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Before the largest assembly of world leaders gathered on Tuesday in New York City to promise "catalytic" action on climate change, the largest climate change protest rally took to the city's streets the Sunday before. More than 300,000 people took part in the "People's Climate March," and were joined by more protesters, perhaps another 300,000 or so, in other cities around the world. The marches were designed to put public opinion squarely behind the United Nations Climate Summit, and also to put public pressure on it.

The summit was a one-day event for leaders from government, business and civil society, convened by UN Secretary General Ban Ki-moon to "galvanize and catalyze climate action." The idea was to help ensure that a substantial and legally binding agreement on limiting greenhouse gases will be reached in Paris late next year. The summit is separate from the ongoing and complicated negotiations undertaken under the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change, but its goal, according to official UN literature, is "to raise political will and mobilize action, thereby generating momentum toward a successful outcome of the negotiations."

Did it work? It is of course too early to tell, but there are disquieting signs. China, now the world's largest single source of carbon dioxide emissions, was not represented by its new paramount leader, Xi Jinping. Prime Minister Narendra Modi, the leader of the third-biggest emitter, India, did not show up either. The climate change skeptics who run Canada and Australia, Stephen Harper and Tony Abbott, skipped the event, too. Even Chancellor Angela Merkel of Germany, who pledged \$1 billion to the UN's Green Climate Fund, missed the summit.

While the UN has sought to put a positive spin on these and other absences, saying it is each respective country's set of commitments to climate action that is important, the reality is less congenial. The summit was convened precisely in recognition of the nature of the climate change negotiations: Everything boils down to political will. If the leaders of some of the countries most crucial to the negotiations did not bother to show up, what is the message being sent to those countries' negotiators?

Even more disquieting are the consequences of climate change, which become more and more obvious with each passing season.

The international community long ago reached consensus on the 2-degree mark: that if global average temperatures rose more than 2 degrees (or 3.6 degrees Fahrenheit) above pre-Industrial Age levels, the result would be calamitous. At current rates, and despite the progress of the environmental movement in many countries, the world will breach the 2-degree mark well before the end of this century.

Indeed, as the Global Carbon Project's annual report, released just in time for the summit, shows, carbon dioxide emissions reached a new record high last year, and are expected to rise even further this year. "Carbon dioxide ... emissions from fossil fuel burning and cement production increased by 2.3 percent in 2013 ... 61 percent above 1990 emissions (the Kyoto Protocol reference year). Emissions are projected to increase by a further 2.5 percent in 2014."

Those numbers should shock us. In the quarter-century since the landmark Kyoto Protocol was reached, which encouraged developed economies to reduce emissions but allowed developing economies a virtual free pass, the annual level of carbon dioxide emissions has soared.

Today, two of the largest developing economies exempted under the Kyoto Protocol account for over one-third of all emissions: China with 28 percent, India with 7. Any disinterested observer would suggest that any new global arrangement require major restrictions on China, India—and the United States, which did not sign the Protocol and which today accounts for 14 percent of all carbon dioxide emissions.

But no one on this planet is, or should be, disinterested. The very future of the human race is at stake, and those of us who live in disaster-prone zones are especially at risk. As President Aquino emphasized in his short speech at the UN Climate Summit: “It would not be an exaggeration to say that Filipinos bear a disproportionate amount of the burden when it comes to climate change.” Supertyphoon “Yolanda” and the typhoons that have wrought havoc on once-storm-free Mindanao are howling reminders of that disproportionate burden.

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