

Time for plan B for the planet

Written by Gal Luft

Thursday, 04 November 2021 00:00

No matter how one tries to spin it, the UN climate summit in Glasgow, COP26, ended in failure. Aside from an agreement to end deforestation by 2030, which, like its 2014 predecessor, is unlikely to be implemented, and the formation of a US-EU partnership to limit methane emissions by 30% by 2030 compared with 2020 levels, the summit mostly produced hot air.

Many leaders of key emitting countries did not show up; those who did mostly reiterated their old voluntary commitments for GHG cuts; and the few who did come up with new pledges rely on unproven technologies and political successors who may or may not share their sense of urgency. As the history of the past five US presidents shows, pledges made by democratically elected leaders are as durable as writing on ice.

Over the past century, the US has emitted more GHG than any other country on the planet and its per capita emissions are the highest in the world, twice that of China's, but this did not stop President Joe Biden, who could not even convince Congressional Democrats, let alone Republicans, to pass the bills necessary for the implementation of his climate action plan, to present himself as champion of the climate movement and criticize presidents Xi Jinping and Vladimir Putin for not showing up in Glasgow. While calling on nations to cut their emissions by using less fossil fuels, he demanded oil exporters increase production to lower costs at the pump. Trying to reconcile voters' anger about rising energy prices with the pressure coming from the progressives of his party who see climate change as number-one priority, his Glasgow message was equivocal and unpersuasive.

Other leaders were no less fickle. Small and medium countries have learned that to curry favor with the global elite they must show up in Glasgow with ambitious GHG reduction pledges which they know they cannot meet. A vocal bloc of micro island countries, some with a population of tens of thousands but armed with a vote in the UN equal to that of countries of hundreds of millions, demand that 99 percent of humanity sacrifice their economic development to save the habitat of the remaining one percent. At the same time, nowhere in Glasgow could one hear the anguish of the billion or so people in the developing world who are living in energy poverty, disconnected from modern electricity, internet and transportation systems. Another absentee from the conversation was the only source of affordable, reliable and zero-emissions 24/7 electricity – nuclear power. No serious discussion on global net-zero can ever take place without the nuclear power industry at the table, yet COP26 organizers treated the industry like the black sheep of energy options and the parade of leaders barely mentioned this solution.

Indeed, the international conversation in Glasgow has been a cocktail of hypocrisy, cynicism, shallow elitism and apocalyptic environmental zeal. In what can only be defined as new form of imperialism, leaders of rich countries shamelessly pressured the poor to curtail their growth before heading back to their limousines and private planes, while the poor are too timid and too disorganized to effectively stand their ground. If the speech givers were really concerned about emissions, they would have held the conference on Zoom rather than flying hundreds of apparatchiks in on private jets and zooming around Glasgow in enormous motorized cavalcades. Furthermore, if the recent energy crunches in China, India, Europe and North America have taught us anything it is that an overly ambitious rush toward meeting self-imposed emissions goals may be detrimental for our economy and energy security. Those disruptions are stern reminders that the road to net-zero is full of potholes and speedbumps and that going

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too fast may ultimately cause us to go slower. Sustainability must be sustainable.

It is time to begin to internalize the inconvenient truth that despite the platitudes, fiery speeches and lofty goals, humanity as a collective lacks the willpower and resources to transform away from fossil fuels before the end of the century. To be sure, great strides could be made to lessen the dependency on fossil fuels, but this will not be enough to meet the 1.5 degree warming target set by the UN. The climate movement insists that failure to do so could bring about the end of humanity. This assertion is speculative and will only contribute to panic, unhinged decision-making and misallocation of trillions of dollars that are needed to address no less important challenges. Natural disasters have been part of the human experience since time immemorial and can be managed if we shift the conversation on climate change from a lofty net-zero fixation to a more pragmatic and sustainable approach, one that includes practical solutions on how to live, even thrive, in a warmer planet.

To better utilize scarce resources, we must shift our focus from attempted prevention to adaptation. Prevention means investing trillions of dollars, which we do not have and we must therefore borrow from future generations, in an energy transformation, which may or may not cap temperature rise. Adaptation is about increasing resilience to a fluctuating climate while improving quality of life and reducing energy costs. These two diametrically opposed responses to climate change can be applied in addressing every climate related event be it torrential rains in Henan Province, forest fires in the East Mediterranean or Bangladesh going under water.

The Glasgow approach is to invest trillions in attempted prevention with the goal of reducing the frequency of extreme weather events. The adaptation approach on the other hand assumes floods, heat waves, and rising sea levels will continue to happen no matter what, so let's build our cities and communities in ways that make them more resilient. This means better city planning, improved water management, home insulation and ventilation, establishing regional squadrons of airtankers to put out forest fires, investment in disease eradication, public transportation, encouraging our best and brightest to study engineering rather than gender studies and better emergency preparedness to name a few.

Rising sea levels could indeed make some littoral communities uninhabitable, but Quixotic efforts to control the world's temperature may not be the best way to save them. A rich country like the Netherlands demonstrated countries can live and even thrive below sea level using well understood engineering solutions, city designs and construction techniques. Bangladesh, which is often flooded, can take note, but in order to deal with the challenge it must first prosper. And this is the crux of the matter. A smart response to a fluctuating climate begins with prosperity. Poor countries are preoccupied with meeting their people's basic needs and can do very little to address global challenges. If we are to increase resilience, Bangladesh must advance toward the level of prosperity of the Netherlands – not the other way around. Trade wars, technology and scientific decoupling, nuclear arms races, weaponization of space, and the other features of the rivalry between the world's two largest emitters, China and the US, are undercutting global prosperity and denying us the resources needed to meet global challenges.

But to even begin to talk about Plan B we must first change the polarized nature of conversation about climate. Today, those who dare to challenge the so-called "scientific consensus" are

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marginalized and delegitimized; their voices are banned from the media; and governments, international development banks and NGOs are directing funds to those who bolster the Glasgow narrative while marginalizing adaptation advocates. We must be able to have a more mature, secular, and tolerant conversation about the way we allocate our resources and the resources of our descendants. We must stop vilifying fossil fuels as enemies of humanity. They are not. Over the past half century life expectancy at birth in China doubled and GDP grew 150 times in large part thanks to their abundance and cheap price. It is immoral to deny the poorest parts of the world the same opportunity. Declaring war on fossil fuels and betting the farm on experimental technologies is a gamble we cannot take without a serious conversation. Sadly, this approach will not be accepted by the collective West any time soon. It is up to China, India, Brazil and other major developing nations to introduce an alternative approach, one that works alongside nature rather than against it, one that maintains healthy balance between prosperity and environmental stewardship and – most important – one that is based on reason, not faith.

Gal Luft is co-director of the [Institute for the Analysis of Global Security](#) and professor at Ostim Technical University