What Really Happened at COP-28 in Dubai

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- Press hailed COP28 as a great success or a distinct failure, …
  - … largely based on one sentence in the closing statement about the future of fossil fuels …
  - … endorsing “transitioning away from fossil fuels in energy systems, in a just, orderly and equitable manner”

- Compromise
  - Above endorsement (instead of “phasing down” or “phasing out” fossil fuels) was combined with endorsement of “renewables, nuclear, abatement and removal technologies,” plus …
    - … endorsement of tripling global renewable-energy capacity and doubling annual rate of energy-efficiency improvements
  - Resulted in broad approval (by oil-producing Middle East countries, industrialized and developing countries)

- A Vacuous Statement about Future Aspirations … or a “Paradigm Shift?” (COP28 President Al Jaber)
  - Essentially a non-binding resolution about future ambitions, but statement – and its press coverage – may have symbolic, signaling value
So, Was COP28 a Success or a Failure?

- **Most COPs are neither successes nor failures**
  - Except when a new agreement is reached (Kyoto Protocol, 1997; Paris Agreement, 2015), the COPs have much in common with the annual World Economic Forum in Davos, Switzerland
  - Both are complex get-togethers, based on bottom-up processes.
    - Corporate CEOs in Davos do not agree to take action, then go home to their Boards of Directors to implement their Davos commitments
    - Causality runs in the opposite direction
  - So too with COPs, the delegations from the 195 “Parties” bring to the COPs their domestic priorities.
    - Each COP’s outcome is essentially the aggregation of those

- **What really drives action around the world (i.e., cuts in GHG emissions) is largely the combination of market realities and public policies.**
  - Policies are largely enacted at the national level, and sometimes the sub-national level
  - Those policies are linked with what happens at the annual COPs, but the direction of causation is fundamentally bottom-up, not top-down.
What was the most important COP28 development?

- **Recall: most important development during COP27 occurred 6,000 miles away in Bali, Indonesia.**
  - U.S. President Joe Biden and China President Xi Jinping met on sidelines of G20 Summit for a 3-hour meeting, signaled their return to cooperation on climate change (2022)
  - Statement of cooperation trickled down to leaders of two negotiating teams – John Kerry and Xie Zhenhua

- **Even before COP28, they signaled that China and USA might really resume co-leadership**
  - Two weeks before COP28, the most important development for COP-28 (Dubai) took place 8,000 miles away
  - In Sunnylands, California, same two heads of state met and signaled in writing (“Sunnylands Statement”) renewed cooperation on climate change
  - U.S.-China cooperation is essential for meaningful progress on climate change, …
  - … and the Sunnylands Statement — jointly signed by the two presidents in November 2023 – may ultimately be more important than any individual accomplishment at COP-28 in Dubai.
Reminder about the Evolution of the Annual COPs

- **UNFCCC specifies any non-governmental entity, which is qualified re topics of Convention can be represented at the Conference of the Parties as an observer** (UNFCCC 1992, Article 7, paragraph 6)
  - An explicit role for observer organizations from civil society (NGOs, trade associations, universities, etc.)

- **Evolution over Time**
  - Gradual changes in relative importance and prominence of core country delegations of negotiators versus observers from civil society
  - Sixteen years ago (my first COP), 90-95% of meaningful action was in the negotiations, with 5-10% among the participants from civil society
  - By the time of COP28, 10% of meaningful action was within the negotiations, and 90% among the official “Side Events,” unofficial presentations and sessions, meetings, and interactions among gov’ts and civil society.
  - The COP is, to a large degree, a “trade fair” with entrepreneurs of all kinds promoting their products
  - The COP is a circus in which the “main event” is eclipsed with increasing frequency by the “side shows”

- **Hence, I think of the festivities in Dubai, “Climate Expo 2023”**
  - Not cynicism or even skepticism, because like Davos, the Climate Expo plays a role
  - Great example of this in Dubai were events targeting a specific non-CO₂ greenhouse gas – **methane**.
The Prominence of Methane at COP28

- Methane received greatly increased attention from civil society (business associations, NGOs)
  - Reminder: CH$_4$ has much greater radiative forcing per unit than CO$_2$, but much shorter atmospheric lifetime
    - Over 100 years, radiative forcing per unit of CH$_4$ 20 times > CO$_2$; over 20 years, 80 times > CO$_2$
    - Methane emissions account for 30% of warming since pre-industrial times, and nearly half this decade
  - Can be in financial interests of O&G companies to reduce emissions
  - Included work of Harvard Initiative to Reduce Global Methane Emissions (4 presentations, 20+ meetings)

- Harvard initiative brings together seventeen faculty members plus external collaborators
  - Four departments in FAS: Earth & Planetary Science, Economics, Government, and History
  - Five professional schools: Business, Engineering, Government, Law, and Public Health
  - Disciplines: physics, chemistry, engineering, economics, political science, law, business, and history
  - By collaborating across research teams, the whole can be greater than sum of its parts: frequent interaction among researchers; building on synergies
  - Translating research into useful materials, and science into action
  - In first year of 3-year initiative, we have 9 research & outreach projects
  - Initial focus on O&G is USA, but diversifying to include agriculture & landfills, and other countries
The Prominence of Methane at COP28 (continued)

- **USA**
  - EPA regulations to cut O&G methane emissions by 80%
  - $1 billion pledged help for poor countries reduce methane emissions
  - “Methane Summit” with China and UAE

- **Global Methane Pledge**
  - To cut global CH$_4$ emissions by 30% by 2030
  - Expanded to 155 countries – with Turkmenistan, Kazakhstan, & others joining

- **Other Important institutions & Partnerships**
  - World Bank Global Flaring and Methane Reduction Partnership
  - Global Methane Hub
  - Oil and Gas Methane Partnership 2.0 (120 companies in 60 countries covering 35% of production)
  - Oil and Gas Climate Initiative’s (OGCI) Satellite Monitoring Campaign

- **Will pledges & actions from private industry, NGOs, & governments yield real emissions reductions?**
Disappointments and Progress at COP28

• Two Disappointments
  ▪ Adaptation received great attention in COP28 Decision, but not Funding
    ➢ Perhaps because of diverted attention: Loss and Damage Fund contributions reached $700 million (but less than 1% of likely eventual L&D demand)
  ▪ Major Setbacks for Article 6
    ➢ Some countries tried to re-open what had been settled issues regarding nature of Article 6.2 mechanism
    ➢ General politicization of Article 6; steps toward implementation blocked

• Path Ahead
  ▪ “COP28 was a coming-out party for private-sector climate action” (Nathaniel Keohane, president, C2ES)
    ➢ Hundreds of companies from diverse sectors showcased climate-friendly technologies, management practices, adaptation, and finance
    ➢ A negative or positive development?
  ▪ COP28 completed first 5-year Global Stocktake; countries will submit new NDCs by COP30
  ▪ The marathon (not sprint) continues to COP29 (Baku, Azerbaijan, 2024) & COP30 (Brazil, 2025)
Thank You!
For More Information

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