

# Climate change: Going to Glasgow to save the world (or not)

There is greater public awareness of global warming after a quarter century of summits, but political dilemma remains



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For *The Straits Times*

On Oct 31, world leaders will gather in Glasgow, Scotland, for the United Nations Climate Change Conference or COP26.

This will be the 26th COP. What can we expect from Glasgow? The short answer is hopefully quite a lot, but probably not very much.

The first COP was held in 1995 in Berlin, marking the first international collaborative commitment for international climate action.

Yet, 26 years later, we are still racing against the clock to prevent the permanent damage that carbon emissions will cause. We have perhaps less than a decade to take effective action.

Why have more than a quarter century of global summits to address climate change somehow resulted only in minimal action?

The answer is simple: action on climate change poses a fundamental political dilemma.

The costs of effective action are extremely high, both in financial terms and in terms of economic opportunities foregone, and must be paid up-front, whereas the benefits are reaped only many decades in the future.

For any politician, this is not an attractive proposition. This is particularly so in political systems that require reelections, but the dilemma of balancing short-term political and policy imperatives against long-term benefit is no less painful in authoritarian systems too.

The dilemmas are real and cannot be wished away. It is a fallacy to believe that a global problem, however compelling, necessarily engenders a solution.

There are always multiple logics at play, and on climate, political logic and scientific logic are not naturally aligned.

Governments generally agree on the science behind the sorely needed emission reductions, but



A coal-fired power plant in Shanghai, China. The world's biggest carbon emitters, the US and China, must act resolutely and lead by example by agreeing to a phased programme to close their existing coal-fired power plants, or to retrofit them with carbon capture technology, says the writer. PHOTO: REUTERS

they cannot agree on how to distribute the responsibility or on how to effectively implement the needed changes.

## PUBLIC PRESSURES, POLITICAL DILEMMA

There is growing public awareness of the urgent need to deal with climate change. Governments and corporations realise that they cannot ignore these public pressures.

But public pressures do not in themselves automatically resolve the fundamental policy and political dilemma I have outlined.

Thus, the COP system generates, year after year, discussions, producing commitments which are not, indeed perhaps never can or not intended to be followed through.

To a very large degree, COP serves as an alibi. Engaging in the process is too often a substitute for politically risky hard decisions by governments and corporations.

Rather than being a guide to long-term action, COP commitments are intended to

assuage the short-term pressures generated by being in the international spotlight. This sets up something of a vicious circle, where the sensation or promise of action substitutes for real, effective action.

The Kyoto Protocol of 1997 was the first legally binding climate treaty and it called on developing countries to reduce emissions by an average of 5 per cent below 1990 levels. This goal was not met.

The Paris Accord 2015 on climate change has been described as the most significant commitments on the climate to date, requiring all countries to reduce emissions in order for the world to eventually become carbon neutral. But there are no binding enforcement mechanisms to ensure this will occur and the grand pledges made in Paris seem unattainable.

Financing the need to address carbon emissions still presents a major challenge.

Developing countries do not have the money to acquire and use the necessary technology; rich countries are struggling to cope

with the economic fallout of the Covid-19 pandemic, while trying to reduce their own emissions.

Yet there is no substitute for the COP process.

## BREAKING THE VICIOUS CIRCLE

So, how do we break the vicious circle and make the process more meaningful?

It would be a mistake to ask governments to commit to any more than they already have. That just reinforces the vicious circle.

Instead, COP26 should look at existing pledges, assess the progress each country has made, and address how the necessary funds to implement prior commitments can be raised.

I do not think there is any substitute for more public pressures to change the calculation of cost and benefit for governments and corporations.

I am normally very sceptical about the Great and the Good gathering to lecture governments. I remain highly sceptical. But this is such a crucial issue that I direct the attention of

Singaporeans to a new organisation, the Scotia Group.

The Scotia Group aims to address the fact that the world is facing a diplomatic emergency as a result of a climate emergency.

The climate emergency will not be adequately addressed unless the diplomatic emergency is resolved, and the vicious circle the COP system has generated is broken.

The Scotia Group comprises a diverse network of lawyers, academics, politicians, scientists and policy experts. It works with leading international institutions including Harvard, Oxford and St Andrews universities; the International Bar Association; and the Transatlantic Leadership Network to host monthly dialogues, around a variety of pressing climate issues.

The group has joined others in underscoring the need to reduce carbon emissions by 50 per cent by 2030 and highlighted COP26 as the platform for the change

previous COPs failed to catalyse. The Scotia Group has published a statement of urgency as an open

letter to the UN Secretary-General. The statement makes three main points which it hopes can, in some form, be agreed in Glasgow:

First, the United States and China, the world's largest carbon emitters, must act resolutely and lead by example by agreeing to a phased programme to close their existing coal-fired power plants, or to retrofit them with carbon capture technology, and to ban the financing and construction of new coal plants. It also calls upon the Gulf countries to lead Opec (Organisation of the Petroleum Exporting Countries) to halt investment in additional oil production.

Second, commitments made to poorer countries must be honoured. Their governments must be able to ensure access to cheap and reliable power. The US\$100 billion (S\$135 billion) a year promised by the rich countries to poor countries must be delivered.

Third, the estimated US\$5 trillion a year in clean technology investment needed to halve emissions by 2030 is certainly not going to be raised. A more realistic path to reducing emissions is carbon pricing. Something around US\$100 per tonne of carbon dioxide at the upper range will probably be needed to deter companies from increasing their carbon emissions, while helping countries meet their emission reduction targets.

These goals are easy to state but immensely difficult to implement. All of them come with a cost.

I do not know if the Scotia Group will be any more effective than other such groups in getting governments to act rather than just talk about acting. The odds are against it.

On the eve of the Glasgow COP26, it is unclear if growing public recognition of the problem will be sufficient to overcome conflicting political and policy priorities.

The public may want climate action, but are people willing to pay the price? How much are they willing to pay? Human nature being as it is, I suspect the majority in every country would rather someone else pay the price.

This is not a problem that can be solved by governments alone.

The Singapore Government is one of the few that take climate action seriously. But Singaporeans should not forget that those questions apply to us too.

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