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Can Diplomacy Deliver?

In the two and a half decades since serious international climate negotiations began, global greenhouse gas emissions and atmospheric concentrations have continued to rise, and at present the rates of increase are faster than ever. What is more, as Yale economist Nordhaus has observed, world carbon dioxide emissions were declining relative to world gross national product (GNP) at faster rates before global climate negotiations began than in the two and a half decades since Rio.¹ Admittedly, neither the 1992 Framework Convention nor the 1997 Kyoto Protocol specifically aimed to stop the rise in world emissions, and so on a literal-minded interpretation the treaties cannot be said to have failed in their objectives. But most of us are not literal-minded. The plain facts of the matter are that world emissions have been growing faster than anybody expected in the 1990s and that nobody really knows what to do about it. This has led to a general perception, across the political spectrum and among everybody from casual observers to the most authoritative specialists, that diplomacy is failing.

The Rio Framework Convention “sought to organize global action to address a threat to the global commons—the