**COP26: actions, not words**

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The United Nations summit on climate change, known as COP26, a gathering of world leaders, government ministers, academics, climate activists, and experts, currently underway in Glasgow, has been billed as a watershed event. All eyes are fixed on the outcome of the conference as feverish discussions take place over a period of two weeks, trying to find common ground between disparate positions.

As with such events of international importance, speeches delivered by world leaders have made the right noise, giving the impression that climate change-related awareness has seeped into the systems of individual countries, but it is the action part that leaves a lot to be desired. The gap between promises and their practical implementation explains why many such global pledges remain unfulfilled. Climate change is not an exception to this rule.

There is, however, a caveat here. As far as the climate threat is concerned, the time for dilly-dallying and delaying critical action is long gone. According to UN Secretary General Antonio Guterres, “the climate crisis is a code red for humanity.” Thus, the Glasgow summit is taking place amid an enhanced understanding of the cost of delayed actions and raised expectations for a doable set of actions.

UK Prime Minister Boris Johnson reflected the global mood in the opening speech to the summit when he said: “We have to move from talk and debate and discussion to concerted, real-world action on coal, cars, cash and trees. Not more hopes, targets and aspirations, valuable as they are, but clear commitments and concrete timetables for change.”

This major climate summit, after the one held in Paris in 2015, represents the culmination of the disparate but determined efforts made by environmental activists like Sweden’s Greta Thunberg. These climate crusaders have refused to waver in the face of challenges in their mission to impress upon world leaders the need for an accelerated global action to avert a catastrophe that is already knocking on humanity’s doors.

The Born into the Climate Crisis and Children Climate Risk Index reports released by Save the Children and Unicef respectively and the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change report have set the tone for the conference, underlining the gravity of the challenges of climate change vis-a-vis children and demanding strong political will articulated in the form of nationally determined contributions (NDCs) on the part of member countries.

The executive summaries of these reports should be part of the essential reading material for participating leaders to remind them of their responsibility. The world is justified in being alarmed at the current pace of rise in global temperatures that seem to go well beyond two degrees Celsius by the end of the current century.

While the macro picture remains grim, it is encouraging to note that many countries are thinking seriously and sharing individual NDCs in terms of reducing their dependence on fossil fuels by 2030 as part of the mid-century net-zero mission.

COP26 was preceded by the first in-person meeting of the G20 countries held in Rome after the Covid-19 pandemic, which also featured the climate change agenda. Although the communique issued at the end of the G20 meeting indicated the need for doubling down on the efforts to achieve the net-zero target by 2150, it failed to give a definitive date to end the use of coal.

The failure to agree to the phasing out of coal reflects the slackening of political will on the part of developed nations that are responsible for about 70 percent of global emissions. A strong commitment by the G20 would not only have set a clear direction but also provided a new energy to the Glasgow summit. The evasive response by a few countries to commit to the mid-century deadline for de-carbonisation undermines the global consensus and deeply hurts the pledges made as part of the Paris Climate Accord in 2015.

Addressing a press conference at the COP26 climate summit, US President Biden took a swipe at Chinese and Russian presidents, Xi Jinping and Vladimir Putin, for ‘not showing up.’ In a response to a question from CNN’s correspondent, Biden said: “The rest of the world is going to look to China and say, ‘what value added are they providing?’ And they’ve lost an ability to influence people around the world and all the people here at COP, the same way I would argue with regard to Russia.”

Chinese special envoy for Climate Change Xie Zhenhua was quick to remove any doubts created about China’s intention to honour its commitment. He categorically stated, “I do not resist the 1.5-degree target. That is a part of the Paris Agreement goals, actually. Talking about global climate goals needs to be based on rules. Since 1.5 degrees Celsius is a part of the Paris goals, certainly we’re not against this target.”

In an interview with CNN’s Christiane Amanpour, John Kerry, President Biden’s special envoy on climate change, struck a positive note of engagement with China in what was clearly an effort to dilute the harsh tone of his boss. In a conciliatory note, he said, “What we are trying to do is work with China in a cooperative way … without challenging them in a personal way.”

Climate finance remains a fundamental hindrance in the way of developing countries to transition to green economies by drastically cutting down on their emissions. Mohamed Nasheed, Maldives’ former president and ambassador of the climate vulnerable forum (CVF), highlighted the need for a shared approach to tackle climate change. His argument revolved around the enhanced vulnerability of all countries – no matter big or small – and the need for meaningful cooperation. The CVF brings together 48 countries from the Global South that face disproportionate threats from climate change compared to their contribution to global warming.

Despite the lapse of 10 years, developed countries have failed to honour their commitment of giving $100 billion to the developing world to help them become climate-resilient, green economies. This ‘gap of trust’ between the Global North and South hits at the very root of consensus around the climate agenda, achieved so painstakingly after years of negotiations. With the pledges made so far, it has been estimated that the target will be met in 2023.

It is only after the conclusion of the COP26 summit that we will know what has been agreed to. As of now, rhetoric from the mega global event seems pretty fine. However, the biggest threat to climate-related goals comes from the global polarised mindset that is promoting confrontation rather than cooperation as part of the fight for global dominance.

The failure of the international community, particularly the developed world, to turn the Covid-19 pandemic into an opportunity – and the blame-game that followed – does not inspire much hope. It looks that every global catastrophe will accentuate the divide and lead to the exchange of recriminations.

For the world to be able to attain the target of 1.5 degree Celsius, the fractured and polarised world order needs a healing touch. As long as the consensus on the rules-based world order continues to be challenged in one way or the other, there is little hope for a unified action against the climate change threat to bear fruit within the stipulated timeline.

A deep and dispassionate contemplation on the state of the world will pave the way for a secure and safe future for our children. World leaders need to act like statesmen and women to show some actions, and not mere words. Only a multilateral approach can help meet the targets.

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