

Climate accord doesn't end in Paris: Our view

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Following through on U.S. commitments in historic deal will be the true test.

In today's fractious world, getting 195 nations to agree on anything, even whether the sun rises in the east, isn't easy. So, in many ways, the climate change deal that emerged from Paris over the weekend, a month after terrorist attacks traumatized the city, represents a remarkable achievement on behalf of humanity.

But the things that made the Paris agreement so broadly acceptable to so many countries — its voluntary nature, its lack of enforcement tools, and the many “requests” and “urges” throughout [the 31-page text](#) — are the same things that threaten its effectiveness.

Previous United Nations-sponsored efforts to create legally binding cuts in greenhouse gas emissions ended in failure. So the Paris accord takes a pledge-drive approach: Each nation decides for itself how it plans to curb emissions, and by how much. Every five years, countries will be expected to submit stronger pledges. The pledges made so far aren't nearly enough to meet the Paris target of keeping the planet “well below” 3.6 degrees Fahrenheit of warming. So the agreement is less a solution than it is an effort to provide more structure and encouragement to the effort to control man-made climate change.

In the best case scenario, the Paris accord will evolve like the competition between countries, and increasingly across regions, to sign new free trade agreements. Successive rounds of negotiations take on their own momentum and lead to more and more progress.

In this scenario, countries will keep upping their pledges as new technologies emerge and renewable energy sources become more competitive. China, now the world's leading greenhouse-gas emitter, will drastically reduce its burning of coal, which is choking its cities with smog in addition to pumping carbon into the atmosphere. Peer pressure will prevent countries from cheating on their pledges. Working together, the nations of the world will stave off catastrophic warming.

In the worst case scenario, countries will fail to meet their pledges, either by cheating or by recalibrating what they can afford. They will renege on financial commitments to help island countries survive rising sea levels. A glut of low-cost fossil fuel energy will stifle widespread adoption of greener technologies. Republicans in Washington will yank the U.S. out of the Paris accord, giving other nations an excuse to bail as well. Barring a technological miracle, global warming continues unabated and wreaks havoc on the planet.

Which, if either, scenario prevails is yet to be determined. But, if nothing else, the Paris agreement — hashed out during what's shaping up as the [warmest year since modern record-keeping](#) began — sends a strong signal that the time for debating the basic science is past, and the time for mitigation and adaptation has arrived.

[As the agreement states](#), “Climate change represents an urgent and potentially irreversible threat to human societies and the planet and thus requires the widest possible cooperation by all countries.” With so much at stake, the U.S. participation in negotiating the Paris agreement is only a first step. Selling the idea at home, and building consensus to follow through on America's commitments, will be the true test of the Obama administration's climate legacy.

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