

## Turning a corner on climate

Every year since 1995, tens of thousands of climate-policy wonks, politicians, journalists and campaigners from all corners of the world have gathered in one place at the end of the year. For two weeks they cram themselves into an enclosed conference centre. There is much talking and little sleep. At times, hundreds gather in a single auditorium; at others, they huddle in small clusters. Fresh air is a luxury. There are social drinks and meals. And at the end of it all, everyone flies back to where they came from. In other words, the UN's annual climate summits are ideal superspreader events for a pandemic virus.

It comes as no surprise, then, that the 2020 event (dubbed "COP26") was delayed until November 2021. From a public-health perspective, the decision was obvious. It may also have been a stroke of luck for the British government, which was due to host the event in Glasgow. Early in 2020 it became fairly clear that the prime minister, Boris Johnson, and his team had their hands full with Brexit and were looking somewhat lacklustre on the climate front. The extension gave them an additional 12 months to do their homework.

It seems to have paid off. The key task ahead of COP26 is to plead with and nudge the nearly 200 governments that are party to the 2015 Paris agreement to dig deep and improve on their promises to slash national emissions. So far, however, the sum of these "nationally determined contributions" to the agreement (or NDCs) is not sufficient to prevent catastrophic warming. Models suggest the world is likely to see around 3°C of warming above pre-industrial temperatures by 2100, far more than the agreement's aim of limiting the rise to 1.5-2°C.

To make up for the shortfall, signatories were due to submit more ambitious NDCs by the end of 2020. So far only 15 have done so—mainly small developing countries that account for just 4.6% of global emissions, yet suffer greatly from their climatic impacts.

From a global climate-policy perspective, 2021 begins on December 12th 2020, the fifth anniversary of the Paris agreement. Rather than heralding the opening of COP26 in Glasgow, the anniversary will instead be marked by a summit co-

hosted by Mr Johnson and António Guterres, the UN's secretary-general. Many fresh climate commitments will be made then. Spurred on by recent European Union and Chinese statements about eliminating all or most emissions by mid-century, more countries will come forward with similar net-zero targets.

The EU says it will reduce all its greenhouse-gas emissions to net-zero by 2050, in line with what the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, a scientific consortium, says is necessary as a global average to hit the 1.5°C Paris target. In September 2020 China's president, Xi Jinping, announced that his country would reduce its “carbon emissions” (ie, not including other greenhouse gases) to net-zero by 2060. Both the EU and China are expected to register these mid-century goals with the UN as part of their updated NDCs. Details of how they plan to achieve these lofty ambitions, and reach their targets for 2030 of peaking emissions (China) and cutting them to 55% below 1990 levels (EU), should come with China's 14th five-year plan and the EU's Green Deal.

Equally important will be how countries set out their plans to adapt to the inevitable impacts of a warmer climate at the virtual Climate Adaptation Summit in late January, and how nations flesh out their economic recovery plans from covid-19. The pandemic is expected to cause a reduction of nearly 8% in global CO<sub>2</sub> emissions in 2020, compared with what they would have been without the associated global recession. Whether or not emissions rebound, as they did after the global financial crisis in 2007-09, will depend on how countries decide to stimulate their flagging economies. Some, like Nigeria, have already announced plans to phase out fossil-fuel subsidies as part of their recovery. Others, like Canada and France, have tied climate-related conditions to bail-out funds. And the European Commission plans to spend 30% of its recovery package on climate action.

Such moves will aid a global transition to a greener economy and ultimately keep global temperatures cooler than they might otherwise have been. But they are not enough. The recovery plans of China and India, notably, still include stimulus for future coal-power development which is entirely inconsistent with Paris targets.

The biggest climate actor to watch in 2021 will be America, newly returned to the fold under President-elect Joe Biden. On November 4th, the morning after Americans went to the polls, their country officially came out of the Paris agreement, according to plans set in motion by President Donald Trump six months after he took office in 2017. Mr Biden will reverse this decision soon after entering the White House.

He supports a net-zero-by-2050 target, which, taken together with the European and Chinese pledges, would give 45% of global emissions an expiry date of sorts. Mid-century is a long way off, though, and if Mr Trump's presidency has demonstrated anything, it is that the best-laid plans can easily be overturned by the next administration. When it comes to the climate, it will be important for Mr Biden to succeed where Barack Obama failed. And the foundations for that must be laid in 2021.

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