

The Road to Dubai

The latest round of international climate negotiations is being held in a petrostate. What could go wrong?

By **Elizabeth Kolbert**



Illustration by Isabel Seliger

Cop1 was held in 1995 in Berlin's International Congress Center, a massive, metal-clad complex that looks like the set for a dystopian movie. Around nine hundred government delegates attended the weeklong negotiating session, along with about a thousand observers from non-governmental organizations. Daimler-Benz brought some electric cars to show off, while young activists brought a steamroller, to convey their opposition to cars. Delegates were invited to take a trip along the River Spree in a solar-powered boat.

Since cop1 was the first of its kind, there were no procedural rules in place, and all decisions had to be made by consensus.

Presiding over the negotiations was a young Angela Merkel, then Germany's minister for the environment. At the last plenary session, when it came time to adopt the session's final communiqué, a delegate from Saudi Arabia rose to voice an objection. According to one journalist who was present, Merkel simply ignored him. "I think it's all agreed," she said, bringing down the gavel.

There have now been twenty-seven cops; this week marks the opening of the twenty-eighth, which will be held in Dubai. Over the years, everything cop-related has grown bigger and more elaborate. This year's session is expected to attract some seventy thousand people—enough to populate a

small city. Many will be representatives of governments and N.G.O.s; the rest will be lobbyists, protesters, reporters, and what are known as “overflow” delegates, who also represent governments but aren’t officially part of any delegation. Countries and advocacy groups have spent millions of dollars on World’s Fair-like pavilions, where they and their partners—mostly corporations—will tout their commitment to sustainability. This year, for the first time, Finland is springing for a pavilion; the aim, according to the organizers, is to strengthen the country’s “brand as a green tech hub.” opec, too, has decided to put up a pavilion.

“I hope all voices will be at the table at cop28,” the oil cartel’s secretary-general, Haitham al-Ghais, said, announcing this decision.

As cop has grown and grown, so, too, of course, has the problem it’s supposed to address. In 1995, global carbon-dioxide emissions amounted to twenty-three billion metric tons. This year, the total is expected to be about thirty-seven billion tons, an increase of around sixty per cent. Meanwhile, cumulative emissions—which, from a climate perspective, are what count—have doubled. Among scientists, it is widely agreed that the planet is approaching critical “tipping points,” if it hasn’t already crossed them. “Life on planet Earth is under siege,” is how a recent scientific paper put it.

Thanks to these opposing trends, cops have become a kind of travelling paradox. The meetings are the one time each year when the whole world confronts the climate crisis, and they are the time when the world demonstrates its collective failure to confront the crisis. The president of this year’s session, Sultan Ahmed al-Jaber, heads the United Arab Emirates’ state oil company.

Does this show that even petrostates are now determined to act on climate change—or that fossil fuel interests run everything, including cops? It is worth noting that one of the great many questions that more than two dozen cops have failed to settle is how disagreements should be settled. Procedural rules have never been adopted, and so decisions must be reached by consensus, though what counts as consensus is also disputed.

cop stands for Conference of the Parties, meaning, in this case, parties to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change. When the convention was finalized, at the so-called Earth Summit, in Rio de Janeiro, in 1992, President George H. W. Bush flew down to sign it.

“The Chinese have a proverb: If a man cheats the Earth, the Earth will cheat man,” Bush told the crowd gathered in Rio. “The idea of sustaining the planet so that it may sustain us is as old as life itself. We must leave this Earth in better condition than we found it.” Around the same time, he also said: “The American way of life is not up for negotiation.”

European countries had been pushing for a treaty with binding targets for reducing emissions, along with timetables for achieving them. The U.S. refused to go along. To accommodate the U.S.—at the time by far the world’s largest emitter—the treaty was purposefully vague. It called for preventing “dangerous anthropogenic interference with the climate system,” but left unspecified how that was to be accomplished. The U.S. Senate quickly ratified the convention, making the U.S. one of the treaty’s first parties.

At cop3, held in Kyoto, in 1997, a supplement to the convention was

fashioned, containing the explicit targets and timetables that the Europeans had sought and the U.S. had resisted. These applied only to developed nations, which, as the biggest emitters, had, in the original treaty, agreed to take the lead. The targets were modest; the nations of Europe, along with the U.S., Canada, Japan, Australia, and a few others, were to reduce their emissions to slightly below 1990 levels. President Bill Clinton signed the Kyoto Protocol but never submitted it to the Senate for ratification. In Washington, there was stiff opposition to anything that might impinge on “the American way of life,” or give a developing country—specifically China—a competitive advantage. Almost as soon as he took office, in 2001, President George W. Bush announced that the U.S. was withdrawing from the agreement. The U.S. is one of the few countries in the world that was not a party to the protocol; another is Canada, which withdrew after it became clear that it would not meet its targets.

In the two-thousands, cops lurched along, with America largely on the sidelines. Meetings in Milan, New Delhi, and Buenos Aires yielded little of note. Owing to its complex ratification process, the Kyoto Protocol didn't go into effect until 2005. On the day it did, I happened to interview Paula Dobriansky, a State Department official whose job included explaining the Bush Administration's climate policies to the rest of the world. I asked Dobriansky if there were any circumstances under which the Administration would accept a cap on U.S. emissions. She replied, “We act, we learn, we act again.” When I asked her what level of CO₂ would count as “dangerous,” she replied, without embarrassment: “We act, we learn, we act again.” Fifteen minutes into what was supposed to be a twenty-minute conversation, I was told that time was up.

Meanwhile, climate change itself was changing. What had been a prospective problem became palpable. The warmest year on record was 1998, until it was surpassed by 2005, which was overtaken by 2010. (By now, only 2010 makes it into the top ten.) A devastating heat wave in Europe in the summer of 2003 caused more than thirty thousand deaths. Two years later, Hurricane Katrina claimed more than thirteen hundred lives, and three years after that, Cyclone Nargis, which hit the densely populated Irrawaddy Delta, in Myanmar, killed more than a hundred and thirty thousand people. All of these disasters, if not caused by climate change, were certainly exacerbated by it.

“The scientific evidence is clear: global climate change caused by human activities is occurring now, and it is a growing threat to society,” the American Association for the Advancement of Science declared in 2006. Also, in 2006, China's annual emissions overtook the U.S.'s.

For the past several years, the parties to the framework convention—these by now include virtually every nation on the globe—have been operating under the Paris Agreement, a quasi-treaty that was negotiated at cop21, in 2015. The agreement is based on the notion that the best way to get countries to act on climate is to let them do what they want, which, if not quite another cop paradox, certainly comes close.

Under Paris, countries are free to fix their own targets for reducing emissions—or, in the case of developing countries, reducing the rate of growth in emissions. (These targets are referred to in U.N.-speak as “nationally determined contributions,” or N.D.C.s.) Paris also commits the parties to, collectively, “holding the increase in the

global average temperature to well below 2 degrees Celsius” and “pursuing efforts to limit” it to 1.5 degrees Celsius. (The baseline here is pre-industrial temperatures.)

The Paris Agreement was carefully drafted so as not to require ratification by the U.S. Senate. This arrangement allowed the country to become part of Paris on the strength of President Barack Obama’s signature in 2016, and it also allowed President Donald Trump to announce in 2017 that the U.S. was withdrawing from the agreement. Trump claimed the accord shafted America, an argument that, critics pointed out, made no sense, since the nation had drawn up its own N.D.C. “I was elected to represent the citizens of Pittsburgh, not Paris,” Trump said.

One of Joe Biden’s first acts as President, in 2021, was to reverse course again and return the U.S. to the Paris fold. The country’s history of making, breaking, and remaking agreements had, by this point, pretty much destroyed its climate credibility; nevertheless, the rest of the world cheered Biden’s move. “Welcome back!” the French President, Emmanuel Macron, tweeted. The Administration submitted a new N.D.C., which called for a fifty-per-cent reduction in the U.S.’s greenhouse-gas emissions by 2030. This goal was, on the one hand, extremely ambitious, and, on the other, not so much. Most developed countries had used 1990 as the baseline for their N.D.C.s, and many had, per Kyoto, already reduced their emissions to below this level. The U.S., by contrast, chose the baseline of 2005—a peak emissions year—thereby cutting itself extra slack.

When the Administration submitted its N.D.C., it had no credible path to fulfilling it. This changed in the summer of 2022, with the passage of the Inflation Reduction Act.

The I.R.A. offers hundreds of billions of dollars’ worth of grants and tax breaks to promote low-carbon technologies, and it is expected to significantly reduce U.S. emissions over the coming decade. Even so, according to independent analyses, the U.S. will probably miss its 2030 target.

In many other countries, the situation is just as bad, or perhaps worse. China is now responsible for almost a third of the globe’s yearly emissions. The country’s N.D.C. calls for its emissions to peak “before 2030” and for the “carbon intensity” of its economy—which is to say, emissions per unit of G.D.P.—to drop by sixty-five per cent. But, recently, even as China has been adding vast amounts of solar and wind energy, it has been approving new coal-fired power plants at the astonishing rate of two per week. Climate Action Tracker, a consortium of research groups, predicts the country’s emissions will peak by 2025, but that, instead of falling, they will “plateau at high levels.” It rates China’s targets as “not in line with any interpretation of fairness.” (On the eve of their meeting earlier this month, Biden and Chinese President Xi Jinping issued a joint announcement on climate change, which reiterated their commitment to the Paris Agreement, but offered few new specifics.)

For its part, the U.A.E., host of this year’s cop, has pledged to reduce its emissions by nineteen per cent by 2030, using 2019 as the baseline. Recently, though, under al-Jaber’s leadership, the state-owned oil company announced plans to increase production by a total of more than seven billion barrels, a move that clearly strains against this pledge. Climate Action Tracker rates the country’s N.D.C. as “insufficient,” and notes that “its planned

fossil fuel developments would also render it unachievable.”

Many countries have also promised, over the longer term, to reach net zero—that is, to emit no more CO₂ than they somehow remove from the air. (Until pretty much all countries reach net zero, the world will continue to warm.) The U.S. has pledged to reach net zero by 2050, China by 2060, and the U.A.E. by 2045. Few, if any, of these net-zero pledges are backed by plausible plans. A recent analysis in the journal *Science* was titled: “Credibility gap in net-zero climate targets leaves world at high risk.” The analysis found that even if countries with dubious net-zero targets manage to meet them, the globe will warm by 2 degrees Celsius, and under policies currently in place it will warm by 2.6 degrees Celsius. A [report](#) released last week by the U.N. Environment Programme warned that, under the current policies, warming could reach three degrees Celsius by the end of the century. The report was titled “Broken Record: Temperatures hit new highs, yet the world fails to cut emissions (again).”

It is now almost certain that 2023 will be the warmest year on record, and by a wide margin: average global temperatures this year are running about 1.4 degrees Celsius above pre-industrial levels. The past several months have seen one climate-related disaster after another: [record-breaking heat waves in Europe and China](#); [record-breaking wildfires in Canada](#); [Hurricane Otis](#), which strengthened at record-breaking speed before hitting Acapulco in October; and Storm Ciarán, which brought record-breaking rainfall to Italy in early November. Partly, the extreme conditions are the function of the weather pattern known as El Niño, which took hold in June and is

expected to last through the spring. But mostly they’re a function of climate change.

At this point, even rapid and drastic emissions reductions probably would not be enough to prevent the world from warming more than 1.5 degrees Celsius, at least temporarily. The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, the U.N. body responsible for assessing and communicating the science of climate change, all but announced this in the spring, when it released its latest so-called synthesis report. “The finding is that almost irrespective of our emissions choices in the near term, we will probably reach 1.5 degrees in the first half of the next decade,” one of the report’s authors, Peter Thorne, a climate scientist at Ireland’s Maynooth University, [said](#) at the time.

In this context, perhaps it’s appropriate that cop28 will take place in the U.A.E., one of the hottest places on Earth. A [study](#) published a few years ago in the journal *Science Advances* found that, along the Persian Gulf coast, temperatures already exceed the limits of human heat tolerance for brief periods, and a [study](#) published just this past month in the *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* found Dubai to be one of the cities most at risk from “conditions associated with threshold exceedance.” Of course, the U.A.E.—where migrant workers outnumber citizens by a ratio of ten-to-one—is also an extremely rich country. Those who can afford to can beat the heat by skiing down an indoor slope or having ice delivered to their pools.

The U.A.E.’s choice of Sultan al-Jaber to lead cop28 has, by some accounts, already undermined the gathering. “The deck is stacked against a successful outcome,” former Vice-President [Al Gore](#) [said](#) recently. This past spring, in an open letter to the U.N.

Secretary-General, António Guterres, some hundred and thirty members of the U.S. Congress and the European Parliament called for al-Jaber to be replaced. Allowing an oil-company executive to head the session, the group stated, “severely jeopardized” the proceedings. Al-Jaber’s office responded to the letter by saying that his experience “across the energy spectrum”—he previously headed Masdar, a state-owned renewable-energy company—was an “asset” that would “help drive the UAE’s transformative approach to COP28.”

In the run-up to the meeting, al-Jaber has granted only a handful of interviews. (When I requested one, I was curtly told there was “nothing available.”) In one of the few he’s given, to the *Times*, al-Jaber said that fossil-fuel interests shouldn’t be blamed for slowing progress on climate change. Rather, the problem was that advocates of strong climate action and representatives of fossil-fuel interests vilified one another.

“Why are we fighting industries?” he asked. “Fighting emissions should focus on reducing emissions across the board, whether it’s oil and gas, whether it’s industry, regardless of what it is.”

At cops, a great deal of time is spent wrangling over the precise wording of communiqués that may or may not have any real-world impact. cop26, for instance, which was held in Glasgow in 2021, was very nearly derailed when China and India objected to a proposed text that called upon the parties “to accelerate the phasing-out of coal.” China, the world’s biggest coal consumer, wanted to call for “phasing down” rather than “phasing out,” and India wanted to limit the call to “inefficient” coal, whatever that meant. According to witnesses, the cop president, Alok Sharma, a British M.P., was tearful when he announced the

final text, which called for “efforts towards the phase down of unabated coal power.” “I am deeply sorry,” he told the delegates.

At cop27, in the Egyptian city of Sharm el-Sheikh, India—the world’s second-largest coal consumer—pressed to extend the “phase down” language to all fossil fuels. Its proposal gained support from around eighty countries, including from the members of the European Union, but was blocked by, among others, Saudi Arabia. At cop28, this battle will continue. E.U. representatives have said that they will push for the “phase out” of “unabated” fossil fuels. It’s not clear they will prevail, nor is it clear what should count as abated. Technologies to capture emissions do exist, but these have yet to be deployed at any meaningful scale, and many argue that they never will be.

“We call for a fossil-fuel phaseout and demand that abatement technology not be used to green-light continued expansion,” David Kabua, President of the Marshall Islands, a country that could easily be obliterated by sea-level rise, said at the U.N. in September. A report released earlier this month by the U.N. Environment Programme noted that “while the term ‘unabated’ is being increasingly used in policy commitments,” it is “poorly defined.” The same report found that most of the world’s largest fossil-fuel exporters—including the U.S., Saudi Arabia, and the U.A.E.—are planning to ramp up production even as they claim that they are working to reach net zero.

“Continued production and use of coal, oil, and gas are not compatible with a safe and livable future,” the report states. (Another recent report, from the group Oil Change International, found that the U.S. accounts for more than a third of the expansion in oil and gas production planned through 2050,

and dubbed the country “Planet Wrecker in Chief.”)

Also at cops, a lot of time is spent arguing over money, which generally does have real-world consequences. One of the most contentious issues at this year’s session will be funding for what’s become known as “loss and damage.” Poor countries, like the Marshall Islands, which have contributed the least to climate change, are expected to experience—and indeed, already are experiencing—some of its worst effects. These countries argue that the nations that have reaped the greatest benefits from fossil fuels should compensate them. The U.S., the world’s largest cumulative emitter, long resisted these arguments, as did the E.U., in part out of fear that offering such compensation could be viewed as an admission of legal liability. Last year, under intense pressure, they finally relented, and, at cop27, it was agreed that a loss-and-damage fund should be launched. All the major questions about the fund, though, were left to be settled later.

During the past several months, negotiators have met repeatedly to draft a loss-and-damage proposal to bring to Dubai. After the last scheduled meeting ended in acrimony, an emergency session was convened in early November. The text that emerged from that session, the U.S. objected, did not reflect a consensus.

Among the many questions that remain unresolved about the fund is who should pay into it. Under the original framework convention, countries were divided into two groups—developed nations in one and pretty much everyone else in the other. Though a lot has changed since Rio, no country has officially switched groups. This means that, in the context of climate negotiations, Singapore, one of the world’s

richest countries, still technically doesn’t count as a developed nation, and neither do petrostates like Qatar, the U.A.E., and Saudi Arabia. Should such countries be asked to contribute to a loss-and-damage fund? Reportedly, the U.S. and the E.U. have been pressing the Saudis to commit to contributing, so far without success.

“If you can pay millions to have Cristiano Ronaldo, then you can pay into the fund,” an unnamed diplomat recently told the *Financial Times*.

Meanwhile, even as they wrangle over who should support a new fund, developed nations have yet to live up to commitments they made to finance existing ones. Two years ago, President Biden vowed to provide eleven billion dollars to help poorer countries remake their energy systems and adapt to climate change. Congress appropriated a billion.

“There is definitely a sense of disappointment—or perhaps more than disappointment,” the chief executive of cop28, Adnan Amin, who’s from Kenya, said recently.

After thirty years of climate negotiations and thirty years of rising emissions, the headlines practically write themselves:

was cop27 a cop-out?

cop out 27

world leaders head for another climate cop-out

“For some, a narrative has begun to take hold that COPs are failing,” a recent report co-authored by Chris Skidmore, a British M.P., observes. This sentiment is shared even by many high-level participants in the process. In February, a group of diplomats and scientists—including Laurence Tubiana, a former French official and one of the

architects of the Paris Agreement—published an open letter calling for “urgent reform of the COP process.”

“The consensus-based COP structure is predisposed to incremental progress,” the letter stated. “We are now faced with a dramatic and unacceptable mismatch . . . between what COP needs to accomplish, and the inertia that it consolidates amongst Parties.”

Given the “mismatch” and the extravaganza that cops have become—tens of thousands of people flying around the world produce, at a minimum, tens of millions of pounds of carbon dioxide—is it time to put a stop to cops? I posed this question to nearly a dozen people who have either studied or participated in the process. Although several of them were highly critical of it, none thought it should be abandoned.

“It’s the forum that we have,” one I.P.C.C. author told me glumly.

“You can be very flip and very, very cynical about it, and I certainly am,” Raymond Clémençon, an expert on global environmental governance at the University of California, Santa Barbara, said. “But there is no alternative to the international process.”

“cops are the only place where the most vulnerable countries have a seat at the table,” Jennifer Morgan, Germany’s special envoy for international climate action, told me. “And that is so important because it changes the dynamics. It forces the largest emitters to sit across the table from countries like Vanuatu and listen to what it means if we don’t act.” (Vanuatu, in the South Pacific, is another country that could easily be wiped out by sea-level rise.)

Navroz Dubash, a professor at the New Delhi-based Centre for Policy Research, made a similar point: “cops are the only place where the distributive justice and the vulnerability agendas get taken seriously—or have a prayer of being taken seriously.”

Among the issues to be decided at cop28 is where to hold cop29. The peripatetic gathering is supposed to travel next to Eastern Europe, and the host country should already have been announced. (The war in Ukraine has complicated the choice.) But whatever is accomplished—or not accomplished—in the U.A.E. and an undetermined Eastern European country, the show will go on. cop30, it’s already been determined, will take place in Brazil, in the city of Belém. ♦