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The New York Summits: a complex but essential political momentum

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The United Nations Secretary-General (UNSG) is exerting all his political influence, one year before the major 2020 deadlines of global environmental governance: in just over a year, governments must demonstrate their capacity to increase their ambition under the Paris Climate Agreement and define an effective global framework to tackle biodiversity loss. At this time of increasing geopolitical tension, the UNSG is taking a risky gamble, although an essential one, by organizing a series of summits over three days that will assemble heads of state from around the world to take stock of the situation regarding key agreements reached in 2015, including the Paris Agreement, the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), and the Addis Ababa Action Agenda on financing sustainable development. In this series of political initiatives, it is important to ensure the event's political readability, and to know what can be expected.

Each component of this series is essential for the others. And it is this coherency that will maintain the political message of these negotiations: each country must design its own development model transformation pathway to simultaneously achieve all of the objectives (climate, biodiversity, inequality reduction...) but given the scale of the challenges in all of these areas and the interdependencies between countries, all must continue to negotiate with each other to give themselves the means to jointly increase the ambition of this transformation.

Ahead of the official intergovernmental negotiations, this political momentum initiated by Antonio Guterres, as Ban Ki Moon did in September 2014 before COP 21, must enable the acceleration of implementation and give credibility to the capacity and willingness of major countries and economic sectors to transform: the role of non-state actors, the private sector and local authorities in launching initiatives on a variety of topics will therefore be very important, and a series of announcements should mark this week in New York, particularly regarding climate.

This series of summits will also send out a signal regarding the convergence of major issues (climate, biodiversity, ocean), as illustrated for example by the emphasis on nature-based solutions, a subject entrusted to China, which will host COP 15 of the Convention on Biological Diversity in 2020. This convergence, beyond the environmental challenges where “win-win” solutions are difficult to find, actually means that political coalitions focusing on common interests must be built among countries with potentially different, or even divergent, aspirations. The SIDS Leaders Summit, involving countries that are particularly vulnerable to environmental change, illustrates the pivotal role of some states and actors in being able to maintain the fragile balance between development needs and environmental ambition.

Expectations are very high regarding the SDGs and sustainable development financing, particularly from developing countries, but achievements during the first four years of the 2030 Agenda have been insufficient given the close proximity of the 2030 horizon, especially regarding the high-level political commitment to the SDGs. Nevertheless, the UNSG has emphasized the importance of the 2030 Agenda for the planet and as a project for the multilateral system itself.

Each of the summits held during the week of 23 September therefore represents a specific strategic moment in its own negotiation field, but by holding them together the UNSG aims to build on the political momentum and leadership embodied by different countries and different actors. Given the complexity of the issues involved in this political mobilization, it will be necessary to help with the evaluation and communication of the progress of this week of successive summits, which constitutes an essential step prior to 2020.

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