

GLOBAL WARNING

The Emperor's New Climate-Change Agreement

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COPENHAGEN – Dressing up failure as victory has been integral to climate-change negotiations since they started 20 years ago. The latest round of talks in Durban, South Africa, in December was no exception.

Climate negotiations have been in virtual limbo ever since the catastrophic and humiliating Copenhagen summit in 2009, where vertiginous expectations collided with hard political reality. So as negotiators – and a handful of government ministers – arrived in Durban, expectations could not have been lower.

Yet, by the end of the talks, the European Union's climate commissioner, Connie Hedegaard, was being applauded in the media for achieving a "breakthrough" that had "salvaged Durban," and, most significantly, for achieving the holy grail of climate negotiations, a "legally binding treaty." According to British climate minister Chris Huhne, the results showed that the United Nations climate-change negotiation system "really works and can produce results."



Sure, the agreement would come into effect only in 2020 – which sounds oddly complacent when environmentalists and political leaders warned ahead of the Copenhagen conference that we had just six months or 50 days to solve the climate problem. But, as the British newspaper *The Guardian* assured readers, this was a breakthrough, because developing countries, including India and China, were, for the first time, "agreeing to be legally bound to curb their greenhouse gases." And, just as importantly, the US was making the same promise.

Let's take a look at the actual agreement reached in Durban that generated all that congratulatory back-slapping. It won't take long: the document runs to two pages, contains no commitments to cut emissions, and outlines no policies to implement the undefined cuts. There is simply a promise "to launch a process to develop a protocol, another legal instrument, or an agreed outcome with legal force."

An agreement to launch a legal process. That is what everyone got so worked up about? And, again, the negotiators merely promised to set themselves a deadline of 2015 to finish setting up this legal process, which would enter into force five years hence.

Just a few days later, the Indian environment minister, Shrimati Jayanthi Natarajan, stressed that there was no legally binding treaty: "India cannot agree to a legally binding agreement for emissions reduction at this stage of our development....I must clarify that [Durban] does not imply that India has to take binding commitments to reduce its emissions in absolute terms in 2020."

India was not alone. The day after the Durban conference, Canada officially withdrew from the Kyoto Protocol, which Russia and Japan have already declined to extend, leaving only the EU's member states and a few other countries committed to further reductions.

Hollow victories have been central to climate negotiations since they began. The Durban agreement uncannily echoes the agreement reached in Bali in 2007 "to launch a comprehensive process to enable the full, effective, and sustained implementation of the [UN Climate] Convention through long-term cooperative action." According to that deal – which was, of course, much celebrated at the time – a legal treaty was supposed to be ready for the 2009 Copenhagen meeting.

In Kyoto in 1997, the treaty was acclaimed as "a milestone in the history of climate protection," and President Bill Clinton declared that "the United States has reached an historic agreement with other nations of the world to take unprecedented action to address global warming."

Of course, the treaty had already been rejected in the US Senate by a 95-0 vote, and thus was dead on arrival. This, and lax interpretations of emissions in the years following Kyoto, meant that more emissions occurred under the protocol than had been expected to occur in its absence according to research undertaken by the economists Christoph Böhringer and Carsten Vogt.

Even at the start of global climate-change negotiations in Rio de Janeiro in 1992, the aim of putting the planet "on a course to address the critical issue of global warming" soon went awry. Rich countries fell 12% short of their promise to cut emissions to 1990 levels by 2000.

For 20 years, climate negotiators have repeatedly celebrated deals that haven't panned out. Worse, for all practical purposes, the promises that have been made have had no impact on global CO2 emissions. They have only provided false hope that we have addressed climate change and allowed us to push it to the back burner for another few years. So, before we get too excited celebrating the "breakthrough" of Durban, we would do well to reflect on a two-decade history of flogging a dead horse.

We will never reduce emissions significantly until we manage to make green energy cheaper than fossil fuels. We must focus sharply on research and development to drive down alternative energy prices over coming decades.

The first step toward doing that is to end our collective suspension of disbelief when it comes to climate-change negotiations. We need to see through the hype and self-serving political spin. We owe it to the future to do better.

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