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COP31 Antalya: When an Unstoppable Force Meets an Immovable Object

Reflections on the outcome of COP31 and the future of climate multilateralism



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COP31 in Antalya ended without an agreement, and the blame game is now in full swing. This has been accompanied by an almost infinite amount of analysis, with everyone who was in Antalya — and many who were not — weighing in on what happened, who was responsible, and what it all means for the future of international climate cooperation.

Much of this commentary seems driven as much by passion and ideology as by a cold assessment of the facts and political realities. It is increasingly difficult to have a rational discussion about climate change. Football may be the only other subject that generates comparable emotions.

Antalya was, in many ways, a reflection of the polarized world in which we live. Different visions collided: visions of how to address climate change, of what the UNFCCC process is supposed to deliver, and ultimately of how to interpret the events and outcome of the COP itself.

One is reminded of the old paradox of what happens when an unstoppable force meets an immovable object. Or, perhaps more appropriately, of the wisdom of not doing the same thing over and over again while expecting a different result.

Two visions of addressing climate change

Let us be more specific.

In principle, there is broad agreement that climate change needs to be addressed. However, behind this apparent consensus lie two fundamentally different visions of how to achieve this objective.

The first is based on reducing and ultimately eliminating greenhouse gas emissions, with the objective of reaching net zero. This vision is reflected in the EU Climate Law and its targets for emissions reductions, renewable energy and energy efficiency, and potentially soon in additional objectives for electrification.

This approach is driven not only by climate considerations, but also by the EU's particular circumstances, including energy security concerns and its relatively limited domestic endowment of fossil energy resources. These considerations are legitimate and form part of the EU's economic and geopolitical reality.

The second vision is often articulated through the concept of a *circular carbon economy*. It focuses on preventing carbon dioxide from accumulating in the atmosphere, including through capturing, using and storing CO2, rather than necessarily eliminating all activities that generate emissions.

Proponents point to Article 2 of the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change, which refers to the stabilization of greenhouse gas concentrations in the atmosphere, and to the nationally determined nature of contributions under the Paris Agreement. This approach has been advanced by several countries, most prominently Saudi Arabia, which has incorporated the circular carbon economy into its national policy framework. Whether this vision can be operationalized at the scale and speed required remains an important and legitimate question.

Neither vision can simply be dismissed by invoking political or moral superiority.

This is where much of the debate on fossil fuels originates. Is the objective to eliminate fossil fuels as an energy source, or to eliminate their contribution to increasing greenhouse gas concentrations in the atmosphere? These are related, but they are not identical propositions.

The distinction matters, and it cannot be wished away.

The fossil fuel debate and the Cover Decision

The disagreement resurfaced in Antalya through the debate on fossil fuel language in the proposed Cover Decision.

Cover Decisions are a relatively recent feature of the COP process. They are not a mandatory element of the formal negotiating architecture under the Paris Agreement but have increasingly been used to provide broader political direction and address issues that extend beyond the negotiated agenda. Whether to have a Cover Decision at all is therefore a political choice.

Our understanding is that this choice was not unanimously welcomed from the beginning of COP31. If that was indeed the case, opposition to the text — and the possibility that it might not be adopted — should hardly have come as a surprise.

The EU, supported by a number of other countries, pushed for language on fossil fuels. This language was also introduced in the Belem COP. In both cases, the effort did not produce the language sought.

There was, however, an important difference.

In Belém, the text was ultimately accepted. In Antalya, it decided that the outcome was not acceptable.

It was also puzzling to see the EU and others move so quickly in the final plenary to articulate their opposition, leaving other Parties free to intervene subsequently and claim their acceptance of the proposed outcome. The timing is puzzling.

A setback for multilateralism

The outcome of Antalya should be seen, first and foremost, as a setback for the multilateral process in general and the UNFCCC in particular.

There will be those who see the refusal to accept the proposed outcome as an important statement of principle. From their perspective, accepting a text that did not adequately reflect the urgency of the climate challenge would have been unacceptable.

Others will see the objection as an attempt to impose a particular vision of the energy transition on countries with different national circumstances and development priorities.

Both interpretations will continue to circulate. But the consequences for the process are the same.

The objection did not affect only the Cover Decision. It also caught other decisions in its wake, including those relating to the Mitigation Work Programme and Response Measures.

These are not peripheral issues.

The Mitigation Work Programme provides an important space for discussing how mitigation ambition and implementation can be advanced. The Response Measures discussions address the economic and social consequences of climate policies, including their international and cross-border impacts.

In a world where climate policies are becoming increasingly consequential for trade, investment, industrial competitiveness, employment and development, such discussions are not a luxury. They are an essential part of maintaining trust in the international climate regime. The idea that these measures can be pursued without providing a credible multilateral space to discuss their impacts is difficult to sustain.

Not having such a space will not make the concerns disappear. It will simply move them elsewhere, potentially into more confrontational settings.

This is particularly important for developing countries, many of which already perceive international climate discussions as insufficiently attentive to their economic circumstances and development needs.

It should therefore not be surprising that voices from developing countries, in the aftermath of COP31, have expressed frustration that the fossil fuel debate overshadowed issues closer to their immediate priorities, particularly finance and adaptation.

The precedent matters

There is also a broader institutional question.

Some of the countries that objected in Antalya may wish to reflect on their own negotiating history and positions. Others, which have previously been reluctant to block consensus, may now feel more comfortable doing so when the proposed text goes against them or beyond what they are prepared to accept.

Once a precedent has been established, it is difficult to argue that only some Parties should be entitled to use it.

This is one of the more troubling aspects of the Antalya outcome.

The UNFCCC has always operated through difficult compromises, often involving language that satisfies nobody completely. That is not necessarily a weakness. It is the reality of a universal process bringing together countries with fundamentally different interests, capabilities and economic structures.

We have not seen a disruption of this magnitude since Copenhagen. The circumstances are different, and the comparison should not be taken too far. Nevertheless, Copenhagen demonstrated how long it can take to rebuild confidence in the multilateral process once that confidence has been seriously damaged.

It took years to recalibrate the process and ultimately arrive at the Paris Agreement.

The human dimension

There were also moments in Antalya that deserve recognition.

One cannot but admire the determination of the COP Presidency to steer the negotiations through an increasingly difficult political environment. Blamming the Presidency for the failure is not fair, not appropriate and not right. They followed the rules of consensus and did not try to impose their desire for a positive outcome.

Particular recognition is due to the Turkish Minister chairing the proceedings, who appeared genuinely committed to maintaining order, keeping the discussion focused, and bringing the process to a conclusion.

What next?

Antalya was not the outcome many of us wanted.

The failure to reach agreement is disappointing. More concerning, however, is what it may signal for the future of climate multilateralism. We should be concerned about where this is taking us. And we will not have to wait long for the next test.

The future is, quite literally, next week.

The next stop is London, where negotiations at the International Maritime Organization will once again test the ability of governments to agree on international measures to address greenhouse gas emissions. We already drew a blank at the IMO a year ago.

Can London provide some redemption this time?