



In Focus

Paris Climate Change Conference 2015

On 12 December 2015, a global climate deal was agreed by 195 countries at the [United Nations Climate Change Conference in Paris](#). A key part of the so-called ‘[Paris Agreement](#)’—which will [replace](#) the current Kyoto Protocol—is the aim to limit the global temperature increase to “well below” 2.0 degrees Celsius on pre-industrial levels, and to “pursue efforts” to [limit the temperature increase](#) even further to 1.5 degrees Celsius above pre-industrial levels. [The United Nations Climate Change Secretariat](#) has described the latter objective as a “significantly safer defence line against the worst impacts of a changing climate”. In order to achieve these long-term temperature goals, the [Paris Agreement](#) calls on countries to “reach global peaking of greenhouse gas emissions as soon as possible”, and to achieve a balance between the amount of carbon emitted by human activity and what can be absorbed by the environment between 2050 and 2100.

Background

The UNFCCC is an [international environmental treaty](#) which was signed at the UN Earth Summit in Rio in 1992, and set an “overall framework for intergovernmental efforts to tackle the challenge posed by climate change”. The [Kyoto Protocol](#) was subsequently adopted in 1997, becoming the world’s first greenhouse gas emissions reduction treaty. However, because the Kyoto Protocol required the ratification of countries representing a combined 55 percent of global emissions, it actually did not come into force until Russia ratified the treaty in 2004. The Agreement legally binds developed countries to reduce carbon emissions, and is due to expire in 2020. However, the protocol was never [ratified](#) by the United States.

Efforts to put together a [global agreement to reduce emissions](#) that included the United States, and other major developing economies (such as China), began with the so-called ‘[Bali Roadmap](#)’ agreed in 2007. However, following two years of negotiations to replace the Kyoto Protocol, the countries at the Copenhagen climate talks (COP15) in 2009 failed to agree a treaty. Nevertheless, in December 2011, at the COP17 in Durban, the [Durban Platform for Enhanced Action](#) was adopted which set a deadline for a global climate agreement no later than 2015. More recently, in November 2014, the US and Chinese Governments [reached a deal to reduce their greenhouse gas emissions](#), with the US pledging to reduce emissions by 26–28 percent by 2025 and China stating its emissions would peak by 2030. The countries [reaffirmed](#) their commitment to the 2014 agreement in September 2015, pledging [faster and deeper cuts in carbon emissions for major US and Chinese cities](#).

The Paris Agreement

After nearly two weeks of negotiation, on 12 December 2015, the Paris Agreement was [adopted by COP21](#) (The Conference of the Parties). The President of the COP 21 UN Climate Change Conference, and French Foreign Minister, Laurent Fabius, [said](#) that the “Paris Agreement allows each delegation and group of countries to go back home with their heads held high”. Fabius and the French diplomatic corps were particularly [praised](#) for their management of the conference and for ensuring an agreement was reached. The Paris Agreement was adopted by all the Parties to the UNFCCC, and will “enter into force after 55 countries that account for at least 55 percent of global emissions” have ratified it. US Congressional Research Service analyst, Jane A Leggett, [observes](#) that the Agreement is legally binding, but notes that not all provisions of the Agreement are compulsory. For example, before the conference, countries had submitted [Intended Nationally Determined Contributions](#) (NDCs) containing their individual proposals to cut carbon emissions. The BBC [reports](#) that these NDCs would not be legally binding, because big emitting countries (such as China and India) felt they could restrict economic growth. In addition to the aim to [limit the rise in global temperatures](#), the Agreement also committed countries to:

- A mechanism to submit new NDCs before 2020, and to review those NDCs every five years (as the current pledges are not enough to meet the 2.0 degrees Celsius target)
- Financial support for poorer countries to adapt to climate change worth \$100 billion a year until 2025, when a new goal will be set
- A global stocktake to assess progress towards the agreement beginning in 2023, and taking place every five years thereafter

Reaction

In response to the Paris Agreement, the UK Prime Minister, David Cameron, [said](#) “in striking this deal, the nations of the world have shown what unity, ambition and perseverance can do”, while US Secretary of State, John Kerry, said that the [Paris Agreement](#) was a “a victory for all of the planet and for future generations”. The Paris Agreement has also generated a large amount of reaction from commentators and stakeholders. Many have welcomed the agreement, however, the *Sunday Times* [observes](#) that the deal is “already being picked apart by both sides: the climate change zealots who say it does not go far enough and the sceptics who say the Paris gathering was an expensive waste of time”.

Further Reading

- United Nations COP21, [Adoption of the Paris Agreement \('The Agreement'\)](#), 11 December 2015
- United Nations, '[Climate Change Newsroom](#)', accessed 22 December 2015
- Gov.uk, '[World Agrees to Historic Global Climate Change Deal](#)', 12 December 2015

Library In Focus are compiled for the benefit of Members of the House of Lords and their personal staff, to provide impartial, politically balanced briefings on a selection of topical subjects. Authors are available to discuss the contents of the Notes with the Members and their staff but cannot advise members of the general public.

Any comments on In Focus should be sent to the Head of Research Services, House of Lords Library, London, SW1A 0PW or emailed to purvism@parliament.uk.