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Is the Climate COP transitioning away from governments?

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COP31 resembled a wedding cake with two unequal layers: a substantial core of action agenda initiatives, and a thin and sour icing of intergovernmental negotiation process. At the top of the cake was a dual Presidency, struggling to keep the celebration on track, and the gathering ultimately ended without its final declaration. The negotiations largely reflected entrenched positions, hidden geopolitical dynamics, and lack of leadership. The Action Agenda forum was buoyant, messy and a clear signal that the climate agenda thrives–beyond the positioning of political masters. It has entered an implementation phase where progress depends on a wide range of economic and local actors capable of moving the different pieces of the puzzle and on those whose interests may be threatened by it.

The climate agenda is moving—but not always through negotiations

Around 90,000 participants came to Antalya from all over the world and across affiliations–businesses, cities, parliamentarians and civil society–becoming one of the most attended COPs of all time. The breadth of representation was striking: from a shadow US pavilion to those of Small Island States, a European village and a strong presence from Africa and Central Asia.

The annual COP gathering remains one of the few moments when climate is at the centre stage of global political, business and media attention. At a time when nationalism and distrust across countries have become the norm, it is a precious chance to unite a community that receives little attention during the rest of the year. Of course, groups opposing climate action or promoting false solutions are also present, seeking to build coalitions and influence governments. But their influence is limited in a forum largely driven by those working to deliver the transition.

The programme of the Action Agenda reflected the growing breadth and technical depth of climate action. It also showed the results of last year's effort to organize the agenda across thematic axes and objectives aligned with the outcomes of the first Global Stocktake, and generated a wide range of initiatives and coalitions. Not all will endure—that is part of how innovation works—but they can help develop ideas and build partnerships. COPs have become spaces where new ideas are tested, networks formed and potential areas for international cooperation identified. Governments are requested to appoint Action Agenda focal points, and ultimately they will need to decide which initiatives deserve their political support and where they can add value.

Discussions on the ground covered a wide range of issues, including carbon markets, sectoral action, local adaptation, just transitions and partnerships, finance mechanisms, and prominently this year, the oceans-climate nexus. Some of these discussions explored issues that may shape future intergovernmental debates, including artificial intelligence and the role of trade in supporting adaptation.

Electrification was one of the clearest examples. Turkey had proposed a global target to raise the share of final energy demand met with electricity to 35% by 2035, backed by up to 80 governments by the end of COP31. Several initiatives were launched to support its implementation, as part of the Electrification Package. The European Commission's (EC) Electrify Now, first introduced at the London Climate Week, helped catalyze a Finance Coalition to mobilize investment in clean electrification across emerging and developing economies. At COP31, the EC and the Global Covenant of Mayors also launched ElectrifyCities, supporting cities in electrifying urban transport, buildings and public services. Turkey and IRENA launched D-GRIDs to strengthen grid action in developing countries. This alone sends strong signals to markets and investors on the transformation underway and the underlying conditions for continued electrification (grid, storage, etc.) (IDDRI, 2026).

Industrial transformation was another focus. UNIDO launched the Global Green Industrialization Agenda (GGIA) building on the Belém Declaration agreed at COP30, providing a framework to help countries develop investment-ready industrial projects, mobilize finance and technical assistance, and share policy and implementation tools. A new UNCTAD-supported Global Carbon Market Network was also launched to strengthen capacity in developing countries and improve links and interoperability between carbon markets.

Other initiatives included follow-up of the Brazil-presidency-led Global Initiative on Information Integrity, which launched its Charter for Climate Information Integrity. Or the current Turkish presidency announcing the Antalya Artificial Intelligence Pledge, which seeks to tap the technology's potential in finding climate solutions and assess its growing environmental risks.

The limits of intergovernmental consensus

The contrast with the Action Agenda was stark. While initiatives and coalitions were pushing different aspects of the transition forward, progress inside the negotiating rooms remained extraordinarily slow. This is not new: intergovernmental discussions have struggled to advance for several years, reflecting both the stage the Paris Agreement has reached and deeper political divisions. The focus is no longer on designing a treaty and its rules, but on implementing existing commitments through transparency, accountability and stronger national action. Yet implementation is far from a purely technical exercise. It raises unresolved political questions about how efforts and responsibilities are shared, how to take forward outcomes and roadmaps on finance, transitioning away from fossil fuels and deforestation, how to mobilize climate finance amid constrained public resources, and how to advance a just transition. These questions remain difficult to resolve.

The negotiations in Antalya reflected these tensions. On the mandated agenda, a number of decisions were rejected, others were purely procedural. Some nevertheless advanced. The Adaptation Fund was allowed to access 5% of the revenues generated by Article 6.4 carbon markets. The Global Goal on Adaptation moved forward on its “Belém–Addis Vision”, with experts nominated to revise the indicators agreed last year. The Just Transition Work Programme was extended for three years, although agreement on how to operationalize the Mechanism was postponed to COP32. By contrast, the Mitigation Work Programme, Response Measures and Action for Climate Empowerment, failed to reach agreement, exposing disagreements over trade, disinformation and how these issues should be addressed within the process.

The most visible expression of divisions was the failure to agree on a cover decision, despite the Presidencies' investment of political capital in the process. The draft sought to bring issues stalled in formal negotiations into the political spotlight, give visibility to topics without a clear mandate, and capture concerns emerging beyond the negotiating rooms. It brought together a range of political signals, from electrification, methane abatement and Carbon Capture, Use and Storage (CCUS) to

tripling adaptation finance, the role of science and the upcoming GST2, COP reform, and mountain and ocean dialogues. Notably, it omitted references to the Global TAFF and Deforestation Roadmaps led by the COP30 Presidency.

The failure to agree exposed a lack of consensus on some of the political signals the draft sought to convey. The disagreement was more nuanced than a simple rejection of climate action. It reflected diverging views on how to advance the transition, which priorities deserve political endorsement, and how to navigate the different pathways, measures and transformations needed. For some countries, the risk of sending the wrong signals outweighed the benefits of a deal. For others, rejecting the package posed a greater threat to the process and to multilateralism.

Cover decisions are not essential to the COP process, which has other avenues to advance political signals and collective work. Yet, against the backdrop of limited progress in formal negotiations, the draft had become a valuable vehicle for conveying a broader political message and giving visibility to issues that might otherwise have been lost amid the breadth of the COP. While allowing a clarification of positions on content upon which to build, its failure raises questions on how COP Presidencies can rebuild political momentum and connect initiatives beyond the negotiating process with collective decisions. Ultimately, Antalya exposed more than the limits of consensus on individual issues. It raised a broader question about the capacity of climate diplomacy to sustain dialogue, bridge differences and provide political direction in an increasingly fragmented geopolitical context.

Are countries talking to each other?

COPs are, first and foremost, exercises in diplomacy. Their value lies not only in bringing countries together, but in creating the conditions for dialogue, compromise and collective decisions. Compromise is inherent to this process. Yet Antalya raised questions about whether countries are still able and willing to bridge their differences and agree on a shared direction, even when consensus on individual issues remains out of reach.

The fact that almost all countries came to Antalya with substantial delegations was itself significant in the current geopolitical climate. It showed that climate change remains important to governments. But the negotiations also revealed a shortage of political leadership, trust, and willingness to progress a collective outcome. Neither the European Union nor China[1] filled that gap.

Antalya’s failure generated two lessons.

First, the challenge for the process today is not simply to streamline negotiations or reduce the number of agenda items. It is also to preserve spaces where countries can continue to discuss their differences and maintain a shared understanding of the overall direction of travel—even when agreement on every step is out of reach. Although a responsibility for all, this challenge *de facto* falls partly on COP Presidencies, who are expected to provide political leadership, trust, and careful

management of the process in a more conflictual geopolitical context.

Second, there are limits to what governments can collectively agree on regarding the direction of travel. Implementation is inherently granular and country-specific, extending beyond the mandates of environment ministries. And, unlike negotiated outcomes, much of the action needed today does not require international consensus. The challenge is to strike the right balance between what requires collective agreement and the political impetus COPs can provide, and what can—and should—be pursued outside the negotiating process.

How do we bridge action and direction on the road to Addis?

The challenge ahead is to connect the growing momentum of climate action on the ground with the political direction and cooperation needed to sustain it. Action beyond the negotiating process can accelerate implementation, but it cannot replace the role of governments in establishing common goals, safeguarding equity and ensuring accountability. The task is therefore not to choose between action inside and outside the multilateral process, but to build stronger connections between the two. Antalya points to several priorities on the road to Addis.

Rebuilding the foundations for GST2. Agreeing on *how* to meet the climate goals is not a matter for global consensus. Copenhagen showed the limits of this approach, and Paris moved beyond it (IDDRI, 2015). But that does not mean governments can no longer agree on political signals. These must be grounded in science, discussed inclusively, and shaped well before the political stage. This requires drawing not only on national climate plans and modelled assessments, but also on evidence of action and implementation on the ground. They must also reflect balance: electrification as an enabler, alongside stronger domestic resource mobilization, alignment of financial flows with the Paris Agreement and access to finance for countries ready to deliver. A diplomatic effort is needed to rebuild trust and identify a package of signals that provides a clearer sense of direction.

Unlock the finance discussion. Several pieces of the climate puzzle lie outside of the UNFCCC remit—the adaptation finance discussion is a clear one, which could make progress under G20 discussions on multilateral development banks' roadmaps and on insurance. Ultimately, it is difficult to see how the lock-in of positions on the subject may be broken without finding a new source of concessional finance—be it through the channelling of inefficient fossil fuel subsidies, the reuse of carbon taxes or the establishment of a new international tax—that provides at the same time clear decarbonization incentives.

COP reform: For all its dynamism, the Action Agenda and outside coalitions cannot set a clear direction by themselves. There is a reason this agenda is attached to the COP, namely to build coherent and effective action, legitimacy, accountability capacity, and to safeguard equity. Today one cannot live without the other, but bridges are not strong. COP reform should consider how the Action

Agenda and Presidency-led initiatives can be better connected to the negotiations, including through the work of successive Presidencies and the Troika. As a concrete avenue to facilitate cooperation outside the climate regime, the trade-and-climate dialogues could build a shared language between communities that too often work separately, including on how trade can support adaptation.

Resetting climate diplomacy. The difficulties in reaching consensus at COP31 should prompt a broader reassessment of how countries cooperate to advance the climate agenda. Coalitions and partnerships will be increasingly important, as will be support for pragmatic, sector-focused cooperation among countries and market-shaping businesses that can drive transformation. This is not simply about shifting from multilateral to minilateral or bilateral diplomacy. It means reassessing the value of international cooperation at a time when political disputes and posturing can seem more rewarding than collaboration. Antalya may have exposed less a lack of willingness to advance the climate agenda than a lack of willingness to cooperate. Climate diplomacy could respond by becoming more pragmatic and sector-focused, building coalitions around specific transitions and the countries and businesses best placed to shape markets.

As the Ethiopian proverb goes, “When spider webs unite, they can tie up a lion”, a fitting thought for the road ahead. When countries gather in Addis next year, the challenge will be to draw on that collective strength—bringing different countries, interests and initiatives together to find common ground and shape a shared way forward.

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https://asiasociety.org/policy-institute/china-quiet-cop31-influential-beyond-it

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