A Japanese Perspective on the International Energy Landscape (821) November 24, 2026

COP31 Fails to Adopt Final Agreement as Divisions over Fossil Fuels Prove Irreconcilable

Ken Koyama, PhD
Senior Advisor
The Institute of Energy Economics, Japan

The 31st Conference of the Parties to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (COP31), held in Antalya, Türkiye, from 9 November, sought to adopt a final decision document summarizing the outcomes of the negotiations. Despite extending the conference by two additional days beyond the scheduled closing date, negotiators ultimately failed to reach consensus. As discussions became deadlocked over issues related to fossil fuels, the conference concluded on 22 November without adopting a formal outcome document.

Within the history of the Conference of the Parties (COP), negotiations have traditionally culminated in the adoption of some form of consensus text, even when substantial differences among participating countries have emerged. Through a combination of political compromise among parties and mediation by the conference presidency, a negotiated outcome has generally been achieved. This failure to adopt a final agreement at COP31 constituted an unusual development not seen since the decision to forgo the adoption of a negotiated outcome at COP15 in 2009.

COP15, held in Copenhagen, Denmark, aimed to establish a successor framework to the Kyoto Protocol, which had been adopted at COP3 in 1997. Negotiators sought to formulate a new international agreement on greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions reductions through a "top-down" approach, under which legally binding emissions reduction commitments would be imposed upon participating countries. However, political divisions prevented agreement on such a framework, resulting instead in the adoption of the political declaration known as the Copenhagen Accord. In response to the shortcomings revealed at COP15, a fundamentally different "bottom-up" approach was subsequently adopted, allowing individual countries to determine and submit their own emissions reduction commitments. This shift ultimately led to the successful conclusion of the Paris Agreement at COP21 in 2015.

As with COP15, COP31 ultimately failed to produce a consensus document because deep disagreements among parties could not be resolved. The key question, therefore, is what underlying forces contributed to this outcome. The present essay seeks to examine that issue. It should be noted at the outset that the author did not participate directly in COP31. The observations presented here are based on publicly available reporting, exchanges within professional networks, and the author's long-standing experience and perspective in the field of international energy affairs.

According to various reports, the immediate cause of the failure to reach agreement at COP31 was the inability of participating countries to reconcile fundamentally different positions regarding the treatment of fossil fuels. Early drafts of the proposed outcome document reportedly included language calling for a "just and orderly transition away from fossil fuels." However, this wording encountered opposition from major hydrocarbon-producing countries and from emerging and developing economies whose energy systems remain heavily dependent on fossil fuels. As a result, references related to a transition away from fossil fuels were removed from subsequent drafts and never reappeared.

Conversely, the removal of such language provoked strong objections from the European Union and from small island states that face particularly acute climate-related risks. These parties intensified their efforts to restore explicit references to a transition away from fossil fuels in the final text. Negotiations became increasingly difficult, prompting the conference presidency and the host country, Türkiye, to continue consultations during the two-day extension period. Nevertheless, even in the text circulated as the final compromise proposal, references to fossil fuel phase-out or phase-down measures remained absent. Faced with the inability to bridge these differences, Türkiye's Minister of Environment, Urbanization and Climate Change, Murat Kurum, who served as COP President, announced during the plenary session on 22 November that consensus could not be achieved and that adoption of a final outcome document would therefore not proceed. Consequently, COP31 concluded without an agreed text.

Scientific evidence has established that the increase in global temperatures associated with climate change is strongly influenced by growing GHG emissions, particularly carbon dioxide emissions arising from fossil fuel combustion. As this scientific understanding has become increasingly accepted, calls for reductions in fossil-fuel-related CO_2 emissions have intensified. Since the latter half of the 2010s, policy discussions have increasingly emphasized not merely emissions reductions but also reductions in fossil fuel consumption itself.

This trend became especially pronounced in 2020, when a growing number of countries announced intentions to achieve carbon neutrality by the middle of the twenty-first century. At roughly the same time, the International Energy Agency (IEA) published its Net Zero Emissions (NZE) Scenario, outlining a global energy pathway consistent with achieving net-zero GHG emissions by 2050. These developments accelerated momentum toward decarbonization and elevated the movement away from fossil fuels to an unprecedented level of prominence. The international community appeared to be moving rapidly toward what many regarded as the ideal vision of a low-carbon future.

However, the Ukraine crisis in 2022 and the Strait of Hormuz crisis in 2026 led to sharp increases in energy prices, bringing renewed attention to the importance of securing stable and affordable supplies of energy, an indispensable commodity that underpins both daily life and economic activity. Against this backdrop, ensuring energy security and affordability came once again to be recognized as the most urgent and important challenge in the field of energy policy. In this context, it became increasingly clear that while the energy transition required to advance decarbonization is important, no country in the world can easily accept such a transition if it results in significantly higher energy costs.

Fossil fuels continue to account for more than four-fifths of global primary energy supply. Their persistent dominance reflects several enduring advantages, including resource abundance, versatility, affordability, availability, and well-established infrastructure. Against this backdrop, a more nuanced understanding of energy transition has emerged. Even as progress toward decarbonization continues, many analysts increasingly recognize that fossil fuels are likely to remain an important component of the global energy system for a considerable period. The evolution of successive long-term energy outlooks published by the IEA provides evidence of this changing perspective.

One might therefore argue that the weight of reality concerning the role of fossil fuels in the global energy system has become increasingly influential in international energy discourse. At the same time, the growing frequency of extreme weather events observed around the world has reinforced concerns about climate change and strengthened calls for more ambitious mitigation efforts. Consequently, there remains a powerful constituency advocating continued pursuit of the ideal of rapid decarbonization and carbon neutrality. Yet as understanding deepens regarding the immense challenges associated with achieving carbon neutrality, the gap between aspiration and reality has become more apparent. The closer policymakers and stakeholders examine the practical implications of decarbonization, the more evident the economic, technological, and political complexities become.

The widening gap between these competing perspectives, and the corresponding divergence among countries and stakeholders, appears to constitute an important structural factor underlying the growing difficulty of international consensus-building. At COP31, disagreements surrounding fossil fuels ultimately proved impossible to reconcile. Positions remained entrenched, and no mutually acceptable landing point could be identified. Issues that might once have been settled when the international community was collectively moving toward an idealized vision of energy transition have become substantially more difficult to resolve as awareness grows regarding the practical costs and societal implications of implementing that vision. Under contemporary conditions, where economic resilience and industrial competitiveness have become central policy objectives, the inability to reach agreement has emerged openly and unmistakably.

Viewed from this perspective, future COP negotiations may become increasingly challenging. Climate change mitigation seeks to protect what may be termed the "global common good." Yet the implementation of more ambitious climate policies inevitably generates tensions among competing national interests. As the failure of COP15 ultimately catalyzed a major transformation in the architecture of international climate governance, leading eventually to the Paris Agreement, the outcome of COP31 may similarly signal the need for new approaches to international climate cooperation and consensus-building. Absent such innovation, the widening gap between ideal objectives and practical realities may increasingly impede constructive and productive dialogue aimed at advancing the global common good. In that sense, the international community may now find itself at a critical crossroads, not only in the fields of energy and climate policy, but also in the broader challenge of governing global collective action in an era of growing geopolitical and economic complexity.

Contact: report@tky.ieej.or.jp
The back issues are available at the following URL.
http://eneken.ieej.or.jp/en/special_bulletin.html