

The global warming alarm clock is ringing. Wake up

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The human brain isn't ideally wired to worry about a problem like global warming. We tend to short-term thinking, such that annoyances today can loom larger than existential dangers tomorrow. We also suffer from a tendency to loss aversion, which can cause us to lose sight of opportunities for long-term gain as we focus on avoiding short-term pain. And then there's the perpetual challenge of co-operating with others – even when it's in everyone's best interests.

As the world gathers in Glasgow for the United Nations climate conference, our collective thinking is as much a hindrance as a help. The payoff of working together to contain the rise in global temperatures in the decades ahead is obvious – yet Glasgow opens with uncertainty and discord.

The meeting in Scotland – one year delayed because of the pandemic – ties back to an earlier UN meeting in 2015, which led to the landmark Paris Agreement. Countries pledged to cut greenhouse gas emissions enough to hold temperature increases to “well below” 2 degrees Celsius, and ideally to 1.5 C. Paris included a provision to ratchet up that ambition, with everyone stepping up the promises, every five years. Glasgow is supposed to be that first step.

The co-operative spirit of Paris contrasts, so far, with the reality of Glasgow. The challenge of global warming requires international co-operation on a scale that's never been seen before, but the two largest emitters, China and the United States, are on most days engaged in acrimonious competition. U.S. President Joe Biden, whose own climate agenda is stuck in Congress, arrived in Glasgow with a lecture that China, the world's No. 1 emitter, and Russia, at No. 4, are not doing enough, and that their foot-dragging led to lacklustre climate action out of last weekend's [G20 summit in Rome](#). Neither Xi Jinping of China nor Vladimir Putin of Russia bothered to show up in Glasgow.

Every country matters in the fight against climate heating but some countries matter more. China represents 23.9 per cent of current emissions; the U.S. 11.8 per cent; India 6.8 and Russia 4.1 – the four [accounting for almost half](#) the global total. The world's target is net zero emissions in 2050, but China has only pledged to get there by 2060. On Monday in Glasgow, India promised 2070.

As such, it's easy to think the future looks bleak. The [latest findings](#) from the UN Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change in August showed the world is already 1.1 C hotter on average than in the late 19th century and could hit 1.5 C within two decades.

There has, however, been progress. Before Paris, the world was on [a calamitous road](#) to heating of more than 4 C by 2100. The outlook now is a range of 2.7 C to 3.1 C. If countries follow through on their promises, heating could be kept to 2.1 C. That's not good enough, but it is an improvement.

And some countries have delivered results. The European Union and the United Kingdom, the birthplaces of the coal-fired industrial revolution, emit considerably less today than they did in 1990.

For Canada, with a small population but relatively high emissions, global co-operation is key. The Liberal government has promised to cut emissions by 40 per cent by 2030. [This is doable](#), if Ottawa puts all the tools into place. But Canada can't achieve much if its trading partners – notably the U.S. – are laggards.

On Monday in Glasgow, Prime Minister Justin Trudeau reiterated his election promise of a cap on emissions from oil and gas production. That is within reach – oil and gas output jumped 16 per cent from 2014 to 2019, even as emissions were held flat. But the U.S., against which Canadian oil and gas competes, has not as yet committed to anything similar.

The dangers of climate heating are clear – among them, extremes of fires, floods and droughts. In Glasgow, Mr. Trudeau invoked Lytton, B.C., which saw a Canadian record temperature of 49.6 C in June, after which fire razed the village. The abstract long term is starting to become real in the short term.

The alarm bells of an emergency are being rung. British Prime Minister Boris Johnson, host of the Glasgow meeting, alluded in his opening remarks to the parallel with the existential threat of nuclear annihilation. “Humanity has long since run down the clock on climate change,” Mr. Johnson said. “It’s one minute to midnight on that doomsday clock and we need to act now.”