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Can multilateral climate action overcome geopolitical rivalries?

The road ahead after COP31

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Summary

The recently concluded climate negotiations COP31 in Antalya, Türkiye, will be remembered for being the longest running COP, culminating in a tumultuous final plenary on 22 November 2026. The plenary ran two days over time and saw several countries protest against decision texts, of which some - including a political declaration - failed to reach consensus. The divisions exposed at COP31 reflect the difficult geopolitical context and disagreements over how to implement the Paris Agreement in an era of polycrisis. COP31 thus marks a critical moment for multilateral climate diplomacy. Lessons from the negotiations open new venues for multilateral climate action.



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Commentary

Introduction

The 31st Conference of Parties (COP) to the UN Climate Convention took place against a backdrop of unusually acute geopolitical, economic and environmental turbulence. The international context was characterised by several interconnected crises: energy insecurity, persistent cost-of-living pressures, escalating climate impacts, and growing geopolitical competition. The negotiation context was additionally made difficult by the Trump administration's hostility towards climate action and international climate cooperation, and scientific assessments that the world is set to overshoot the Paris Agreement's 1,5°C target. These developments have reinforced the urgency of climate action while simultaneously making the politics of international cooperation more difficult.

COP31 was intended to advance implementation of the Paris Agreement. Despite two weeks of negotiations, countries failed to reach agreement on the political declaration known as the Antalya Pact. The final plenary exposed persistent and deep disagreements over the economic and political implications of decarbonisation and who bears responsibility for climate action. Nevertheless, negotiations produced decisions on several technical and institutional issues, including on just transition, adaptation and the launch of the second global stocktake, while parallel voluntary initiatives demonstrated that cooperation continues beyond formal negotiating outcomes. Lessons from these negotiations can open new venues for multilateral climate action.

What went wrong at COP31?

The outcome of COP31 was the result not only of the difficult geopolitical context, but also resulted from a failure of leadership, lack of vision and the absence of climate solidarity. First, few leaders attended COP31, with the UK's Andy Burnham being the only G7 leader present. In his speech he promised a new era of British leadership and highlighted the climate issue as a national security issue, announcing the appointment of the first UK special representative for climate security. He was however criticized for not matching his words with actions.

Second, COP31 was the first COP with a joint presidency, whereby Türkiye retained the overall COP presidency, while Australia was assigned responsibility for leading negotiations. Although the arrangement was intended to distribute responsibilities, it created ambiguity over decision-making power and complicated coordination. This was compounded by concerns about insufficient transparency surrounding the drafting of the proposed cover decision. This decision had not been mandated, but the presidency wished to secure a political declaration to highlight their flagship initiative of aiming to increase electricity's share of global final energy consumption to 35% by 2035.[1] However, the process to draw up the declaration was complicated by countries adding a wish list of demands to put into the draft. The first draft of the cover decision was 18 pages long with 144 separate items. Importantly, it included a paragraph that called for "accelerated action to phase out fossil fuels, including through the immediate transition away from fossil fuels in

1 More than 75 countries, including the EU and China, and 180 businesses announced their support for the electrification pledge: https://www.nrdc.org/press-releases/more-75-countries-180-businesses-sign-global-electrification-pledge-cop31

energy systems." However, when the second draft came out the day before the scheduled close of the conference, most of the text that would have advanced on key elements had been removed or diluted, but a time-bound target for accelerating the controversial deployment of carbon capture utilization and storage was retained. This highlighted the significant influence of countries such as Saudi Arabia and Russia in the COP31 negotiations. Despite objections from a range of countries, including Panama, France, Sweden and others, on the basis that the cover decision did not raise ambition, the third draft was even more diluted - so much so that civil society called it "a gift to fossil fuel industry" and urged countries to reject it. In a dramatic final plenary, over 40 parties (including the UK, Norway, Panama, the Marshall Islands and the EU), rejected the Antalya Pact. Several countries also highlighted that the way the negotiations were led raised questions about accountability, inclusivity and trust in the multilateral process, illustrating how unclear leadership structures and insufficient transparency can undermine confidence in negotiations, thereby complicating consensus-building.

Third, while developed countries wanted to discuss how to address overshoot and accelerate a transition away from fossil fuels, they were not keen to discuss climate finance pledges to support accelerated climate action. In fact, public climate finance pledges have fallen by more than 70% in 2026 according to one analysis. This is the result of aid cuts in many developed countries, as well as the US withdrawal from international climate efforts.

The road to COP32: turning diplomatic failure into political momentum

The next year will be particularly important for determining whether the COP31 outcome becomes a temporary setback or a more profound crisis of multilateral climate governance. Despite the failure to achieve a high-level declaration, COP31 made it clear that a majority of countries wish to secure higher ambition. It is also clear that consensus-based decision making and the presence of vested interests means that the COP-process cannot deliver the diplomatic breakthroughs needed to keep up with the urgency of climate action. Yet, in a period characterised by geopolitical tensions, competing national priorities and weakening confidence in international institutions, the continued convening of COPs represents an important expression of collective responsibility.

To make them work better, the COP process will need to address increasingly loud calls for COP reform. Moreover, a more strategic approach to climate diplomacy is required, including through strengthening coalitions capable of maintaining climate ambition even when consensus is difficult to achieve. The 2nd International Conference on the Just Transition Away from Fossil Fuels in July 2027 will be an important opportunity to strengthen practical cooperation to advance on issues that the consensus-based COP process is ill-equipped to address. Moreover, given the vacuum left by the US withdrawal from international climate cooperation, strengthened engagement with climate progressive actors in the US could advance climate action.

In conclusion, COP32 in Addis Ababa will need to rebuild legitimacy for the COP-process, taking onboard lessons from this year's COP. This includes strengthening transparency and inclusive diplomacy and advancing the finance issues. The upcoming negotiations on the UN Framework Convention on International Tax Cooperation could be an important venue to start with. As outlined by Ethiopia's Prime Minister at COP31: "Dependable finance requires cooperation, even as competition between countries grows. Yet, we discuss climate in one room, development in another, trade and finance in two more. Many of us see it in all four. In each of those rooms we should ask how we will finance the future that we have agreed to build."

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