

The European Union has come up with a climate action plan when the global climate talks failed to reach key objectives. What is the EU's plan, how does it compare to others', and how much remains to be done?

The annual climate talks ended in Madrid last week with a disappointing outcome. The talks were unable to define the rules of a new carbon market to be set up under the Paris Agreement, the only major agenda before it. Nor were they able to persuade countries to commit to increase the scale of climate actions by next year, a demand being made again and again in view of scientific assessments that show that current efforts to tackle climate change were not enough.

While the meeting was still on, the European Union, whose 28 member countries are together the third-largest emitter of greenhouse gases in the world after China and the United States, came up with an announcement on additional measures it would on climate change. Called the European Green Deal, the EU announcement was hailed as a major step forward, even though it needs complementary efforts from other countries to make a significant impact.

The two key decisions

Two major decisions are at the heart of the European Green Deal. One is about achieving "climate neutrality". The EU has promised to bring a law, binding on all member countries, to ensure it becomes "climate neutral" by 2050. Climate neutrality, sometimes also expressed as a state of net-zero emissions, is achieved when a country's emissions are balanced by absorptions and removal of greenhouse gases from the atmosphere. Absorption can be increased by creating more carbon sinks like forests, while removal involves technologies like carbon capture and storage.

Over the last few months, there had been a growing demand for countries to commit to net-zero emissions by 2050. The UN Secretary-General had convened a special meeting on the sidelines of the General Assembly session in September to persuade countries to commit to this target. Over 60 countries had agreed to scale up their climate actions, or to the 2050 target, but these were all relatively small emitters. The EU is now the first major emitter to agree to the 2050 climate neutrality target. It has said it would bring a proposal by March next year on a European law to enshrine this target.

The second decision pertains to an increase in its 2030 emission reduction target. In its climate action plan declared under the Paris Agreement, the EU was committed to making a 40 per cent reduction in its emissions by 2030 compared to 1990 levels. It is now promising to increase this reduction to at least 50 per cent and work towards 55 per cent.

Even at 40 per cent, the European Union had the most ambitious emission reduction targets among the developed countries. The US, for example, had agreed to cut emissions by 26-28 per cent by 2030 from 2005 levels, but having withdrawn from the Paris Agreement, it is under no obligation to fulfill even that target.

The EU also happens to be only one among major emitters to retain the 1990 baseline for emission cuts, originally mandated under the Kyoto Protocol for all developed countries. Most other countries have shifted their baselines to 2005 or even later under the 2015 Paris Agreement.

The Green Deal includes sectoral plans to achieve these two overall targets, and proposals for the policy changes that would be required. For example, it has proposals for making the steel industry carbon-free by 2030, new strategies for transport and energy sectors, a revision of managements of railway and shipping to make them more efficient, and more stringent air pollution emission standards for vehicles.

Better than others

The European Union, as a whole, has been doing better than other developed countries on reducing emissions. In 2010, the EU had pledged to reduce its emissions by at least 25 per cent by 2020 from 1990 levels. By 2018, it claimed to have achieved 23 per cent reduction in emissions. In terms of emission reductions, it probably is on track to meet the 2020 target, unlike any developed country outside the EU.

Canada, which walked out of the Kyoto Protocol, reported last year that its emissions were down 4 per cent from 2005 levels, but compared to 1990, this was an addition of about 16 per cent. Japan, another country to have abandoned the Kyoto Protocol, said its emissions for the year ending March 31, 2018 had come to about 8 per cent below the 2013 baseline it has chosen for itself. But this is a miniscule decrease compared to 1990 levels.

Even the EU, however, has not been fulfilling all its climate obligations. The Kyoto Protocol required the rich and developed countries to provide finance and technology to the developing countries to help them fight climate change. In those respects, there has been little climate money flowing out of the EU, especially for adaptation needs of developing countries, and transfer of new climate-friendly technologies has been mired in patent and ownership complications.

Still miles to go

The Green Deal is important but inadequate in itself to achieve the emission reductions that scientific assessments say would be required to save the world from catastrophic and irreversible impacts of climate change. There has been no signal from other big emitters, including large developing countries like China and India, that they were considering immediate scaling up of their climate actions.

While announcing the deal, the EU urged other countries to raise the ambition of their actions as well. “As long as many international partners do not share the same ambition as the EU, there is a risk of carbon leakage, either because production is transferred from the EU to other countries with lower ambition for emission reduction, or because EU products are replaced by more carbon-intensive imports. If this risk materializes, there will be no reduction in global emissions, and this will frustrate the efforts of EU and its industries to meet the global climate objectives of the Paris Agreement.”

Expected Questions (Prelims Exams)

1. Recently the annual climate talks in Madrid ended with a disappointing outcome, consider the following statements in the context of the Green Deal announced by the European Union in this dialogue:-

1. The Green Deal for Europe is an ambitious and viable plan for zero greenhouse gas emissions.
2. The European Green Deal emphasizes on climate neutrality and increase the reduction target of greenhouse gases by 2030.

Which of the above statements is/are incorrect?

- (a) Only 1 (b) Only 2
(c) Both 1 and 2 (d) None of these

Note: Answer of Prelims Expected Question given on 20 Dec., is 1 (c)

Expected Questions (Mains Exams)

Q. Despite relentless efforts, the emission of greenhouse gases is continuously increasing. In this context, how far will the Green Deal proposal brought by the European Union prove useful in reducing the emission of greenhouse gases? Comment. (250 words)

Note: - The question of the main examination given for practice is designed keeping in mind the upcoming UPSC main examination. Therefore, to get an answer to this question, you can take the help of this source as well as other sources related to this topic.

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