As the G20 leaders seek common ground amid national views on energy policy, Ella Kokotsis, director of research and accountability, G20 Research Group, assesses the G20’s historic compliance on energy commitments.

When the G20 began meeting at the leaders’ level in 2008, it had the distinct advantage of bringing together, in an informal setting, the world’s largest energy producers, consumers and polluters. With 77% of all energy consumption and almost 82% of all global carbon dioxide emissions stemming from the G20, this small but highly influential group of countries plays a critical role in global energy-climate governance. And with Argentina establishing energy as a priority for the Buenos Aires Summit and climate sustainability as one of its key work streams for its 2018 G20 presidency, the time has come for this pivotal group of global energy players to take the appropriate actions needed to move the climate agenda forward.

Commitments and compliance
The G20 has consistently demonstrated that its climate and energy commitments matter. From its inception in 2008 to 2017, the summit generated 222 commitments across both streams. Of its portfolio of 24 issue areas addressed, only financial regulation, macroeconomic policy and development produced a greater number of commitments. And of the core energy and climate commitments assessed by the G20 Research Group at the University of Toronto, compliance with these energy and climate pledges has occurred 69% of the time.

Initially limited in scope, climate change and energy were addressed at the first G20 meeting in Washington DC in 2008, and had more attention at London and Pittsburgh in 2009. At Pittsburgh, leaders made a bold commitment to phase out inefficient fossil fuel subsidies in the medium term. Attention to energy and climate change receded somewhat at Toronto and Seoul in 2010. Beginning at Cannes in 2011, the G20 began linking climate and energy directly, devoting a section of the final declaration to the enhancement of energy markets through “improved energy efficiency and better access to clean technologies, to achieve strong growth that is both sustainable and inclusive”. There was a peak in 2013, with 19 commitments on energy and 11 on climate generated at St Petersburg. Here, G20 leaders devoted more than 10% of their final declaration to sustainable energy policy and the fight against climate change. Their most prevalent climate commitment came in the context of a post-Kyoto control regime, where G20 leaders agreed to work towards the adoption of a protocol, legal instrument or agreed outcome “with legal force … applicable to all Parties by 2015”.

This upward cadence continued from 2013 to 2017, reaching 42 commitments on energy and 22 on climate at Hamburg in 2017. In highlighting the rift between the United States and its G20 partners on these issues, the joint statement pointed to America’s announced withdrawal from the Paris Agreement while affirming the commitment of the rest of the G20 members. Moreover, the final communiqué was accompanied by a climate and energy plan, supporting the key tenets of the Paris Agreement. It set goals to phase out fossil fuel subsidies and sought to shift countries towards “affordable, reliable, sustainable and low greenhouse-gas-emission energy systems as soon as feasible.”
Causes and corrections
With this foundation from Hamburg, a significant opportunity arises for the G20 leaders at Buenos Aires to continue this momentum. Unprecedented natural disasters in 2018, coupled with record-breaking global temperatures, are resonating among the majority of the world’s political, business and thought leaders, underscoring the need to act now. A special report by the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change published a month before the summit stated that carbon dioxide emissions need to fall by 45% by 2030, adding pressure and urgency to the 24th Conference of the Parties that will meet in Poland just a few days after the G20 summit.

A key aspect in continuing this trajectory is the ongoing meetings of G20 energy ministers, who met first in Istanbul in 2015. This format has enabled more inclusive energy collaboration by addressing several energy principles, including those tied to better access, renewables, transparency, clean energy technologies and the phase-out of inefficient fossil fuel subsidies. Taking this one step further, the Argentinian presidency has launched the first-ever climate sustainability and energy transitions steering committees, bringing together G20 engagement groups and officials to focus on issues ranging from adaptation, climate financing and sustainable consumption to flexibility, transparency and the digitalisation of energy grids.

The transition to a low-carbon energy future can be a reality if the world’s leaders can provide the political certainty to secure it. With its demonstrated ability to show strong leadership on energy governance, the G20 is well positioned at Buenos Aires to deliver on a set of concrete principles and commitments that can guide the world along a carbon-neutral path.

The views and opinions expressed in this article are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the views of the Global Solutions Initiative. This article was originally published in G20 Japan: The 2019 Osaka Summit by GT Media Group and the G20 Research Group, 2019. View the original article.