enforcement of the Parties, the global community agreed to the Berlin Mandate, which interpreted “common but differentiated responsibilities and respective capabilities” as meaning that the Annex I countries alone would take on emission-reduction responsibilities. The Berlin Mandate, codified with numerical national targets and timetables in the 1997 Kyoto Protocol, produced a dramatic gap between rhetoric and reality.

By the time of the Berlin Mandate, greenhouse gas emissions of non–Annex I countries had come to surpass those of Annex I countries. By 2005, when the Kyoto Protocol entered into force, per capita fossil fuel CO2 emissions of 50 non–Annex I countries exceeded those of the Annex I country with the lowest per capita income, the per capita income of 50 non–Annex I countries exceeded the per capita income of the poorest of the Annex I countries.

The six largest greenhouse gas emitters were not constrained by the Kyoto Protocol, because of lack of commitments (China, India, Brazil, and Indonesia), the non-binding nature of its emission commitment (Russia), or failure to ratify the agreement (United States).

Since 1990, the base year of the Kyoto Protocol, emissions have grown by approximately 5 percent annually in the non–Annex I countries, while remaining essentially flat in the Annex I nations. Furthermore, this structure of limited national participation effectively quadrupled the global cost of emission abatement necessary to stabilize atmospheric concentrations of greenhouse gases, relative to a cost-minimizing scenario. And, most problematic, the dichotomous structure of commitments rendered progress virtually impossible.

But prospects for change emerged in 2011 when an important departure from the dichotomous structure arose at negotiations in Durban, South Africa. There agreement was reached on a structure focused on the participation of all parties in the effort to mitigate greenhouse gas emissions. Under the Durban Platform for Enhanced Action, delegates agreed to craft a future legal regime that would be “applicable to all parties . . . under the convention.” This presented the potential to eliminate the annex distinction for the first time, and was therefore a very important step toward potentially breaking the logjam that has prevented progress.

The goal now before negotiators is to produce a new international agreement — under the Durban Platform — in Paris in 2015, for implementation in 2020, as a successor to the Kyoto Protocol. This presents the greatest opportunity the world has had in 20 years to make meaningful progress on this exceptionally challenging issue.

Negotiators are converging on a hybrid policy architecture, which will combine bottom-up elements in the form of “nationally determined contributions” (to be specified independently by each country), together with top-down elements, such as for monitoring, reporting, and verification.

But will this politically attractive international policy architecture place the negotiations on a path toward eventually achieving cumulative emissions reductions that are sufficient to address the threat of global climate change? That is a question that will be answered only over the months and years ahead.

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