

# Climate change after the Kyoto Protocol

**Events:** The 1997 Kyoto Protocol (to the UNFCCC) marked the first use of binding targets to reduce greenhouse gas emissions. The Protocol entered into force in 2005, and its first commitment period ended in 2012. The principal attempt to construct a post-Kyoto Protocol climate change framework was undertaken at the 2009 UN Climate Change Conference in Copenhagen. However, the Copenhagen conference failed to create any new legally-binding obligations on any country to cut its emissions, even failing to establish any non-legal targets for national or global emissions reductions. The 2011 United Nations Climate Change Conference in Durban, South Africa, nevertheless appeared to get the post-Kyoto process back on track, by supporting a plan for a new treaty to be agreed in Paris in late 2015, and to come into force in 2020, with the Kyoto Protocol continuing to operate until then. Although the 2012 United Nations Climate Change Conference in Doha, Qatar, did not consider the shape of the new treaty, agreement was reached on extending the life of the Kyoto Protocol until 2020.

**Significance:** Pessimists view this catalogue of failure, delay and obfuscation as a stark abandonment of responsibility on the part of the international community. Extending the life of the Kyoto Protocol achieves little because the treaty is so clearly flawed. Not only did the USA (then the world's largest carbon emitter) never ratify the treaty, and the entire developing world including China (which, in 2008, overtook the USA as the world's largest emitter) remained outside Kyoto's target regime, but, through its 'flexible mechanisms', Kyoto provided a range of loopholes which parties could exploit to fulfil their targets. Thus, although most of the parties to Kyoto met their commitments easily, worldwide emissions have surged by 50 per cent since 1990, driven by economic growth in China and other parts of Asia, South America and Africa. Optimists, nevertheless, questioned this bleak assessment, pointing to a record of slow, but meaningful, progress. For all its limitations, Kyoto was a vital first step, both marking the first use of legally binding emissions targets and introducing the 'cap and trade' systems and carbon taxes that have subsequently been taken up in Europe, Australia, Japan, China, California and parts of Canada. Copenhagen moved beyond Kyoto, in that the USA and China were full participants in the climate change process. Durban formally



endorsed the idea of a post-Kyoto treaty, and Doha established the principle that rich countries should compensate poor countries for 'loss and damage' due to climate change, while resisting the idea of legal liability.

Nevertheless, the task of developing a successor to Kyoto remains fraught with problems. These include conflict between the developed world and the developing world over burden sharing. The former emphasizes the need for targets to reflect current emissions levels, as developing countries have, since 2012, been responsible for more than half the world's carbon emissions. The latter argues that targets should reflect the historic responsibility of developed countries for the carbon emitted since the beginning of the industrial revolution. Progress at Copenhagen, Durban, Doha and elsewhere has also been made more difficult by great power rivalries, particularly between the USA and China. Perhaps the most fundamental problem, nevertheless, is that reductions in greenhouse gas emissions that are sufficient to mitigate the effect of climate change are both costly (because of the need to develop alternatives to carbon-based production) and threaten to impede growth and therefore prosperity. Short- and medium-term economic self-interest therefore tend to be given priority over longer-term environmental concerns (despite growing evidence of the economic costs associated with climate change). States thus have an incentive to do as little as possible about climate change, in the hope that others will shoulder the burden, especially in the context of the 2007–09 global financial crisis and its aftermath.