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UNSG Climate Summit: the race is on

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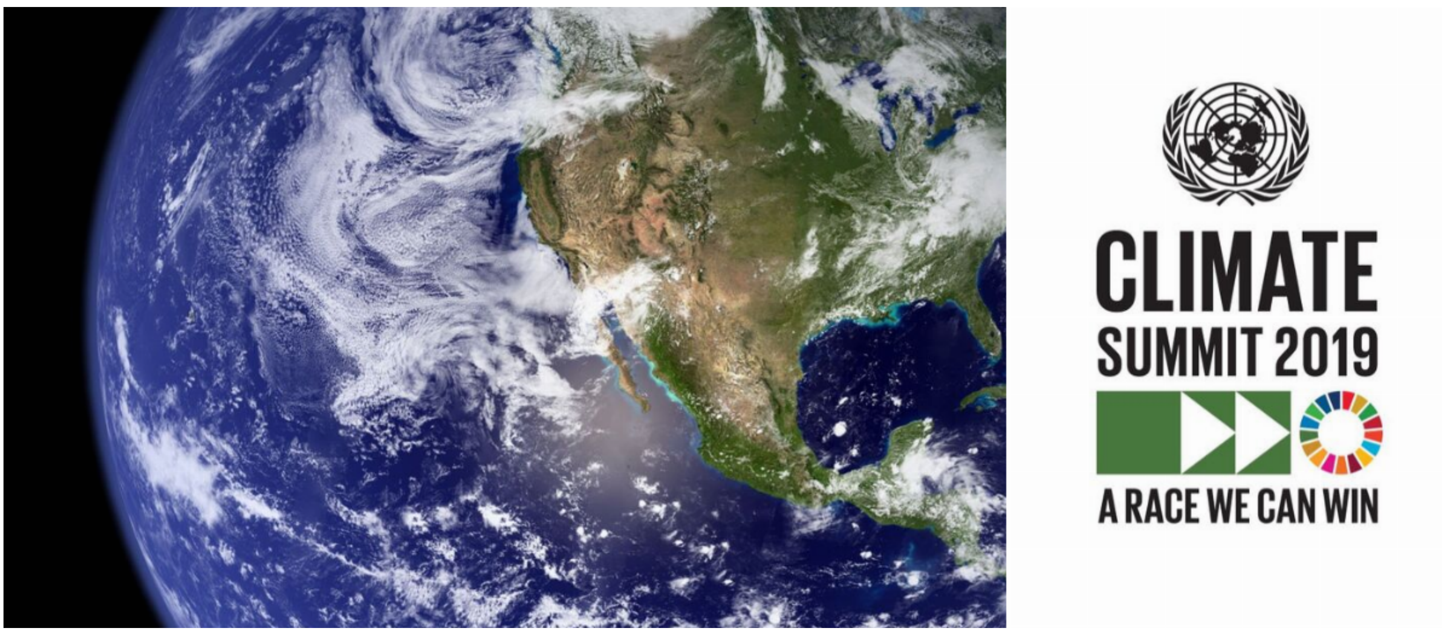

The UN Secretary General is convening a special Climate Action Summit on the 23rd September 2019, outside the normal agenda of climate negotiations. Antonio Guterres urged countries and non-state actors to enhance climate action ahead of 2020 when countries are required by the Paris Agreement to submit new pledges for 2030 and long-term low-carbon development strategies to 2050. Through unusually explicit requests, governments and climate actors were invited to end fossil fuel subsidies and begin the coal phase-out. This posts details the expectations of the Summit, reviews the trends on possible announcements, and reflects on the value of the process to deliver a deep decarbonisation of the global economy.

Increasing the ambition of countries' climate pledges is undoubtedly the main challenge of the UN agenda on climate this year and until the COP26 to be hosted by the United Kingdom in Glasgow. Under the Paris Agreement on climate change, countries must, by the end of 2020, increase the ambition of their climate commitments (known as "Nationally Determined Contributions", or NDCs) submitted in 2015 and submit long-term strategies (LTS) in line with the Agreement. Achieving current unconditional pledges would lead the world to 3.2 °C by 2100, far beyond the well-below 2°C aiming for 1.5°C objective agreed upon by all countries. Countries' preparatory work needed to design ambitious yet feasible objectives should thus be well underway. But beyond the analytical work required to assess the impact of various policy options, a key ingredient to the successful enhancement of climate ambition is political momentum, or to put it less euphemistically: political pressure.

Ahead of the United Nations Secretary General (UNSG) summit, additional political pressure is mainly coming from two categories of actors. Firstly, from the rapidly growing youth mobilisation spearheaded by Swedish activist Greta Thunberg through weekly school strikes and marches organised through social media (#FridaysforFuture) all around the world. Secondly, from the personal engagement of the UNSG Antonio Guterres who convened this summit under the theme 'A Race We Can Win, A Race We Must Win' to remind heads of states and governments of the required emergency on climate action. The summit itself culminates with a heads of state summit at the UN General Assembly for countries to present transformational strategies as they were warned to bring "plans, not speeches". The week-end before (21-22), governments together with the private sector, civil society, local authorities and international organisations will announce new coalitions and present a series of initiatives to accelerate the low-carbon transition in six 'action areas': energy transition; industry transition; infrastructure, cities and local action; nature-based solutions; resilience and adaptation; and climate finance and carbon pricing. Three additional action tracks cut through these areas: youth and civil society; social and political drivers; and 'mitigation'. They respectively refer to the growing civil protests and mobilisation for ambitious action, the inevitable social tensions and opportunities of the transition (echoed by the 'Just Transition' declaration of COP24[1]) and the necessary translation of this momentum into 'official' NDCs submitted to the UNFCCC.

In the lead up to the summit, what is most worth noticing is that the Secretary General unapologetically set the standards for what should be viewed as ambitious: ending fossil fuel subsidies and, no new coal plant from 2020. He has also been uncommonly direct by pushing all major emitters individually, writing letters to all heads of states from G20 countries with specific demands, followed by a more generic letters to all global leaders, and engaging in a worldwide climate diplomacy tour. He also asked all countries to indistinctly plan for net-zero emissions by 2050, thereby supporting the most ambitious interpretation of the Paris Agreement, aiming at net-zero emissions in the second half of the century and thus securing a greater chance to limit global warming to 1.5°C than the 50% likelihood of the IPCC main pathways. However, developed economies agreed to take the lead and some developing countries may need more time or support to decarbonise their economies as per the Paris Agreement.

What can we expect at the summit? To date, only the Marshall Islands have submitted an enhanced NDC and just over60 countries are expected to announce they *will* enhance their NDC; these countries account for under a third of the signatories of the Paris Agreement, and do not include major emitters. In the absence of the US, expectations are high for the EU to be at the forefront of international climate action. Unfortunately, Member States have missed reaching consensus on a date to achieve net-zero emissions, and therefore the EU cannot show either a clear commitment towards an enhanced NDC, or an indication of what its long-term strategy will look like, yet. Announcements will instead come from Member States' governments who have already pledged ambitious national targets, including France and the UK's commitment to reach net-zero emissions by 2050 without international compensation. Finland, which currently presides the EU council, pledged to be carbon neutral by 2035 while Denmark's new government plans to introduce a 70% mitigation target compared to 1990 levels (up from 40% currently) by 2030. On finance, the European Investment Bank has made strides towards cutting all funding for fossil fuel projects by 2020 (to be finally submitted to a vote in October), and the OECD has just released a new report confirming that climate finance mobilisation should be on track to reach $100bn by 2020. The issue will nevertheless be central at the Summit: first, because raising ambition next year is intrinsically tied with the growing availability of green investments and subsidies; second, because the Green Climate Fund replenishment conference is around the corner so countries that have not announced their contribution will be expected to chip in; third and most important, because the new coalitions coming out of the Summit will need dedicated financial instruments to become a reality on the ground. While France and China jointly announced their plan to upgrade the ambition of their commitment, a more substantive announcement at the UNSG appears uncertain. With tensions on trade, large emitters that are also economic competitors are expected to announce their intention to enhance their NDC by 2020 as per the Paris Agreement, but the meatier plans are likely to materialise only at COP25 or later.

The clarification of expectations raised by the civil society, as structured by the UNSG, should still be commended as an important contribution to raising ambition by 2020 in the absence of political leadership on the matter. Beyond the desired announcements of LTSs and NDCs, one of the virtue of this summit is setting the right guidelines for action (nine work streams), the right levels for ambition consistent with latest science on the 1.5°C goal and drawing a vision of how to achieve a carbon neutral world. Countries are now clearly asked to reflect these standards in their NDCs and adopt emissions neutrality targets supported by deep sectoral transformations rather than incremental measures focusing on short-term achievements .

1 https://www.iddri.org/en/publications-et-evenements/billet-de-blog/declaration-de-silesie-sur-la-transition-juste-la

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