

Frequently invited as co-facilitator, the little red dot is crucial in advancing global climate negotiations

The 26th United Nations Climate Change Conference (COP26), seen as “the last chance to resolve the global climate crisis”, came to an end last month in Glasgow, Scotland. After two weeks of marathon negotiations and consultations, the 197 parties present overcame their differences and adopted the Glasgow Climate Pact. To safeguard their national interests, the participants did not readily make concessions during negotiations. How did Singapore, a little red dot on the map, leverage on its wisdom as a facilitator to help forge a consensus on the international stage?

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COP26, which had been scheduled to end the day before, saw 24 hours of additional negotiations. The mood was solemn as delegates at the conference hall communicated with one another, as the media and observers waited outside with bated breath.

Mr Joseph Teo is accustomed to such occasions. As the Chief Negotiator for Climate Change at the Ministry of Sustainability and the Environment’s Climate Change Negotiation Office, he was representing Singapore for the third time at COP26.

In an exclusive interview with Lianhe Zaobao, Mr Teo said that Singapore is often invited to play a small but crucial role as a co-facilitator in the multilateral climate change negotiation process.

Singapore was one of the co-facilitators of the Paris Agreement’s Article 6 negotiations this year, consulting with countries on the implementation details for the establishment of a global carbon market, and resolving the most divisive and complex issues that have divided parties since 2015. The establishment of a global carbon market means that a country can buy carbon credits from other countries to meet some of its climate targets.

Before flying to Glasgow, Mr Teo was involved in online meetings almost every day, listening patiently to understand the positions of parties and how much room there was for manoeuvre in the negotiations.

Mr Teo explained that under the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC), each country belongs to at least one group of Parties. Singapore is a member of the Alliance of Small Island States (AOSIS) as well as the Group of 77 and China (G77 & China).

One week before the official start of the Conference, Singapore held pre-sessionals with the two groups of Parties to develop a common position among more than 130 developing countries, followed by a week of negotiations with all Parties to Subsidiary Bodies.

Should an agreement be reached, the text would be presented to the organisers for formal adoption by the Conference of Parties (COP); otherwise, the organisers would convene informal sessions in small groups to continue seeking consensus.

Mr Teo gave an example of the process of negotiating Article 6 of the Paris Agreement, which failed to reach a consensus after the first week due to the rather dichotomous nature of the proposals presented earlier. The British organisers decided to convene ministerial negotiations and invited our Minister for Sustainability and the Environment, Ms Grace Fu, and the Norwegian Minister to assist in taking the negotiations forward.

“We made significant progress in the second week. When we realised that there was some support for Japan’s proposal, we began to engage in fair and transparent consultations with Groups of Parties

to get feedback from them as a way to move the negotiations forward and achieve consensus, ultimately breaking the deadlock.”

Mr Teo stressed that he never takes agreements for granted, as each session has its own dynamics. Until the Chair strikes the hammer, the negotiations are subject to change at any time and there is no room for complacency up until the last minute.

In this year’s COP26, for example, India, supported by other coal-dependent developing countries, strongly opposed a provision calling for a “phase out” of coal-fired power generation at the last minute, demanding that the wording be amended to “phase down” of coal use.

Mr Teo’s main concern at the time was whether, if the organisers accepted the amendment, it would open a Pandora’s box and prompt other countries to propose further amendments, undermining the original compromise.

“Fortunately, other countries adopted a restrained position, understanding that it was *sui generis* and should not affect the overall balance of the negotiations.”

While there were still some critics who said that the outcome of this year’s negotiations was not sufficiently robust, Mr Teo believes that the explicit mention of coal and fossil fuel subsidies in the negotiation text for the first time this year was a major breakthrough.

The world has turned its attention to Egypt, where the next Conference (COP27) will take place next year, and expectations are high.

“The Egyptian organisers have less than 11 months left to introduce another meaningful negotiation outcome arising from Glasgow. This will be a daunting task, with COVID-19 still looming and the emergence of the Omicron variant adding many uncertainties to next year’s Conference,” said Mr Teo.

COP26 Negotiation Outcomes

- Agreement on the Glasgow Climate Pact
- First agreement to phase down coal use
- Finalisation of the implementation of Article 6 of the Paris Agreement to develop a global carbon trading market
- Over 100 countries have signed the Global Methane Pledge to reduce methane emissions by 30% in 2030 compared to 2020
- Developed countries urged to at least double climate financing for developing countries by 2025, compared to 2019
- Calls on countries to submit enhanced emission reduction targets next year, instead of five-yearly updates

Time difference required frequent overnight meetings

The COVID-19 pandemic made it more challenging for negotiations. Although teleconferencing allowed delegates to participate in sessions without leaving their countries, the Singapore delegation often had to sacrifice sleep and meet overnight due to the time difference.

In order to gain a clear understanding of the positions and demands of all parties, a delegation comprising, amongst others, Singapore’s Ministry of Sustainability and the Environment, the Ministry of Trade and Industry, the National Environment Agency, the Attorney-General’s Chambers, and the

National Climate Change Secretariat, spent most of the year in remote sessions with delegates from nearly 200 Parties.

Ms Diane Tan, Deputy Senior State Counsel, International Affairs Division, Attorney-General's Chambers, was the Singapore representative on the Paris Agreement Implementation and Compliance Committee (PAICC) and was responsible for assisting Parties to implement and comply with the provisions of the Paris Agreement.

As one of the new committee members, Ms Tan and the members only formally started their work last year in the midst of the COVID-19 outbreak. "Trying to understand each other's positions and build trust through online meetings has been quite a challenge. There is no substitute for face-to-face communication and dialogue."

Ms Tan jokingly said that meeting times had become a subject of "negotiation" as members were in different time zones. For example, it was not fair for members in a certain geographical zone to always(?) attend meetings late at night or in the early hours of the morning, so they accommodated each other and found ways to "share the burden" on a rotational basis.

For Mr Cheah Sin Liang, the challenge of an overnight meeting was getting back to work early the next morning.

As Deputy Director of the International Policy Division of the National Climate Change Secretariat, he was invited to co-coordinate two projects over the past three years. One was related to the establishment of an expert advisory panel for developing countries on transparency in reporting emission reductions, and the other to provide financial and technical assistance to developing countries in reporting emission reductions.

With responsibilities for two projects, Mr Cheah was involved in the first online meeting at 3am, followed by the second meeting immediately after at 6am. "To be able to fly to Glasgow to attend the meetings in person made it really convenient and much easier."

Mr Teo pointed out that teleconferences were constrained by time because once they exceeded two or three hours, people would start to get tired, and the meeting would have to end. Given that the online meetings were shorter, delegates managed their time well in their presentations and refrained from speaking at length.

However, some developing countries also commented on the lack of inclusiveness of teleconferencing. Mr Teo said that some delegates from developing countries were unable to participate in online meetings from home and had to go back to work to use their computers and wireless networks, unlike those in countries with advanced wireless networks.

"Tug-of-war" is often dramatic

The "tug-of-war" between developed and developing countries was often dramatic, with some threatening to pull out at the slightest hint of disagreement, leading to a stalemate in negotiations.

Mr Cheah had co-facilitated negotiations on climate change mitigations in the Paris Agreement Rulebook in 2016. The three years of intensive negotiations were a steep learning curve and a rare trial for him.

"At times, the negotiation process was highly politicised and full of drama. Some participants often invoked technical procedural objections to delay discussions and offered multiple options to complicate negotiations, which in turn provoked strong reactions from other delegates."

This year's COP26 was no exception. As the Conference entered its second week, negotiations on response measures were on the verge of reaching consensus but were nearly undone when some participants threatened to pull out because they felt their interests were not being taken into account.

Mr Peter Govindasamy, Co-chair of the Katowice Committee of Experts on the Impacts of the Implementation of Response Measures (KCI), was negotiating non-stop for three days, 16 hours a day. He said that such situations had to be handled sensitively and that, in addition to persuading parties to stay in the meeting, he took aside delegates who had threatened to pull out to talk to them and persuade them to stay in the consultations until consensus was reached.

"While listening to all parties, I also reiterated to them that the outcome of the negotiations must be based on principles and provisions. If their proposals are contrary to the principles of the Paris Agreement, I would politely but firmly remind them to follow the rules."

Mr Cheah explained that as the decision-making process was based on consensus rather than votes, the final proposal had to be agreed by all countries before it could be adopted.

"Each country has different interests and circumstances and has different political, economic, and social priorities. We must ensure that the outcome of the negotiations does not breach any party's red lines, while allowing all countries to feel that their interests are being advanced."

However, some delegates may still have misconceptions or preconceptions about each other's positions. Ms Tan pointed out that this was because people did not necessarily have a good understanding of each other's situations.

"Climate change presents a particularly difficult dilemma for all countries, but it is clear to all that they cannot tackle it alone. A real compromise can only be reached when each country feels that their views are listened to and taken into account, and that the final solution will benefit them and address their concerns."

"Honest broker" trusted by all parties

As a long-standing contributor to global climate action, Singapore has played the role of an "honest broker" in international climate change negotiations, steering the parties neutrally towards consensus on difficult issues.

Although Singapore accounts for only 0.11% of global carbon emissions, it is disproportionately exposed to climate impacts. Mr Teo pointed out that as a small city-state with limited renewable energy, the only solution is to keep advocating a multilateral rules-based approach to climate change. This means that each country has to do its part, and no one can afford to fall behind or shirk their responsibilities.

Joseph Teo emphasised that Singapore is trusted by all parties for being consistent in its words and actions, non-threatening to others, and without any hidden agenda.

Whenever Singapore launches a new climate response plan, we share our experiences with our neighbours so that they can learn from it. As one of the first countries in Southeast Asia to implement a carbon tax and to propose an enhanced National Determined Contribution (NDC) and a Long-Term Low-Emissions Development Strategy (LEDS), Singapore is recognised as a 'catalyst for climate action' in the region.

When Mr Teo was appointed as chief negotiator, he admitted to feeling a little intimidated. “In retrospect, however, I did not expect us to make such a significant contribution to the negotiation process, thanks to the efforts of the entire inter-agency negotiation team.”

Mr Govindasamy, who started his career in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, participated in the Climate Change Conference for the 13th time this year. A veteran and currently the Director of the Climate Change International Team at the Ministry of Trade and Industry and the lead negotiator for the Pacific Alliance-Singapore Free Trade Agreement, he believes that trust and goodwill are essential ingredients for success in the negotiation process. “It is a reputation that our previous ambassadors and diplomats have worked hard to build over the years, and there is no higher honour than to defend and advance Singapore’s interests.”