

At Bonn Climate Talks, Stakes Get Higher in Gamble on Planet's Future

By [BRAD PLUMER](#) NOV. 18, 2017 (New York Times)



Leaders from the United Nations, France, Fiji and Germany at the climate change conference in Bonn, Germany. Credit Wolfgang Rattay/Reuters

BONN, Germany — Perhaps the most revealing moment at [this year's United Nations climate talks](#) came on Wednesday, when Chancellor Angela Merkel of Germany addressed the nearly 200 nations gathered here.

After declaring that “climate change is an issue determining our destiny as mankind,” Ms. Merkel acknowledged that Germany was likely to miss the goals it had set itself for cutting greenhouse gas emissions by 2020 because of [its continued reliance on coal power](#). While vowing to grapple with the issue, she said that phasing out coal use would require “tough discussions” with German policymakers in the weeks ahead.

On one level, it was a stark reminder that the real action on global warming does not unfold in international venues. The problem will largely be addressed by governments back home trying to adopt policies to shift away from fossil fuels, by businesses perfecting and

deploying clean energy technologies, by city planners reworking their local transportation systems.

But Ms. Merkel's speech was an example of what diplomats are trying to achieve. As the two-week Bonn talks [concluded on Saturday](#), negotiators said they had made headway on creating a formal process under the 2015 Paris agreement in which world leaders would regularly and publicly detail the efforts they are making to address climate change, pinpoint areas where they are falling short, and push each other to do more.

The Trump administration's [vow](#) to withdraw the United States from the Paris agreement by 2020 has made that peer pressure dynamic more complicated. While State Department officials still attended this year's talks and [helped shape rules](#) around how countries will report their progress on emissions, the world's richest nation is no longer seeking to lead the fight against climate change.

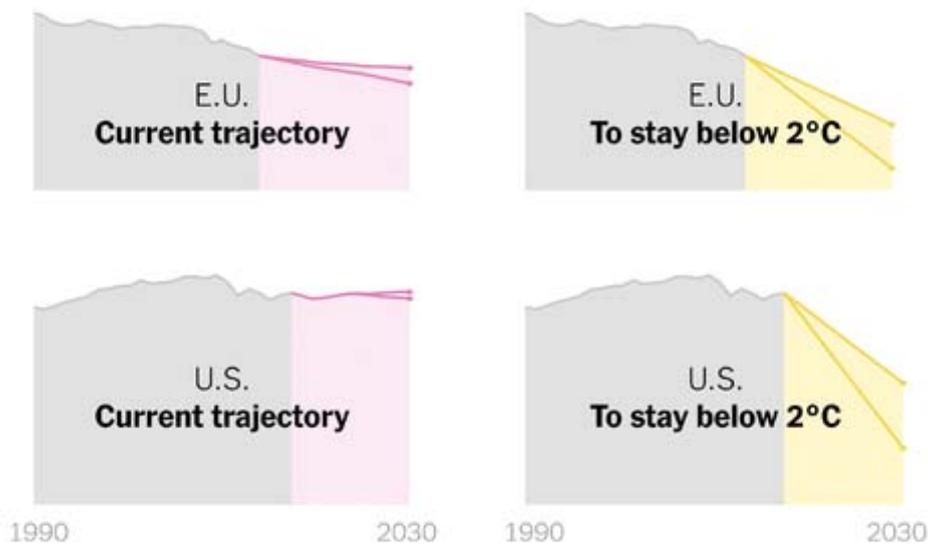
Virtually everyone at the Bonn conference acknowledged that the world's nations are still [failing to prevent drastic global warming in the decades ahead](#). "We need more action, more ambition, and we need it now," said Patricia Espinosa, the United Nations climate chief.

Under the Paris agreement, nearly every country submitted a voluntary pledge for constraining its emissions. Yet those pledges are modest: even with them, the world is still on course to warm at least [3 degrees Celsius \(5.4 degrees Fahrenheit\)](#) this century, an outcome that carries [far greater risks](#) of destabilizing ice sheets in Greenland and Antarctica, drastic sea-level rise and more extreme heat waves and droughts.

[Graphic](#)

[Here's How Far the World Is From Meeting Its Climate Goals](#)

[Two years after countries signed a landmark climate agreement in Paris, the world remains far off course from preventing drastic global warming in the decades ahead.](#)



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So, at Bonn, diplomats focused on ways to encourage countries to ratchet up their ambitions. Next year, world leaders will [meet for a formal dialogue](#) to assess how their efforts stack up against the goal of limiting global warming to “well below” 2 degrees Celsius. They plan to discuss which domestic climate policies are working and which ones aren’t, and then try to figure out which countries can step up the pace of their emissions cuts. Ultimately, countries plan to submit newer, stronger climate pledges to the United Nations by 2020.

Negotiators sought this year to write a “rule book” that will govern this process, laying out guidelines for how emissions from each country should be measured or how financial aid from rich countries to poor ones should be tracked. Most of the hard decisions about what this rule book should look like were put off until next year.

The biggest unknown is whether this whole process will translate into meaningful further action to cut emissions. At Bonn, there were a few signs peer pressure is working and that some countries are indeed feeling compelled to take stronger action. Leaders from the European Union, which is currently on pace to [fall short of its 2030 emissions goals](#), said they would push to enact new legislation on increasing clean energy and efficiency.

“The level of ambition from the European Union has been questioned,” said Miguel Arias Cañete, Europe’s commissioner for climate change. “We understand the concerns.”

And elsewhere, longstanding divisions among nations reasserted themselves. Throughout the talks, China argued that the Paris agreement rule book should hold developed nations to higher standards than developing countries. In past climate talks, the United States had taken the lead in pushing back against this notion, but with the Trump administration stepping back from the Paris agreement, American influence in this area was weaker.

These disagreements may only be partly resolved at future climate talks. Andrew Deutz, an expert on international negotiations at the Nature Conservancy, argued that one of the most

important climate developments of the year actually happened outside of the Bonn meeting — when the Chinese government [announced](#) that it would expand its domestic market for electric vehicles to seven million cars by 2025, a move spurred in part by Chinese concerns over air pollution in cities.

Experts say national climate policies will be shaped far more by domestic considerations than by international pressure. But, Mr. Deutz added, these talks can be useful for “creating a forum where everyone has confidence in what everyone else is doing. That sort of mutual confidence can be enabling.”

Still, there is the question of pace. During the second week of talks, climate scientists gave a presentation to the conference on the vast task ahead of them. To stay below 2 degrees Celsius of warming, global emissions would likely have to peak in the next few years and then be cut by half every decade all the way down to zero by midcentury.

The scale of that transition [is staggering](#). Virtually every coal plant around the world would need to be phased out or outfitted with carbon capture technology within decades. Electric vehicles would need to be the primary mode of transportation, and the world’s power grids would need to be virtually emissions-free. Technology that barely exists today to suck carbon dioxide out of the atmosphere [may need to be deployed on a huge scale](#).

That presentation came on the heels of a news conference by a different set of scientists, who announced that current industrial emissions of greenhouse gases have not yet peaked — instead, they are likely to [rise again in 2017](#), driven in part by a rebound in coal use in China.

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