



**BLOG POST** January 14th 2020

# What political leadership to make a key international year for climate and biodiversity a success?

---

## Auteur

Sébastien Treyer  
Executive Director

---

🕒 Reading time: 7 min



More than just turbulence, the geopolitical conflicts that mark the beginning of the year 2020 reveal complex and deliberate strategic games played by a growing number of countries. Above all, these are, sometimes with great brutality, choices of realpolitik in a world where multipolarity and competition between powers seems to be increasing day by day, whereas 2020 is a critical year for environmental multilateralism.

## The indispensable strengthening of diplomacy

Climate action, the protection of biodiversity and the ocean, and the implementation of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development continue to gain prominence on the international political agenda, not only because the risks of inaction are becoming increasingly clear, as the fires in Australia have highlighted, but also because negotiations on these issues are one of the battlegrounds where the individual strategies of different countries are being deployed. In this context, it seems indispensable to re-analyse the issues of the transformation towards sustainable development in a strategic and geopolitical manner, while seeking to profoundly renew the analytical framework itself of what we call geopolitics and power relations.

COP26 on climate change in November in Glasgow will be the first major test of credibility for the Paris Climate Agreement, five years after its adoption, and a sufficient number of major economic powers must come with more ambitious commitments to climate action than those submitted in 2015. COP15 on biodiversity, to be held in October in Kunming, China, will have to define the next biodiversity governance framework for at least the next 10 years. In the meantime, the negotiations on biodiversity on the high seas will have to find an outcome, after almost 15 years of negotiations: a new agreement under the Convention on the Law of the Sea is expected. And in the framework of the High-Level Policy Forum on the SDGs, which will meet in New York in July, the conditions must be found to revive its political momentum, following the observation made in September 2019 in New York that the first four years of implementation of the 2030 Agenda have not triggered the necessary transformations recommended by the Global Report on Sustainable Development.

More than ever before, the political preparation of these great moments will count for more than what can happen at the events themselves: it presupposes a particularly active diplomatic deployment, in particular between governments, but also through all the other channels of dialogue with the actors of civil society, the private sector, scientific experts and the action of think tanks such as IDDRI.

## **Who to exercise political leadership for sustainability ambition?**

The analogy with 2015 suggests the scale of the task, when one remembers the French diplomatic deployment in the run-up to COP21, the key role of the China/US announcement in favour of climate ambition which had played a decisive triggering role, and the interdependencies between the climate negotiations, SDOs and sustainable development financing.

A number of countries have formally marked their commitment as hosts of key events: Boris Johnson's United Kingdom has confirmed its strong commitment to COP26, and the British diplomatic network is an asset in this perspective; China, which will host COP15, has also engaged in 2019 with strong statements in favour of an ambitious outcome; France, which will host the World Conservation Congress in Marseille in June, a key milestone on the road to Kunming, and Italy, in charge of the pre-COP on climate, are putting the Member States and the European Union in positions of strategic support to these two presidencies.

But the most uncertain, and therefore most worrying, is the capacity for political leadership in a world where the "club" of the two superpowers (the United States and China) is no longer there to provide strategic direction and influence. Today, leadership is needed to build strategic coalitions in a world where the winds are blowing against us, and to deal with contrary alliances, but also to meet the expectations of economic actors who make no secret of the fact that their voluntary commitments cannot be deployed without ambitious public policies.

Until COP25 in Madrid, it was countries of modest size that carried the role of political champions on their frail shoulders: moral leadership of the vulnerable, leadership by example of New Zealand, Chile or Costa Rica, weakened, however, when the question of inequalities crosses the political space and calls into question the exemplary nature of government action.

## **Leadership through partnership as the only solution**

All eyes are therefore focused this year on the major economic powers that are the European Union, China, but also India. Three big blocks on the lookout for each other, waiting for the other to move first. The European Union seems to have already played its hand by announcing in December 2019 the Green Deal and its objective of climate neutrality for 2050, with no guarantee that China will do the same. What could be seen as Europe's strategic weakness is also a fact of the asymmetrical relations between the two blocs. Rather than playing on carbon adjustment at the borders as a threat to get China moving, the European Union would be well advised to demonstrate how trade and climate will be negotiated as two key issues, made up of cooperation as much as competition, at the Europe-China Summit in Leipzig (Germany) next September.

We must also avoid concentrating diplomatic energy solely on this face-to-face: their respective ties to the rest of the world will be just as essential, for example with the African Union, the other major emerging economies or the Latin American continent.

Indeed, political strategies will necessarily be complex, having to take into account both the trade-offs to be made between commercial competition and environmental ambition, and the impact of most often bilateral trade negotiations. The difficult negotiations on the EU-Mercosur agreement testified to this in 2019; and in 2020, the less publicised negotiations between Brazil and China could change the situation, either in favour of or against environmental ambition.

The leadership that a few key countries will have to invent in 2020 is therefore a shared leadership, made up of strategic partnerships with other regions of the world, such as Spain's hosting of COP25 in support of Chile without calling into question its presidency, in a logic of long-term partnerships with Latin American countries. This shared leadership, in a world that seems to be increasingly governed solely by the logic of competition, is the only practicable way in world where no hegemonic power stands out; it is also a strong affirmation of an attachment to an international system of rules, the only guarantee of a minimum of equity.

## **A key role and a decisive moment for the European Union**

These multilateral rules are now being called into question less and less surreptitiously, as much by the thunderous announcements of the US President as by China in the context of its maritime policy, despite its declared commitment to multilateralism. It is in the interest of the European Union, itself built on the model of shared leadership, to deploy such a strategy of partnership and cooperation in the absence of any naivety.

Ursula Von der Leyen's geopolitical Commission and its Green Deal project are in this respect a very welcome affirmation both within the Union and as a diplomatic strategy and project for Europe in the world, particularly with Africa. Furthermore, the timetable for the bilateral trade negotiations undertaken by the EU, beyond the agreement with Mercosur alone, will require a rapid clarification of a strategy linking trade issues and sustainable development, beyond the mere mention of a carbon adjustment at borders. It is in Europe's interest to grasp this need for shared global leadership.

Leadership will also inevitably be distributed among Member States: in addition to the roles officially assumed by France and Italy, the German Presidency of the Union and the indispensable diplomatic collaboration with the United Kingdom, we will also be able to count on a new Spanish Government that has already demonstrated its involvement and diplomatic effectiveness; and we will also have to succeed in mobilising all the other Member States, at the risk of continuing to make people believe that only the biggest ones count in these forms of networked leadership.

But Europe and its Member States will not be able to play such a strategy if it is not based on a logic of inclusive coalition and participation in the conduct of their own public policies. We know how much time and energy it costs to find robust political agreements in favour of climate ambitions, as illustrated by the various experiments with citizens' climate agreements such as the one currently underway in France, the agreements on coal phase-out negotiated with the regions concerned in Spain, or the national political agreement negotiated by the Dutch Climate Minister. But

this is the indispensable demonstration of the strength of democratic processes, cooperation and inclusive processes, at a time when the world seems fascinated, frightened as well as seduced by the affirmation of power in all its nakedness.

---

**BIODIVERSITÉ****CLIMATE****NÉGOCIATIONS INTERNATIONALES****GOUVERNANCE****CLIMATE INTERNATIONAL NEGOTIATIONS****CBD INTERNATIONAL NEGOTIATIONS**