

Phasing out gasoline cars and coal: What the UN climate talks have and haven't achieved

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As the United Nations climate summit in Glasgow, Scotland, enters its final day Friday, global leaders can point to signs of real progress. But the Earth is still headed for a dangerous level of warming.

The point of these talks was for countries to announce ambitious carbon-cutting pledges that would prevent the world from warming more than 1.5 degrees Celsius (2.7 degrees Fahrenheit) above pre-industrial levels.

That did not happen. Despite some new promises, and old promises repackaged as new ones, an analysis by the independent group Climate Action Tracker found that with all the short-term pledges added together, the world is likely to heat up by 2.4 degrees Celsius (4.3 degrees Fahrenheit) this century. That's better than the path the world was on before the Paris agreement six years ago, when scientists predicted nearly 4 degrees Celsius (7.2 degrees Fahrenheit) of warming. But the consequences would still be catastrophic, resulting in deadlier wildfires and floods, famine and the extinction of more species.

Negotiations over what countries will do to combat [climate change](#) going forward are still ongoing. Here's a look at what's been accomplished so far—and what remains unresolved.

Side deals were the main event this time

This year's summit was unusual. Typically, the main event is the final agreement, painfully hammered out over two weeks of daily negotiations between representatives from nearly 200 countries. This time, most of the action happened on the sidelines:

- Nearly 100 countries joined a global pledge to limit emissions of methane, a planet-warming gas more potent as a polluter than carbon dioxide. Still more signed a pact to prevent further deforestation by 2030.
- A coalition of countries, cities and automakers, including Ford, General Motors, Volvo and Mercedes-Benz, committed to phase out sales of new fossil-fuel vehicles by 2040 and by 2035 in "leading markets."
- More than 40 countries pledged to phase out coal by 2030 and stop building coal-fired power plants, helping eliminate the largest source of planet-warming gases globally.
- In a test of whether industrialized nations are capable of helping

developing countries shift to cleaner sources of energy, South Africa reached a deal with the U.S., Britain, France, Germany and the European Union under which it would receive \$8.5 billion over the next five years to transition away from coal.

- The U.S., Denmark and other countries agreed to work toward zeroing out emissions from the shipping industry by 2050 and creating at least six zero-emission shipping routes. If these changes are enacted, governments could require, for example, that only emissions-free ships travel from Shanghai to Los Angeles.

There are reasons to be skeptical of many of these agreements, environmental advocates said. Brazil and Indonesia, countries that are destroying their forests, joined the deforestation pledge. And some of the world's largest coal-burning countries, including China, Australia and India, didn't sign the pledge to phase out the fossil fuel.

But the level of deal-making at the summit is an "enormous sign of success," said Sarah Ladislaw, a managing director at the independent, Colorado-based clean energy research organization the Rocky Mountain Institute. More than ever before, she said, countries, industry, investors and philanthropists are working together to reach side deals that could have a huge effect, adding that the conference should not be judged solely on whether "something very big and new" came out of the official negotiating process.

Beyond swagger, what went down between the U.S. and China?

Doubts that the U.S. and China, the top emitting countries in the world, were willing to work together on climate hung over the summit from the beginning. Chinese President Xi Jinping's absence led President Biden to

publicly criticize him for skipping the summit—a scolding that prompted the Chinese foreign ministry spokesman to accuse the U.S. of offering only "empty words" instead of concrete climate policies.

Despite the rhetoric, American and Chinese officials had been working together for months. The countries unveiled a statement Wednesday in which they pledged to put aside their differences and "raise ambition in the 2020s" to address climate change.

The deal itself mostly restated previous pledges, but the fact that the envoys of the two countries that together produce about 40% of global emissions could agree to even a vague goal was "confidence building," said Kelly Sims Gallagher, professor of energy and environmental policy at the Fletcher School at Tufts University.

"We're all in this really hyper-politicized environment, and the fact that this came together shows that they're trying to inject some momentum into the negotiations," Gallagher said.

What the U.S. left on the table

"America showed up," Biden said at the summit, where he touted the U.S.'s participation in the talks and apologized for former President Trump's exit from the Paris agreement, which the country has since rejoined. He called on other nations to increase their climate goals, saying that "we only have a brief window before us to raise our ambitions."

But at a couple of key moments, the U.S. was noticeably absent.

The White House did not join the pledge to phase out coal in the coming decades, even though coal's decline as a source of power in America has accelerated significantly. Nor did the U.S. sign the agreement to phase

out gas- and diesel-powered cars, joining China and Japan in withholding its support from a deal that could have a greater influence if all three—some of the largest car markets in the world—had backed it.

Experts said the decision to abstain from these pledges spoke volumes about America's domestic politics and the influence of the coal, oil and gas industries. The American negotiators may also have been reluctant to antagonize Sen. Joe Manchin III, a centrist Democrat from the coal state of West Virginia, whose support the president will need if his biggest climate policies are to win approval. The Democrats' spending bill faces an uphill battle in Congress, despite its pared-down measures.

Youth climate activists made their case in the streets

Thousands of climate activists traveled to Glasgow to demand countries act faster to combat climate change. Many of them were young protesters, including Greta Thunberg of Sweden and Vanessa Nakate, an activist from Uganda, who have achieved international recognition by publicly calling out world leaders for failing to take action and ignoring the demands of developing countries.

Summit attendees said that COVID-19 protocols made it much more difficult this year for protesters to confront international leaders in person. But outside of the formal negotiations, side events, panels and marches offered the activists a platform to make their displeasure known.

They may have affected the proceedings' tone. There were boastful claims of progress, but these were often tempered by acknowledgments that the math doesn't add up and more cuts will have to be made to keep global warming in check.

"Let me emphasize as strongly as I can: Job not done," John Kerry,

Biden's climate change envoy, said at a news conference last week. "But this is doable if we follow through."

What happens next?

The summit inspired a flurry of new climate pledges from governments and industry. But in the weeks and months ahead, government officials and researchers will be watching closely to see whether they lead to concrete action.

Biden's spending bill faces an uncertain future. A new Supreme Court case brought by West Virginia and other coal states could block the Environmental Protection Agency from regulating carbon pollution from power plants. And if Democrats lose their majorities in Congress in the midterm elections, Biden would likely find his path to future emissions reductions blocked by Republicans.

The report by Climate Action Tracker found that of all the pledges countries have made to get to zero emissions, only four—Britain, Costa Rica, Chile and the EU—have detailed plans to achieve that.

What's more, many of the major challenges that presented themselves at the beginning of the summit remain unresolved, including whether wealthy countries will come up with the \$100 billion a year they previously promised to developing nations by 2020 to help them transition to cleaner sources of energy.

Negotiations will likely continue at the upcoming World Economic Forum in Davos, Switzerland, in January, as well as the next meeting of energy ministers from around the world in Pittsburgh in late 2022.

"We've got all these promises. We've got all these [pledges](#)," Ladislav said. "But now we will see what [countries](#) are prepared to do."

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