



The Paris Agreement, a Strategy for the Longer Term

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All the interpretations and findings set forth in this expert perspective are those of the author alone.

With the adoption of the UNFCCC, governments across the world set the long-term objective of stabilizing “greenhouse gas concentrations in the atmosphere at a level that would prevent dangerous anthropogenic interference with the climate system.”¹ The adoption of this objective has been a fundamental guide for the intergovernmental process and its Parties in the fight to address climate change.

Efforts to operationalize this objective have delivered important milestones, such as the Kyoto Protocol and more recently the Paris Agreement. Through these, governments agreed on concrete actions and time frames to reduce emissions and adapt to the impacts of climate change. They also agreed to cooperate on finance, technology, and capacity building with a view to increase efforts over time.

The Paris Agreement and its swift entry into force represent a bold statement of the determination of the international community under the United Nations to transform the global economy so as to limit the impact that our power generation, production methods, agriculture, and consumption patterns have on the climate system. The Agreement is in itself a global strategy for the longer term that is defined by the three aims enshrined in its Article:

- First, limit the average global temperature rise to well below 2°C above preindustrial levels and pursue efforts to limit this increase to 1.5°C.
- Second, increase the ability to adapt to the adverse effects of climate change and foster climate-resilient and low greenhouse gas emissions development, in a manner that does not threaten food production.
- Third, make financial flows consistent with a pathway toward low greenhouse gas emissions and climate-resilient development.

These three aims provide a single and clear direction of travel to state and nonstate actors for the longer term, given the link between economic activity, greenhouse gas emissions, and the impacts of climate change. According to the latest available science, achieving the long-term temperature goal would require global greenhouse gas emissions to peak by 2020 and subsequently be reduced to zero before the end of the century. To limit warming to 1.5°C, this reduction to zero must take place around 2050.

The temperature goal reflects, above all, a vision of the type of society we want for the future. It represents an aim to design our economic system so that improving our quality of life is not

hindered by the negative impacts on our climate. In the light of science, this vision implies a major transformation. It compels us to rethink the way we produce, use, and consume energy; how we manufacture and build; and how we manage our land and ecosystems. If global net greenhouse gas emissions are to reach zero at some point before the end of this century, we need to ensure that our energy and production systems become neutral in terms of greenhouse gas emissions so that there is at least a balance between human-generated greenhouse gas emissions and removals of emissions from our land and through healthy, natural ecosystems.

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This transformation must be achieved over time but also in time. No single country has the capacity to decisively shift the global energy base or land use patterns on its own. To this end, policies need to be set in place now; technologies need to be developed, matured, commercialized, and deployed at scale; and the practices and behaviors of economic actors need to move ever faster toward low-emission and sustainable business and investment. In fact, the scenarios and trajectories assessed by the scientific community consider time frames up to the end of this century and take different assumptions in the way these are reached.

At the country level, the Paris Agreement further defines requirements specific to mitigation, adaptation, cooperation, transparency, and so on. Two of these requirements are of particular importance in the context of this note: first, an invitation to all Parties to communicate long-term low greenhouse emission development strategies, and, second, a requirement to each Party to prepare, communicate, and maintain successive nationally determined contributions (NDCs). These two mechanisms are mutually reinforcing: the long-term strategy provides a framework and direction for subsequent NDCs; at the same time, the increasingly ambitious NDCs are the means to achieve the long-term strategy. The requirement that Parties update their NDC or communicate a new one every five years provides the engine that will lead to progressively increasing ambition and avoid the impacts resulting from warming above 2°C.

These provisions constitute a clear signal to countries. While there is flexibility for governments to define climate action according to their development priorities and capacities, the global emissions trajectory would require that all increase ambition over time and that, eventually, they balance their emission and removals. In other words, the direction of travel established by the Paris Agreement foresees a future where the atmosphere sees no additional greenhouse gas emissions and, therefore, all countries must work in this direction. It is in this context where long term strategies become an essential tool for addressing climate change.

From an international standpoint, long-term strategies provide credibility and certainty to the Paris Agreement that its goals can be achieved. They also increase transparency and enhance trust among nations as each Party demonstrates a determination to work toward emissions neutrality and encourages others to follow suit. On the firm basis of positive reciprocity of action, long-term strategies constitute an ideal tool for governments to communicate their determination to address climate change to other countries that require this information to assess their level of engagement.

From a national perspective, these strategies are fundamental, as they guide the short- and medium-term perspectives of political and economic cycles and provide political certainty for bold and concrete action by economic actors. At the same time, they provide the flexibility required for countries to pursue a route that does not compromise their development and poverty eradication goals, all while enabling them to transform their economies.

A few countries have already responded to an invitation by the Conference of the Parties (COP) to communicate midcentury strategies, with 2050 as a reference year. Most of these countries have translated their long-term vision into a quantified goal expressed as a percentage reduction, which in the case of Germany consists of a reduction of up to 95 percent below 1990 levels by 2050. While not being a mandatory law, this quantified goal enables Germany to pursue emissions neutrality step by step and across its political cycles. It encourages different segments of government, now and in the future, to continuously look for options to reduce emissions with the expectation that each will deliver enough action to reach this reduction of 95 percent.

However, long-term strategies can and must include future greenhouse gas avoidance goals, as well as direct reductions of existing emissions in an economy. Countries interested in bringing a vision of a future free of emissions could express it, for example, in terms of a clean energy matrix, a modern transport system that uses only electric vehicles, or mandates to sustainably manage landscapes and reverse deforestation. What is important for long-term strategies is that they convey an unambiguous signal to economic actors; that they provide flexibility for these actors to conform to the best of their ability to the set vision; that they are realistic; that they reflect the long-term aspirations of all sectors of society; that they are compatible with the political cycles and any changes brought in by midterm priorities; and, ultimately, that they effectively guide the country as rapidly as possible along the path to balancing its emissions and removals.

In thinking about the future, governments will undoubtedly need to address questions such as the following:

- How will the country meet its energy needs?
- How will it feed a growing population?
- How will it address transport problems?
- How will it balance social and economic aspirations?

Preventing the impacts of warming above 2°C will be impossible unless countries incorporate climate considerations when answering these questions. Given that transforming economies is a process that takes years, long-term strategies become a main policy tool for delivering this transformation. The vision enshrined in the long-term strategy must transcend political cycles and go beyond the interests of groups and individuals by bringing societies together.

The Paris Agreement and its objective is one such vision for the globe.

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1. Article 2 further specifies that such a level should be achieved within a time frame sufficient to allow ecosystems to adapt naturally to climate change, to ensure that food production is not threatened, and to enable economic development to proceed in a sustainable manner.