
Chatham House COP26 Diplomatic Briefing Series: Outcomes of the Madrid COP25 and what this means for 2020

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Introduction

The inaugural discussion of the Chatham House COP26 Diplomatic Briefing Series – ‘Outcomes of the Madrid COP25 and what this means for 2020’ – took place on 22 January 2020. The event was chaired by Professor Tim Benton, Research Director of Emerging Risks and Director of the Energy, Environment and Resources Programme at Chatham House. The panel consisted of:

- H.E. Raffaele Trombetta, Ambassador of Italy to the UK
- Archie Young, UK Lead Climate Negotiator, Cabinet Office
- Peter Betts, Associate Fellow at Chatham House with extensive experience of working on international climate policy and the UN climate negotiations within the UK government

The event was attended by diplomats and representatives from the UK government, non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and the private sector.

Key messages

- While it was recognized that the 25th Session of the Conference of the Parties to the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change (COP25) had failed to deliver on several negotiation topics, including transparency, international carbon markets and the long-term process for climate finance, some important results had been achieved, including in relation to gender, indigenous people, and loss and damage. Moreover, a disconnect between public expectations and the actual purpose of the conference had contributed to negative perceptions about the Madrid COP.
- The COP26 presidents, the UK and Italy, have an enormous task ahead in terms of bridging the gap between the expectations for and likely outcome of the Glasgow COP, encouraging increased climate ambition, and ensuring that progress is made in the negotiations.
- COP26 will focus on raising the ambition of the Nationally Determined Contributions (NDCs), long-term strategies for achieving net-zero emissions, climate finance and ‘real world action’. The UK is also keen to see adaptation and nature-based solutions given a prominent place at the conference.

Outcomes of COP25

There was a consensus among the speakers that COP25 had been a disappointment and that the negotiations had failed to deliver on several important items, including international carbon markets, the transparency reporting framework and the long-term process for climate finance. There had, however, also been a discrepancy between what COP25 had been expected to deliver and what it had been set up to do. The purpose of the conference had never been to generate increased ambition, but an expectation that it would do so had emerged, and that disconnect had contributed to creating the negative narrative. It was also mentioned that countries tend to hold their cards close to their chests before an important COP (such as COP26), which could have been an additional aggravating factor.

Despite this, the speakers highlighted the point that COP25 had delivered some positive outcomes, including in relation to gender, indigenous people, and loss and damage. Archie Young acknowledged that the signal on ambition had not been as strong as the UK would have wanted, but emphasized that there was enough momentum to build on. Moreover, significant achievements had been made outside the

actual negotiations. Chile and the UK were, as an example, leading the ‘Climate Ambition Alliance’, through which 114 countries had committed to renew or update their NDCs in 2020; and approximately 120 countries had communicated that they were considering presenting longer-term plans for achieving net-zero emissions. Special credit was given to Chile for its efforts as the president of COP25 under the challenging circumstances.

Implications for COP26

States that are parties to the Paris Agreement are expected to submit new NDCs, or update their existing ones, in 2020. A central task of COP26 is therefore to raise climate ambition. Peter Betts noted that even in the most favourable geopolitical circumstances, it would be extremely difficult to raise climate ambition to the level needed in order to fulfil the temperature-related goal of the Paris Agreement¹. Even if the UK and Italy manage to facilitate the best possible outcome, there is a high probability that the Glasgow COP could be regarded by some as a failure. In the run-up to the Paris COP in 2015, public expectations had been relatively easy to manage, but this is no longer the case.

The failure of COP25 to conclude agreements on several important negotiation topics also means that these will have to be addressed at the Glasgow COP. The challenge facing Italy and the UK is enormous.

The UK–Italian strategy

Young initiated his remarks by stating that COP26 is an ‘all-of-government’ undertaking and that a dedicated team is being set up within the Cabinet Office. The conference is the number one priority for the UK’s diplomatic network. The intention is for COP26 to have a strong focus on NDCs, climate finance and long-term strategies for achieving net-zero emissions, but also to demonstrate what is happening in the ‘real economy’. The UK is determined to encourage greater climate ambition from all, and wants to collaborate with countries of all sizes to achieve this objective. It also wants to invest time in understanding national interests and negotiating positions. Reducing emissions is key, but the UK is seeking a balanced approach, and wishes to see adaptation and nature-based solutions given a prominent place at the conference. Progress also needs to be made in the actual negotiations.

The Italian strategy, outlined by H.E. Ambassador Trombetta, consists of three main activities: undertaking tailored outreach to various countries; leading by example – the Italian parliament has recently approved a new climate change bill; and involving other stakeholders. Italy will host the pre-COP, and a back-to-back youth forum, in Milan in the early autumn.

Betts emphasized the dilemma: Glasgow will not achieve all that is necessary, but the climate problem is urgent and it is no longer possible to manage expectations in the same way as in the run-up to COP21 in Paris in 2015. Rather, anger will need to be channelled towards the need for more action, not directed at the multilateral system itself. An important part of the UK–Italian strategy is to highlight progress made in the real economy – this, according to Betts, is the right thing to do, alongside pressing for NDC increases. However, this will not be enough. A narrative that emphasizes progress rather than success, and with more action to follow, will be required, as well as an effective stakeholder strategy. Furthermore, it is critical for the UK and Italy to ‘walk the walk’ in terms of climate ambition and action. The UK has laudable climate targets but needs policies to get implementation on track. Managing relations with the Scottish government is also critical.

¹ To limit the rise in the global average temperature to ‘well below 2°C above pre-industrial levels’ and to pursue efforts to keep the rise to 1.5°C.

China and the US: opportunities and challenges

The central role of China, along with the significance of the upcoming EU–China summit in Leipzig, was highlighted in two of the speakers' interventions. Betts also pointed to the potential implications of the US presidential election, which takes place six days before the Glasgow COP. If President Donald Trump is re-elected, the difficult context for climate action will continue. Should the Democratic candidate be elected, the US will likely rejoin the Paris Agreement, but may need another year or so to submit new climate targets. That scenario might affect the level of ambition that other countries are willing to communicate in 2020.

Discussion with the audience

The speakers' interventions were followed by a Q&A session, which took place under the Chatham House Rule. The discussion covered, among other things:

- the possibilities of creating stronger linkages between the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) COP, the UN Convention on Biological Diversity COP and the UN Convention to Combat Desertification COP;
- the role that the San Jose Principles (relating to Article 6 of the Paris Agreement) for High Ambition and Integrity in International Carbon Markets might play in the COP26 negotiations;
- possible implications of Brexit, including matters related to negotiating groups and the UK's NDC;
- the campaigns which the COP26 presidents might engage in;
- how adaptation and loss and damage might figure at the Glasgow COP;
- the interaction between global climate action and trade.