

COP21, Paris: national contribution plans*

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COP21 (The Conference of the Parties to the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change, UNFCCC) will be the event of this fall and end of the year in environmental diplomacy. The intention is to achieve a “universal and legally binding agreement” to reduce emissions of greenhouse gases (GHG) in order to keep global warming below 2° C from pre-industrial levels, beyond which it is presumed that the effects are irreversible.

Parties to the UNFCCC have been asked during the previous conference (Lima, 2014) to submit, by the end of 2015’s first quarter, national action plans to limit GHG emissions (intended nationally determined contributions, INDC), applicable after 2020 – that is, after the expiry of the “second commitment period” (2013-2020) of the Kyoto Protocol.

By the time of updating this article (September 10, 2015), 59 countries (31 plus the EU, whose INDC covers 28 states) of the 196 UNFCCC members had submitted INDCs, covering 59.4% of global GHG emissions (climateactiontracker.org)

EU resumes in its collective INDC obligations under the climate change and energy strategy for 2030: “The EU and Member States are committed to a binding target for the internal reduction of GHG emissions by at least 43% in 2030 compared to 1990, which will be jointly carried out.” The document specifies that the target is aligned with the long-term goal of reducing emissions by 80-95% by 2050 compared to 1990.

The United States aim to reduce emissions by 26-28% by 2025 compared to 2005 levels. On August 3, the White House and the Federal Agency for Environmental Protection announced the Clean Energy Plan, whereby emissions in the energy sector – 31% of the national total – are to be reduced by 32% since 2022. This plan has already sparked fierce opposition in the American political and corporate environment.

China’s INDC targets are to reach the peak of emissions in 2030, to reach a 20% share of the energy mix for “low-carbon sources” and to reduce by 2030 carbon emissions per unit of GDP by 60-65% compared to 2005 levels.

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For INDCs to serve as a basis for achieving a global climate agreement post-2020, first of all there is a need for their “normalization” with respect to baseline data and calculation methodology, in order to be able to assess INDCs’ relative merits, suitability, and coherence. Yet it would be no wonder if this revealed so much difference in the proposed policies and regulations as to render impractical a unique global institutional response. Besides, the political and administrative capacity of different member states, and also their level of ambition, can vary so much that the project of a universal, integrated system for preventing climate change is unfeasible. Rather, the pragmatic alternative would probably be a regime complex, to use the term of Robert Keohane and David Victor, by which different regional approaches are harmonized functionally and organizationally under the umbrella of common environmental objectives.

It is therefore likely that, for practical reasons, COP21’s outcome will fall short of the aspiration to “a universal and legally binding agreement.” On the other hand, however, the concept of negotiations in Paris is to build a flexible international framework of policies effective in combating global warming. Unlike the Kyoto Protocol, it aims to involve not only industrialized countries, but also developing ones – even though the former will keep the responsibility of financing global climate policy. But it will be an adjustable framework: the EU in particular insists on establishing a quinquennial review of INDCs from 2020 on, in the light of best climate science data, so that the national commitments to reduce GHG emissions can be maximized.

Indeed, it will require much tact to align, beyond good intentions, the energy security needs of member states, international development cooperation, the interests of energy producers and utility companies, international financing and risk management mechanisms etc. In particular, it is a matter of industrial competitiveness for companies in countries with stringent climate regulations that these do not create an untenable competitive disadvantage compared to their main global competitors.

Among other things, as noted by Susanne Dröge and Oliver Geden in a recent study of the Foundation for Science and Politics in Germany, even the term “protocol,” interpreted as a legally binding instrument in international law, is inadequate and risky, given the unlikelihood that the US Congress will ratify such a treaty.

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