissions rose by 1.6 percent in 2017, including 2.5 percent in the US, 5 percent in China and more than 6 percent in India, and are projected to rise by 2.7 percent this year, an acceleration that has ominous implications. If current policies are maintained, emissions will continue to increase beyond 2030.

The day after Thanksgiving, the Trump administration released a nearly 1,700-page report co-written by hundreds of scientists finding that climate change is already causing increasing damage to the United States. That was followed by another report detailing the growing gap between the commitments made at earlier U.N. conferences and what is needed to steer the planet off its calamitous path.

The “emissions gap” between where the world is and where it must be to avoid the worst climate impacts is growing. Philip Drost, the head of the steering committee for the UNEP report, explained, “We need three times more ambition to close the 2-degree gap, and five times more ambition to close the 1.5-degree gap.”

Katowice, building on the 23 conferences before it, provides a display of the paralysis of global capitalism in the face of an accelerating climate catastrophe.



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