

CLIMATE CRISIS UPDATE: KEY PLAYERS in the PARIS TALKS

Sometimes it's hard to know the players without a scorecard. Here is an excerpt of the players in Paris, and the key roles they will play in the success, or failure, of the current round of COP-21 (Conference of the Parties, Paris), as the critical second week of talks comes to a head. This article also puts the history—and future—of climate change in perspective. Next time: War, peace, and the climate crisis.



Laurent Fabius, COP 21 president and France's foreign minister, holds up the **draft Paris outcome** on 5 December 2015. Photograph: IISD

[Fiona Harvey](#) and [Suzanne Goldenberg](#) in Paris
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...In the crunch second week, still significant areas of disagreement, but also [optimism at the talks that a deal can be done](#). The negotiating text has been pared back to just over 20 pages – a far better position than at the equivalent point at the Copenhagen talks. Some of the key players in Paris....

Christiana Figueres - United Nations, Exec. Secretary



Christiana Figueres, Paris, Dec. 5, Photo IISD

Christiana Figueres, executive secretary of the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change.... involved in the long-running UN climate change talks since 1995, first as part of the Costa Rican delegation involved in crafting the Kyoto Protocol of 1997, since 2010 as the UN's climate change chief. Having experienced at first hand the travails of the Copenhagen summit in 2009, which ended in a deal but was derided for the scenes of chaos and vicious recriminations.... she's determined to learn from those mistakes.

Background: Costa Rica. Her father, President Jose ("Pepe") Figueres, was credited with leading his country to stable democracy, has assisted her in gaining the confidence of developing countries, while liaising with rich nations which have dominated past talks. Exhaustive knowledge of [the cumbersome UN negotiating process](#) has proved invaluable, through a series of lead-up meetings.

[The Paris conference](#) is a make-or-break moment for the [UN climate negotiations](#), which began in 1992. Current commitments on limiting greenhouse gas emissions, declared by all the world's major economies at Copenhagen, will run out in 2020, and this conference is aimed at putting plans in place for the next decade. Crucial, if the world is to stay within the threshold of [a 2C temperature rise](#) above pre-industrial levels, regarded by scientists as the limit of safety beyond which the effects of extreme weather are likely to become catastrophic and irreversible. If Paris fails, the world will be left without agreed collective action to solve this global problem. Direct in manner, with a sense of humor and moments of fire, Figueres has needed every ounce of energy and dynamism she can muster for the talks.

These will be her last UN negotiations: next year, she will step down from her role, leaving, she hopes, a lasting legacy.

Todd Stern – US COP-21 Representative



Photograph: Thibault Camus/AP

The tall thin figure of Todd Stern has been a fixture at UN climate negotiations for nearly 20 years, since he was asked to head the White House preparations for the Kyoto protocol in 1997. The State Department negotiator's path through both worlds – the White House and the international climate negotiations – is closely linked to that of John Podesta, the powerful Democratic strategist who brought Stern into Bill Clinton's White House. When George Bush was president, Stern joined a law firm and became a fellow at the Center for American Progress, the think-tank founded by Podesta. In 2007, the two men teamed up for [a report](#) arguing the next US president should make a low carbon economy a top priority. Hillary Clinton brought Stern back into the administration in 2009 after she became secretary of state.

Over the past six years, he has in his quiet and relentless way carried out a revolution in the way the negotiations have approached climate change. His first task was killing off [the Kyoto protocol](#), a legally binding treaty which put the onus for fighting climate change almost entirely on rich countries such as the US, Europe and Japan. In tandem, Stern tried to end the rivalry between the two big climate polluters – the US and China. Stern made his first approach when he accompanied Clinton to [China](#) on her first visit as secretary of state. But the real movement came in [2013](#) after John Kerry became secretary of state.

[The deal, announced at a summit in Beijing in November last year](#), was widely seen as a breakthrough. Stern made headway with the idea that all countries had to engage in fighting climate change, although developing economies would not be required to cut emissions until a later date.

Stern argued the only way to fight climate change was on a volunteer basis, with each country setting its own targets for emissions reductions and other actions. **Stern insisted peer pressure would eventually compel countries to deepen their cuts** and so achieve the goal of limiting warming to 2C

above pre-industrial levels. Only time will prove whether he was right.



Francois Hollande and Ban Ki-moon, arrival at Paris Talks COP21

Photograph: Francois Pauletto/Demotix/Corbis

Hollande, Fabius, Royal, and Tubiana—France

François Hollande, President of France, has been much in evidence for [his country's hosting](#) of these crucial talks. Welcoming [world leaders on the opening day](#), he made clear his determination: “Never have the stakes been so high, because this is about the future of the planet, the future of life.”

[Laurent Fabius](#), foreign minister and president of COP 21, has taken charge of the talks and the lead-up to them. In frequent meetings with counterparts in other countries throughout the year, on a variety of subjects, he has never failed to squeeze in the issue of climate change, and press governments to plan to reduce emissions and, with developed countries, finance poor nations. His has been the key role, finding out from other governments their targets and concerns, forming a bridge (among) nations.



Segolene Royal, France, photo IISD

The attacks on Paris, in which 130 people died and scores more were badly injured marked a watershed. Fabius's concerns switched immediately to the safety of the French people... There was brief doubt as to whether the summit would go ahead. [Ségolène Royal](#), Minister of Ecology, Sustainable Development and Energy, has [championed the concerns of the poor nations](#) at these negotiations, insisting repeatedly that the rich world must assist them in reducing emissions and coping with the effects of climate change. Economic development has sometimes been seen as running counter to environmental well-being. She has been determined to reconcile the two, arguing that no development can be durable if it damages the environment. In the negotiation rooms at the talks, the key figure for the French is [Laurent Tubiana](#). Experienced in international negotiations, she was director of the International Institute for Sustainable Development and International Relations.

Su Wei and Xie Zhenhua - China



Su Wei, China. Photo, IISD

Two contrasting personalities lead China's delegation. Su Wei is known for being one of the toughest negotiators around, described by one delegate as China's "attack dog". Minister [Xie Zhenhua](#) tends to strike a more flexible pose, often smiling and exchanging jokes with reporters and aides, and willing to consider compromises. "Good cop, bad cop," one observer puts it.

China's position at these talks has changed markedly. Blamed for [helping to cause the collapse of negotiations in Copenhagen](#) in 2009, the country nevertheless signed a declaration there enshrining its first commitments on curbing emissions under the UN. In [Durban, at a further round of talks](#) in 2011, the proposal on the table was for a pathway to a new global agreement to kick in from 2020, when the Copenhagen commitments expire.

That agreement is now the subject of the crunch conference in Paris. But if China had been allowed its way, Paris would never have happened. [The talks at Durban carried on for 36 hours beyond their deadline](#), with non-stop marathon negotiating sessions. The EU, which proposed the 2015 agreement, had assembled a broad but fragile coalition of developed and developing countries. [In the final hours, only two held out: China and India](#). China's situation at the talks is complicated by political realities in Beijing. The country's environment ministry pushes for domestic action on pollution, and the foreign ministry wants China to be seen as a constructive player on the international stage, but the National Development and Reform Commission (NDRC) traditionally takes a more hardline view at the UN.

(After) Durban, however, ... China finally backed down and agreed the timetable for Paris; the country has shown more public willingness to negotiate on climate change. Previously, for instance, China refused to set a date for when its emissions would peak. Late last year, [President Xi Jinping stood with President Obama of the US to announce a peak year, 2030](#), which is now its offering at the Paris talks. [China has also contributed billions to the Green Climate Fund](#), for poorer developing countries.¹

Having agreed a peaking year, and contributed to finance, China's aim is now to hold developed countries to what it perceives as their obligations. Whether that involves blocking a deal judged too weak, or not in the Chinese national interest, will depend on Xie and Su, and their instructions from Beijing.



Susheel Kumar, India, photo IISD

India has taken one of the hardest public lines in the first week of these talks and in the lead-up to them. The country was [notably late in submitting its national plan on curbing emissions, known as an INDC](#) - intended nationally determined contribution - which focused on renewable energy.

Narendra Modi, leader of the world's biggest democracy, has publicly argued that it would be "morally wrong" to let rich countries off the hook for their historical emissions. [This line has been continued by India's senior environment official, Susheel Kumar](#), of the ministry of environment, at the talks.

India's negotiators have opposed phrasing in the text that would include developing countries that are "in a position to do so" among those making voluntary contributions to climate finance, and the inclusion of a 1.5C temperature limit which many of the poorest nations want.

But its hard line has been counterbalanced by a strong focus on technology and energy. On the first day, India announced an [alliance of 120 countries to pursue solar power](#), and said it would focus on other renewables as a way of reducing its future reliance on coal. These are potentially important achievements that could change the shape of emissions growth...

With its huge population and rapidly developing economy, India under Modi is proud of its role on the world stage, and will be pivotal at the talks. [Minister Prakash Javadekar](#), who will lead for the second week, is said to have a friendly demeanor in meetings, and is more inclined to want to present India as a supporter of international processes than some of the "old guard" in the delegation. But if the government wants to be seen as a beacon for other developing nations, in the model of China, it [will also have to show it is not harming the least developed countries](#) by refusing to agree measures that would help them.

Miguel Arias Cañete - European Union



Miguel Arias Cañete, presents the European commission's targets.
Photograph: Olivier Hoslet/EPA

European commissioner for climate and energy, Miguel Arias Cañete had a full portfolio: [plans for an unprecedented “Energy Union”](#) across the EU; reinvigorating Europe's energy industry amid the recession and Euro crises; and the COP 21. So far, he has pressed forward with all three.

A genial man, with a background as a conservative politician, the Spaniard gives every appearance of enjoying his role, and his relationships with Latin America are undoubtedly helpful. [Latin America will play a key role](#), as some of those nations – notably Bolivia, Venezuela and Nicaragua – have sought to obstruct agreement in the past, while others are more willing to compromise. Cañete seems to have ridden out early controversies and [objections to his role](#) from campaigners, who were angered by his previous large shareholdings in oil companies, now sold.

But his affable manner should not fool his counterparts into thinking the EU will be a pushover – he has stated firmly that Europe will not accept a weak deal. [“There is no Plan B if Paris should fail,” he told the Guardian](#) earlier this year, and he has repeated his determination since.

ⁱ Of course, many countries say that the date must be accelerated, and percentage cuts made stronger, if we are to reach the goals set in 2009, or go beyond to <1.5C degrees, rather than the current trend toward >2.6C, which is catastrophic if it's unchecked. Those are the stakes at Paris—climate crisis is now. Islands are underwater, today. The polar ice caps are melting, today. The California drought is six years old, today. And we need a [Climate Fund](#) that is adequate to this humongous task. –eaa.