

# Paris Summit: Rethinking 2°C

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From November 30 to December 11, there will be the historic [COP21 United Nations Conference on Climate Change](#) in Paris, France. COP21 will bring in delegates from all over the world to narrow down a massive climate agreement that cuts emissions and helps with adaptation, combining commitments and economic supports to help all countries involved. Through conversations leading up to the conference, it's been clear that there's one overarching goal: to keep global temperatures from increasing more than 2°C above preindustrial levels. Government officials, activists, and other talking heads point to this as a threshold we have to stay below to "avoid the worst impacts of climate change," and hopefully keep the planet a somewhat-livable place. But in my opinion, this is a highly flawed way of looking at any sort of climate negotiations. The "make or break" nature of the 2°C goal leads to all sorts of problems around framing success or failure – and what our reactions will be to either (potential complacency if we "succeed," or complete resignation if we "fail"). It also misconstrues the true nature of climate change: that there is no one safe level or threshold, but rather increasingly bad scenarios with each marginal increase in temperature. So with that in mind, we should reframe our overall goals away from the arbitrary 2°C level, and toward simply reducing emissions as much as possible, because every extra unit of CO<sub>2</sub> emitted means an extra bit of danger faced by humanity.

*[As for the Paris conference's 2°C framing, going into the negotiations with a temperature-based goal doesn't match up with the nature of emissions-reductions efforts. We have no idea which atmospheric CO<sub>2</sub> concentrations line up with which global temperatures, or even what amount of annual CO<sub>2</sub> emissions over time will result in a given atmospheric CO<sub>2</sub> concentration. CO<sub>2</sub> ppm within a given timeframe should actually be what we say in the conversation, and then break that down into annual emissions targets. I actually think it's easier to process, and the large numbers of atmospheric concentration raise an even greater sense of urgency.]*

First off, I have to point out the elephant in the room: keeping temperatures 2°C below pre-industrial levels is, considering the way the world works, impossible. More and more, experts – including economists, scientists, and more – have started noting that we're beyond being able to achieve that goal. A certain amount of climate change is already locked into the system based off our historical emissions. We are at 400 ppm CO<sub>2</sub> (preindustrial was 270 ppm), and people are talking about getting back down to 350 ppm to stay below 2°C – but to make that happen, we would need to immediately stop all emissions and sequester massive amounts of CO<sub>2</sub> in a rapid time frame, not to mention figure out land-use changes, reforestation, etc. The

reality, though, is that modern society is built off the burning of fossil fuels (and land-use changes that contribute to global warming, etc.) – and transitioning away from that can't be done in the time frames needed. Carbon sequestration technologies are largely under development and unproven, and won't be available in the time frames and at the scale needed to achieve our goals. And as I've mentioned before, positive feedback loops (such as melting methane hydrates) mean that, even if we stopped releasing greenhouse gases (GHGs) today, temperatures will keep increasing for the foreseeable future.

So with that in mind, the entire premise of the Paris negotiations is flawed. If there is no possible way to achieve its stated goal of keeping temperatures below 2°C, then what's the point of the negotiations in the first place? And if going above 2°C means experiencing the “worst and potentially catastrophic impacts of climate change,” then what's the point in even trying to reduce emissions to any extent? Everything is going to hell anyway, we will have passed the point of no return, so might as well admit defeat and live it up as the world collapses (or curl up into a ball and cry indefinitely).

Still, with this becoming increasingly clear, the world community still points to the 2°C goal (as it has been for a while now). But why? I actually think that this is symbolic of the cognitive and emotional challenges around processing the reality of climate change. In climate change and other realms, humans virtually require hope for a stable future (and usually, a better one) to keep ourselves from going crazy – and if things are looking down, we inherently believe in our own agency to change things for the better (after all, part of our self-identity – at least in the Western world – is our limitless potential). The prospect of looming catastrophe challenges that basic worldview, even stripping us of our identity as change-makers, and ultimately creates “cognitive dissonance,” we favor our worldview over reality and stick to our guns. This transfers all the way to climate negotiations, where we have to keep hope for a relatively stable, livable future – which we define as a 2°C temperature change – and give ourselves the perceived power to make that future come to be. Because in a way, it's nearly impossible for some people, policymakers included, to process things otherwise. [This is actually a bit ironic. The belief that we have ultimate power and dominion over nature is what got us into this mess – and actually represents the cognitive dissonance that keeps climate deniers from acknowledging the reality of our actions' consequences. Now, the belief that our human power can calm down the beast we riled up, in the face of reality saying otherwise, is the flipside of the same coin].

So ultimately, what does prioritizing the 2°C goal mean? It has several impacts, both good and bad. On the positive side, it provides a sense of urgency and seriousness for what we need to achieve at the talks; and if it seems like we have made progress (but haven't quite gotten there), it gives us a final nudge to move forward toward an even better outcome. But on the negative side, it creates a false dichotomy between livable-future and utter catastrophe, when the real nature of climate change is that increasing levels of temperature change have unique and increasingly-harmful impacts. On the same vein, it also paints a false dichotomy between

success or failure, when really we need to do everything possible to avoid each marginal unit of temperature increase. If negotiators perceive that they've reached the emissions target, governments might experience "complacency" where they don't need to make any more efforts, even though each extra one can make a large difference (it can also make stakeholders feel like they don't need to do much towards adaptation, even those that will be vital). And if the talks fail, there can be a large sense of fatalism because we will lead the climate past the "point of no return" – and (at least some) participants might also resign, saying "we tried," and lose any motivation to still do as much as possible, all things considered. In my opinion, these negatives outweigh any positives.

I propose an alternative, which ultimately is more reflective of the reality of climate change itself. Summit leaders should clearly lay out the climate scenarios under each degree of global temperature rise – and use those as motivations for policymakers to make commitments to the largest cuts possible. On the one hand, there will be the bad-but-not-apocalyptic scenario of 2°C, with a certain amount of sea level rise, more powerful storms, and the migration that I covered in the prior few posts ([Part 1](#)) ([Part 2](#)) ([Part 3](#)). (Here's the thing, though: this can't continue to be framed as "avoiding the worst impacts of climate change" ... It needs to be noted that this will be a pretty stark scenario in and of itself, with details included). And on the farther end of the spectrum, there is the "business as usual" (BAU) scenario, where we keep emitting at current levels and the world sees an 8°C + increase in temperatures. That would see most of the world's major cities (many of which are built on coastlines) flooded, many parts of the Middle East and Africa rendered uninhabitable due to drought and heat waves, etc. – which would eventually lead to massive migration, population loss and suffering. Summit leaders should paint the picture of what the world will be like for each degree of temperature change, from 2°C to 8°C and more. This is already laid out to some extent by the IPCC in its prior reports, which have projections under different emissions scenarios – and several other entities have done examples of gradual impacts, such as Climate Central with its sea level rise series – so there is already a trove of info to build from. The key about laying out these scenarios, though, is that we can't be nice when talking to stakeholders: climate change is scary, and putting it all out to bear should be the gut-punch that those in Paris need to make serious cuts.

Once these various scenarios have been laid out, we need to give negotiators the choice between them, presenting our best estimate of what types of emissions reductions we will need to reach each target – ideally referencing the detail of the scenarios themselves, to drive the point home. Basically, say "this is what we will need to limit ourselves to only losing 10% of our coastal cities, as opposed to 20%. And if you just can't reach that, here's what we need to do to keep it at 20% and not go to 30% (or 40, or 50...)." It's certainly not as hopeful as "avoid the worst impacts of climate change," but it speaks to the way climate change actually works – and also provides a realistic motivation to keep emissions as low as possible, rather than aim for some arbitrary goal.

Most importantly, this way of going about things is honest. It recognizes the true nature of climate change: the fact that there are a multitude of potential scenarios, that we can't concretely say that any emissions reductions will certainly get us to any given temperature-change goal, and that each marginal decrease in temperature change can have immense value, even if we don't reach a pre-set target. It might actually help put some more focus on adaptation, since policymakers will be forced to recognize the seriousness of upcoming impacts, and their unfortunate inevitability. Again, not rosy – but realistic.

Do I think that this is something that will actually happen when Paris comes around? Of course not. But it's an important point to address with how we look at our actions going forward. And to just maybe, some of those at the conference will start thinking this way, and start up that conversation.