Syllabus subtopic: Important International institutions, agencies and fora, their structure, mandate.

Prelims focus: about COP 25, UNFCCC, IPCC

Mains focus: Challenges for the international community in framing policies to check climate change and their implications

News: The longest-ever climate conference delivered probably the weakest outcome ever.

What led to the deadlock?

The two-week Madrid climate conference could produce an agreement only after removing everything that any country objected to from the final text, and postponing all decisions on the only major agenda item it had to finalise.

After several countries rejected the draft agreement texts, the conference had little option but to remove all contentious phrases and provisions, and produce an agreement that was mired in generalities and lacked any specific decisions.

The issue of framing rules for setting up a new carbon market under Paris Agreement, the only big issue to be finalised in Madrid, was deferred entirely to next year, as no country was willing to budge from their stated positions.

Civil society groups, an important and vocal stakeholder in the negotiations, reacted with anger and disappointment at the outcome of what was the longest ever climate talks.

Mandate of COP 25

Apart from framing the rules for a new carbon market, the Madrid talks was expected to direct all countries to increase their climate actions in view of recent scientific assessments that show the world was not doing enough to prevent the extreme impacts of climate change.
Contentious issues

Some countries, especially the most vulnerable ones like small island states, were pushing for language directing all countries to update their climate action plans by next year to reflect the new realities. Such demands were resisted mainly by big developing countries like China, India and Brazil, which had been arguing that countries be asked to deliver on their past and current promises before being asked to make any new commitments.

These developing countries repeatedly pointed out that the current situation was a direct result of developed countries not meeting their targets in the pre-2020 period, and has demanded an assessment of the performance of developed countries on climate action, including their obligation to provide finance and technology to the developing world.

What did the final agreement say?

The final agreement included a general call stressing “the urgency of enhanced ambition” by all countries. There was no direction to update climate action plans by next year.

Similarly, the demand of developing countries, reflected in the earlier drafts in the form of a provision setting up a two-year work programme to assess the performance of developed countries, was also not included in the final agreement.

Even something as innocuous as acknowledging the special reports of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) had run into trouble. Some countries had objected to the fact that an earlier draft mentioned IPCC’s report on oceans but ignored the report on land, both having come out this year. The final agreement thus dropped the names of both the reports and only expressed its “appreciation and gratitude” to the IPCC for coming out with the two special reports.

Way ahead

The result from Madrid means negotiators face an uphill task next year to complete all the unfinished tasks ahead of the transition of the global climate regime from the 1997 Kyoto Protocol to the 2015 Paris Agreement. With the Paris
Agreement set to come into effect next year, the rules of the new carbon market will have to be finalised soon. Moreover, with latest studies showing the world needs to do even more than what the Paris pact mandates, countries will be under pressure to increase their commitments.

About UNFCCC

1. International environmental treaty that came into existence under the aegis of UN.
2. UNFCCC was negotiated at the Earth (Rio) Summit 1992.
4. As of March 2019, UNFCCC has 197 parties.
5. Role: UNFCCC provides a framework for negotiating specific international treaties (called “protocols”) that aim to set binding limits on greenhouse gases.
6. Objective of UNFCCC: Stabilize greenhouse gas concentrations in the atmosphere at a level that would prevent dangerous consequences.
7. Legal Effect: Treaty is considered legally non-binding.
8. The treaty itself sets no binding limits on greenhouse gas emissions for individual countries.
9. In 1997, the Kyoto Protocol (3rd COP) was concluded and established legally binding obligations for developed countries to reduce their greenhouse gas emissions.

Paris Climate Deal

The Paris Agreement of 2016 is a historic international accord that brings almost 200 countries together in setting a common target to reduce global greenhouse emissions in an effort to fight climate change.

The pact seeks to keep global temperature rise to below 2 degrees Celsius from pre-industrial levels, and to try and limit the temperature increase even further to 1.5 degrees Celsius.

To this end, each country has pledged to implement targeted action plans that will limit their greenhouse gas emissions.

The Agreement asks rich and developed countries to provide financial and technological support to the developing world in its quest to fight and adapt to climate change.
How does a country leave the Agreement?

Article 28 of the Paris Agreement allows countries to leave the Paris Agreement and lays down the process for leaving.

A country can only give a notice for leaving at least three years after the Paris Agreement came into force.

This happened on November 4, 2016. Therefore, the US was eligible to move a notice for leaving on November 4 this year, which it did.

The withdrawal is not immediate, however. It takes effect one year after the submission of the notice. It means the United States will be out of Paris Agreement only on November 4 next year.

About Intergovernmental Panel of Climate Change (IPCC)

The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) is the UN body for assessing the science related to climate change.

Established by the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) and the World Meteorological Organization (WMO) in 1988.

Aim: to provide political leaders with periodic scientific assessments concerning climate change, its implications and risks, as well as to put forward adaptation and mitigation strategies.

Composition: It has 195 member states.

The IPCC has three working groups:

Working Group I, dealing with the physical science basis of climate change.

Working Group II, dealing with impacts, adaptation and vulnerability.

Working Group III, dealing with the mitigation of climate change.

About its 6th Assessment Report (AR6)?
It will examine topics such as the link between consumption and behaviour and greenhouse gas emissions, and the role of innovation and technology.

It will assess the connection between short to medium-term actions and their compatibility with the long-term temperature goal in the Paris Agreement.

It will assess mitigation options in sectors such as energy, agriculture, forestry and land use, buildings, transport and industry.