# COP26 : a last chance wasted ?

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# INTRODUCTION

After the Kyoto Protocol[1] and COP21[2], which saw the birth of the Paris Climate Agreement[3], COP26 was to be another historic step towards a determined fight against global warming and an increase in environmental protection and populations at risk. In the IPCC[4] press release[5] on the Working Group I report, which is the first part of the Sixth Assessment Report entitled "Climate Change: The Scientific Basis", the IPCC demonstrates not only that global warming is accelerating, but that human influence is clearly behind these changes and this acceleration.

Indeed, the report states the importance and urgency of taking "immediate, rapid and massive" measures to reduce greenhouse gas emissions, in which case the threshold of 1.5°C should be reached and even crossed in the next twenty years (given the average of recorded phenomena); this would increase the number of heat waves with longer hot seasons and shorter cold seasons.

In addition, future global climate change will not only be a question of temperature. Climate alterations will affect all regions, and consequently, all types of environment with more intense floods or droughts, more accentuated coastal erosion, marine heat waves leading to acidification and a drop in the oxygen content of the oceans, but also in urban environments which record higher levels of heat because human activity is more developed there than in rural areas.

And this is the first time that an IPCC report concludes that this acceleration of global warming and the main causes come from human activity. What were once strong hypotheses are now realities, and so begins chapter A.1.1 of the full IPCC report[6], which states, "Observed increases in well-mixed greenhouse gas (GHG) concentrations since around 1750 are unequivocally caused by human activities."

[1]https://unfccc.int/kyoto_protocol
[2]COP : Conference of Parties
[3]https://unfccc.int/process-and-meetings/the-paris-agreement/the-paris-agreement
[4]Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change is the United Nations body responsible for assessing the scientific work on climate change dating back to 1988, and was established by the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) and the World Meteorological Organization (WMO)
[5]GIEC, IPCC_WGI-AR6-Press-Release_fr, 08/09/2021
[6]GIEC, IPCC_AR6_WGI_Full8Report.pdf, p.5, 08/07/2021

# The objectives of Cop26

The objectives set at the beginning of COP26[7] by the signatory countries of the United *Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change* (UNFCCC) signed in 1992 with the participation of local authorities, non-state actors from civil society and scientists, which served as a basis for discussions and debates, had to go further than those included in the Paris Agreement.

First of all, the will to guarantee a net zero emission rate of greenhouse gases by the middle of the century and to keep the 1.5°C threshold within reach. To do this, countries were invited to propose plans to reduce their emissions by 2030 in order to reach this zero rate by 2050 through several targets:

- Accelerate the exit from coal
- Reducing deforestation
- Increasing the rate of renewal of the national car fleet towards electric vehicles
- Encouraging investment in renewable energy

Subsequently, in order to address the challenge of adaptation to protect communities and natural habitats, and thus cope with a climate that is already changing and will continue to change with devastating effects, despite possible emission reductions by signatory countries. COP26 stakeholders must enable countries already affected by climate change to:

- Protect themselves and be able to restore ecosystems
- Build resilient agriculture and infrastructure, warning systems and fortifications to avoid loss of life, livelihoods and homes

Second, mobilizing funds to achieve the first two goals is critical, with developed countries called upon to fulfill their promise to mobilize at least $100 billion in climate finance per year by 2020[8]. International financial institutions are urged to play their part in unlocking the trillions of dollars of public and private sector financing needed to achieve zero emissions globally.

[7] https://ukcop26.org/cop26-goals/
[8] The COP26 was originally scheduled to take place in 2020.

Finally, the overarching challenge is to find common ground to produce an agreement that meets the climate challenge by:

- Finalizing the Paris Agreement's rules with detailed rules to make it operational
- Accelerating action to address the climate crisis through collaboration between governments, business and civil society.

# Reluctant results

Of course, the meager results of COP26[9] have been criticized by many scientists, NGOs and UN members, starting with Secretary General Antonio Guterres who stated: "Unfortunately, the collective political will was not sufficient to overcome deep contradictions"[10], nevertheless, these results are indispensable and some progress has been made. Starting with the pledge to halt and even reverse deforestation by 2030, a commitment signed by more than 100 world leaders who represent 85% of the world's forests.

The Glasgow Pact included the term "fossil fuels" in an official COP document for the first time, marking a small victory over the oil and other hydrocarbon lobbies.
Another notable fact is the promise to reduce methane emissions by 30% by 2030 signed by 80 countries, methane being the second most polluting greenhouse gas after CO2.

The emergence of the concept of "loss and damage" which was also included in the pact following the speech of the Minister of Economy and Climate Change of Fiji, Aiyaz Sayed-Khaiyum, who said: "When emissions are not reduced sufficiently, you enter the territory of adaptation, and when adaptation is not sufficient, you have to deal with loss and damage"[11]. This concept led to discussions on the possible establishment of an operational financing system, which was rejected by the United States, which did not wish to engage in a legal project of this scope.

And finally, the surprise declaration of China and the United States, respectively the two countries that emit the most carbon dioxide in the world[12], for the implementation of "enhanced climate actions" promising a reduction in methane emissions as well as a transition to renewable energy and decarbonization.

[9] France 24, https://www.france24.com/fr/europe/20211114-cop26-charbon-pertes-et-pr%C3%A9judices-d%C3%A9forestation-que-contient-le-pacte-de-glasgow, 11/14/2021
[10] La Tribune, https://www.latribune.fr/entreprises-finance/transitions-ecologiques/cop26-un-accord-juge-decevant-et-deja-critique-896353.html, 11/14/2021
[11] *Ibid.*
[12] The World Bank, https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/EN.ATM.CO2E.KT?end=2018&locations=US-RU-CN-IN&start=1960&view=chart, 11/20/2021

# A necessary but complex global cooperation

These timid advances could have been much more important and pleasing than the mention of "fossil fuels" in the Glasgow Pact. Indeed, diplomatic pressures from India, China and Saudi Arabia have gradually eroded the first text proposal that stated to "accelerate the exit from coal and fossil fuel subsidies", to be finally reduced to a promise "[to] intensify efforts towards the reduction of coal without (CO2) capture systems and the exit from inefficient fossil fuel subsidies[13]". This is not surprising given that both China (which increased its coal production during the COP26[14]) and India[15] depend on coal to run their power plants, which account for 60% and 70% of their electricity consumption respectively. As for Saudi Arabia, the world's largest crude oil exporter[16], the country has no intention of reducing its production - quite the contrary - and is advocating a "circular carbon economy" in order to "capture the carbon emitted and present in the air for reuse in products such as fuels or fertilizers. However, the technologies needed to manage carbon emissions are not yet operational and require massive investments.

This is yet another example of the impossibility of states acting together towards a common goal, however important, for reasons of self-interest, and that "unfortunately, this is the nature of diplomacy", as Boris Johnson reminded us in his closing speech at COP26 on Sunday 14 November 2021.

Indeed, this event demonstrated that the realist paradigm[17] and its founding principles are still present and relevant when the international community comes together. The constant search for influence and power in a naturally "stato-centric" environment leads governments to think first and foremost of their respective national interests. It is all very well and good to believe that other stakeholders have some weight in the eyes of governments, but we must not forget that when it comes to implementing public policies, in this case framework laws to fight global warming, they alone have the last word.

[13]Hugo SEPTIER with AFP, https://www.bfmtv.com/environnement/climat/cop26-ce-que-contient-le-pacte-de-glasgow-adopte-lors-de-la-conference-pour-le-climat_AD-202111130279.html, 11/13/2021

[14]Franceinfo with AFP, https://www.francetvinfo.fr/monde/environnement/cop26/en-pleine-cop26-la-chine-augmente-sa-production-de-charbon-a-plus-d-un-million-de-tonnes-par-jour_4830007.html, 11/02/2021

[15]Franceinfo, https://www.francetvinfo.fr/economie/energie/pollution-pourquoi-l-inde-refuse-t-elle-d-abandonner-le-charbon_4844857.html, 11/14/2021

[16]VOA, https://www.voaafrique.com/a/l-arabie-saoudite-royaume-du-p%C3%A9trole-voit-dans-la-crise-climatique-une-aubaine/6291052.html, 10/31/2021

[17]Valentin BOUTEILLER, https://les-yeux-du-monde.fr/ressources/18676-le-realisme-classique-en-relations/, 04/25/2014

This again echoes a speech by Henry John Temple, better known as Lord Palmerston in the House of Commons in the United Kingdom in 1848, who proclaimed: *"We have no eternal allies, and we have no perpetual enemies. Our interests are eternal and perpetual, and those interests it is our duty to follow*[18]". This statement, which is over 170 years old, seems timeless in its continuing relevance.

[18]Commons and Lords Hansard, the Official Report of debates in Parliament, http://hansard.millbanksystems.com/commons/1848/mar/01/treaty-of-adrianople-charges-against, hansard.parliament.uk

# Security implications without evidence of action

According to the IPCC, global warming has averaged 1.1°C since the end of the 19th century, resulting in the known effects of melting ice caps, rising water levels, storms, heat waves and ocean acidification. The 7th edition of the National Intelligence Council's Global Trends Report[19] was able to highlight the security issues associated with climate change. Indeed, all of these environmental effects and those that will follow will first cause an exacerbation of food and water insecurity due to salt water intrusion in the soil due to rising water levels and more frequent storms. Some regions dependent on rain-fed agriculture such as sub-Saharan Africa, South America, South Asia, and Australia will experience extremely difficult times with increasingly intense heat waves and less regular freshwater inflows to already water-stressed areas. The above impacts on the oceans, coupled with increased overfishing that pushes fishermen further out to sea and catches smaller and smaller fish, and the destruction of coral reefs, which protect coastal areas from, among other things, violent natural phenomena such as cyclones[20], will put additional pressure on countries' food supplies and weather-related security, especially for the Illian peoples.

In addition, the deterioration of air, water and food quality will cause more health problems such as respiratory complications with asthma or acute allergies. The recurrence of disease epidemics will increase especially in countries with high population density such as in East and South Asia. An evolution of the vectors of transmission of diseases as well as their geographical areas of activity will be multiplied tenfold in view of climate change exposing more and more people to these diseases through water (cholera), insects (dengue, West Nile virus, Zika virus)[21] or food (salmonella). Unfortunately, the COVID-19 pandemic with at least five million deaths[22] is a prime example of what appears, according to a UN panel on biodiversity[23], to be only the beginning of a long series of pandemics. And finally, the increased fragility of health infrastructure in the face of more frequent and extreme weather events will disrupt access to care and may cause deaths in some cases.

[19]National Council Intelligence (NIC), « *Le monde en 2040 vu par la CIA : Un monde plus contesté* », Editions des Equateurs, Paris, Humensis, 2021, p.81-83
[20]WWF, https://www.wwf.fr/especes-prioritaires/coraux
[21]National Climate Assessment, https://nca2018.globalchange.gov/, 2018
[22]Le Monde with AFP, https://www.lemonde.fr/planete/article/2021/11/02/covid-19-la-pandemie-a-cause-la-mort-d-au-moins-5-millions-de-personnes-dans-le-monde_6100615_3244.html, 11/02/2021
[23]France24, https://www.france24.com/fr/europe/20201030-covid-19-des-pand%C3%A9mies-plus-fr%C3%A9quentes-et-plus-meurtri%C3%A8res-%C3%A0-l-avenir, 10/30/2020

The intensification of meteorological disasters will amplify migratory movements. While most migration is currently internal and temporary, global warming with extreme temperatures and rising sea levels will push migration to other states and for a permanent period, creating additional human and geopolitical security tensions.

# CONCLUSION

Whether we like it or not, our world is now more than ever interconnected, the present and future climate problems, whether they take place on national soil or on the other side of the globe, cannot be denied, because they will affect the world's ecosystems in one way or another, the COVID-19 pandemic being one of the clearest illustrations.

Solutions cannot truly come from a cooperation of states[24] as realpolitik does not allow for this level of collaboration. Moreover, the passage of Donald Trump to the White House, who subsequently withdrew from the Paris Agreement, has served to prove the impossibility of developing a long-term strategic vision in Western democracies, among other things, by the agenda of multiple elections (e.g. American presidential elections every four years); and that of authoritarian regimes when they do not deny the existence of global warming or pay little attention for reasons of interest, mostly economic (e.g. the actions of Russia in the Arctic in the face of melting glaciers and permafrost allowing the opening of new sea routes and new resources (e.g. hydrocarbon deposits[25])).

It would be good to ask ourselves if the world's major high-tech companies should not invest more and invest themselves in order to support governments in the solutions to be brought to climate change through the economic idiom, which seems to be the undeniable universal language.

[24]France24 with Reuters, https://www.france24.com/fr/plan%C3%A8te/20211110-les-engagements-pris-%C3%A0-glasgow-pourraient-conduire-%C3%A0-un-r%C3%A9chauffement-de-2-4%C2%B0c, 11/10/2021

[25]Laura MILLAN LOMBRANA, https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2021-03-15/where-climate-scientists-see-danger-russia-sees-an-opportunity?srnd=premium-europe, 03/15/2021