



By: TA | AP Insight

Can the UN climate summit be successful without the leaders of the world's biggest polluters?



World leaders descending on the United Nations annual climate summit in Brazil on Thursday will not need to see much more than the view from their airplane window to sense the unfathomable stakes.

Surrounding the coastal city of Belem is an emerald green carpet festooned with winding rivers.

But the view also reveals barren plains: Some 17% of the Amazon's forest cover has vanished in the past 50 years, swallowed up for farmland, logging and mining.

Known as the “lungs of the world” for its capacity to absorb vast quantities of carbon dioxide, a greenhouse gas that warms the planet, the biodiverse **Amazon rainforest** has been choked by wildfires and cleared by cattle ranching.

It is here on the edge of the world's largest remaining rainforest that Brazil President Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva hopes to convince world powers to mobilize enough **funds** to halt the ongoing destruction of climate-stabilizing tropical rainforests in danger around the world and make progress on other critical climate goals.

Later Thursday, Lula was expected to unveil a flagship multibillion-dollar international fund to offer compensation to countries who help preserve forested areas.

Organizers are hoping this year's Conference of Parties — known as COP30 — will yield action to advance the many unmet promises laid out at previous such meetings.

But they'll have to overcome reduced participation from the planet's three **biggest polluters** as the leaders of China, the United States and India will be notably absent from a gathering of heads of state over the next two days. The formal U.N. climate talks begin next week.

US absence looms over leaders' meeting

President Donald Trump, who withdrew the U.S. from the **Paris climate accords** the same day he entered office, won't send any senior officials. China will send its deputy prime minister, Ding Xuexiang.

That leaves the rest of the summit's leaders — including U.K. Prime Minister Keir Starmer, German Chancellor Friedrich Merz and French President Emmanuel Macron — to confront not only the consequences of an intensifying global climate crisis but a daunting set of **political challenges**.

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Advocates and diplomats have raised concerns that the **absence of the U.S.** — which has at times played a key role in convincing China to restrain carbon emissions and securing finance for poor countries — could signal a more global retreat from climate politics.

“Trump's stance affects the whole global balance. It pushes governments further toward denial and deregulation,” said Nadino Kalapucha, the spokesperson for the Amazonian Kichwa Indigenous group in Ecuador. “That trickles down to us, to Ecuador, Peru, Argentina, where environmental protection is already under pressure.”

President **Javier Milei** of Argentina has already mimicked Trump's moves, threatening to quit the Paris Agreement and last year pulling Argentine negotiators out the climate summit in Azerbaijan. He boycotted this week's meeting as well.

Brazil encapsulates the climate dilemma

Lula, who has presented himself as a champion of **climate diplomacy** in the Global South and

won widespread praise for reducing deforestation in the Amazon, seeks to leverage Brazil's moment on the world stage to push for action on curbing planet-warming emissions and helping **poor nations** adapt to extreme weather and other perils of climate change.

"We will go past the negotiation of rules to implementation," Foreign Minister Mauro Vieira promised on Wednesday.

The conference will test whether Brazil can drum up enough money to make its ambitions a reality

But Lula's climate bona fides have more recently run into economic pressures. Weeks ago, he granted state oil firm **Petrobras** a license to explore oil near the mouth of the Amazon River.

Environmental advocates raise the alarm about the risks of damaging oil spills. Lula has hit back at accusations of hypocrisy.

"I don't want to be an environmental leader," Lula said Tuesday. "I never claimed to be."

Those tensions are at the heart of this conference and of Lula's centerpiece proposal, the new fund dubbed the Tropical Forests Forever Fund.

Aware that chopping down trees is all too lucrative for loggers, miners and ranchers, Lula is proposing a financial scheme that would pay 74 heavily forested, developing countries to keep their trees standing, using loans from wealthier nations and commercial investors.

The conference will test whether Brazil can drum up enough money to make its ambitions a reality. Existing U.N. funds for climate loss and damage have drawn only modest contributions.

Logistical headaches for Brazil

A town of 1.3 million inhabitants, Belem had just 18,000 hotel beds before its preparations to host the conference, which typically draws tens of thousands of delegates, environmentalists, company executives, journalists and other members of civil society.

Foreign officials and journalists scrambled to reserve rooms as prices surged to surreal heights. Thousands booked spots on one of a few docked cruise ships brought into a nearby port for the occasion.

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Public schools, military facilities and even the local Internal Revenue Building have been kitted with air-conditioning and bunk beds to become makeshift hostels. Some frugal participants even paid \$55 a night to crash in hammocks in a facility that normally caters to cats.

"Some two-legged creatures deserve our generosity, too," Eugênia Lima, the 59-year-old owner of a local cat hotel that stopped accepting feline guests to seize on the COP30-fueled demand. "I am very proud that the world will be looking at us this month."

Belem's by-the-hour "love motels" have also cashed in, luring civil servants and climate scientists to rooms that would otherwise host prostitutes or couples in need of privacy. Usually \$10 an hour, most love motels are charging COP30 guests \$200 per night.

Activists find a forum for protest

Large-scale marches, sit-ins and rallies are essential aspects of annual U.N. climate talks, but the previous three summits have taken

place in autocratic nations that outlaw most forms of protest.



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Egypt, the United Arab Emirates and **Azerbaijan** complied with U.N. rules that facilitate pre-approved protests within a walled-off part of the venue not subject to local laws.

Brazil is a different story. As world leaders arrived Thursday for the summit, environmental advocates were reveling in their much-missed freedom.

Youth activists, Indigenous leaders and climate campaigners banged drums outside the sprawling convention center where main debates will be held and sailed into Belem on vessels outfitted with giant protest banners.

"Being able to protest and dialogue is a great thing about this COP," said Laurent Durieux, a researcher at the U.S.-based International Relief and Development organization who arrived by boat from Santarem, a city 1,200 kilometers (1,000 miles) west of Belem.

"Brazil has a long history of social struggle and that is part of this event."