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Byline: Oliver Geden

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BERLIN—The diplomatic effort to forge an international agreement to mitigate climate change is undergoing a fundamental shift. The top-down approach that has guided the effort since 1992 is slowly being replaced by a bottom-up model. Rather than attempting to craft an accord based on legally binding restrictions on greenhouse-gas emissions, the new approach relies on voluntary commitments by individual countries to rein in their contributions to climate change.

This is, in one sense, an admission of failure; such an approach is unlikely to limit the rise in global temperatures to less than 2 degrees Celsius, the target set by the United Nations in 2010. But given the slow pace of progress so far, small pragmatic steps by individual countries may be far more productive than attempts to strike a grand bargain that remains forever out of reach.

International negotiators have made significant progress over the last five years, but they are still far away from an agreement that would meet the 2-degree Celsius target. As a result, diplomats, fearing that another failed attempt to reach a global accord could discredit the entire negotiating process, have rescaled their ambitions.

In particular, efforts to set strict limits on emissions are quietly being dropped. The focus is no longer on what is environmentally desirable or on the measures needed to keep climate change in check; rather, it is on what is politically feasible—the possibilities and constraints of the negotiating process, especially with a view to securing broad participation. Given the slow pace of progress since the first UN climate change summit in 1995, any agreement that involves all members of the Framework Convention on Climate Change will be hailed as a historic success.

That is why, as world leaders and environment ministers prepare to attend the climate-change conference in Paris from Nov. 30 to Dec. 11, persuading all major emitters to commit to ambitious and legally binding emissions reductions is no longer considered realistic. The world's largest polluters—especially China, India and the United States—have made it clear that they alone will decide what measures they will take. Having declared their unilateral targets, they are unlikely to engage in further multilateral negotiations.

To be sure, few diplomats would state this so bluntly. Doing so would acknowledge the failure of the last 20 years of UN climate policy.

Instead, they tend to frame the bottom-up approach not as a break with the top-down paradigm, but as a pragmatic supplement that accommodates major emitters and creates a framework for the climate initiatives of subnational actors, such as large cities and companies.

But the truth is that the top-down approach is already being discarded. Its defining characteristic, after all, is not the political arena in which an agreement will be struck (the UN system); it is the overarching policy goal (avoiding dangerous climate change). And it is already clear that the negotiations in Paris will fail to deliver on the 2-degree Celsius target established in 2010—or on any other strictly binding threshold.

When the contributions of the more than 160 countries that have submitted their voluntary mitigation commitments—the so-called “intended nationally determined contributions”—are added up, the scale of the failure will become evident. Even if all countries rigorously adhere to their pledges, the world is on track for a temperature increase of at least 3 degrees Celsius.

Indeed, the stated goal of the Paris agreement will be to try to “keep the 2°C target within reach.” Diplomats plan to include “ratcheting-up mechanisms” that allow for a gradual increase in aspiration. But if history is any guide, such mechanisms are unlikely to be used in the next 10 years; their main function is to put a positive spin on a disappointing outcome and keep hopes of more ambitious policies alive.

Nonetheless, there is reason for optimism: Pragmatism is proving more powerful than idealism. After more than a decade of attempts to establish strict limits on emissions, the top-down approach has clearly failed to deliver. The quiet adoption of a bottom-up approach is a tacit admission that countries cannot be forced to abide by a strict, centralized regime, even if it is based on scientific evidence.

The adoption of voluntary measures has already sparked progress, most notably the coordinated commitments by the United States and China. Because the bottom-up approach respects the established ways sovereign countries act on the international stage, it has the potential to create positive momentum. Most governments prioritize political survival and short-term economic success; they will contribute to global climate action only if they know that their main competitors are doing so as well.

On balance, then, the emergence of a bottom-up approach in the fight against

climate change is an important step forward. A world that is 3 degrees Celsius warmer may be far from ideal. But it is better than a world in which climate change has spiraled out of control. Project Syndicate

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Oliver Geden is head of the European Union research division at Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik, the German institute for international and security affairs.