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United Nations Summit on Biodiversity: first landmark in the fog of a stalled political agenda

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2020 was to be a crucial year for the international governance of sustainable development (climate, biodiversity, high seas, in particular). But the health and socio-economic crisis triggered by the Covid 19 pandemic has shaken multilateral cooperation, both in its forms and in the reality of relations between States. In this unstable and tense geopolitical context, the United Nations Summit on Biodiversity, convened

by the President of the United Nations General Assembly (UNGA) on September 30, is an important moment to relaunch discussions on the political ambition of the 15th COP on biodiversity. In order to better grasp the stakes and interpret the results, it is necessary to return to the broader context in which this summit is taking place and to the sequence—still very uncertain but with important stakes—that extends from now until the end of 2021, and of which it can be seen as the first step.

An international agenda temporarily suspended

The summit takes place in a context that seems to reinvigorate ambition in the climate field, notably with China's announcements at the UNGA concerning its own commitments to carbon neutrality and the reduction of greenhouse gas emissions,¹ and the announcement by the United Kingdom and the UN of a summit on December 12 for the five-year anniversary of the Paris Climate Agreement.² However, this quiver in international cooperation for the environment is quite recent, in a long period that has seen the Covid-19 crisis lead to the postponement of many key international meetings: in particular COP15 of the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD), postponed at best until May 2021; COP26 of the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC), postponed until the end of 2021; and the IUCN World Conservation Congress, a key moment of commitments by governmental and non-governmental actors, postponed *sine die*.

Other events were also postponed, including the summits between the European Union and China³ and between the European Union and the African Union. These postponements are due in part to technical difficulties related to the health crisis, but also to the observation of major differences between the parties: around issues of human rights, investment and trade in relation to China; around inevitable difficulties in agreeing on the terms of the "partnership between equals" that Europe and Africa are seeking to establish.

The imperative of anchoring environmental negotiations in the reality of reconstruction

Yet these bilateral political discussions are crucial for advancing global governance of biodiversity or climate. As attacks on multilateral institutions and the rules they have put in place come from all sides, it is essential to consolidate the cross-understanding and alignment of positions through alliances between blocs. Moreover, these bilateral discussions are essential to bring the terms of negotiation on environmental governance closer to the reality of the major economic decisions taken in the wake of the post-Covid crisis-19 in these economic blocs.

In concrete terms, one of the topics that China and the European Union have put on their agendas concerns the global value chains of agricultural and food products and knowledge of their impact on biodiversity: for the objectives that should be adopted at COP15 to have a chance of being achieved, there must be a much clearer vision of the flows of agricultural biomass, especially soybeans, and more particularly those that pass through the Chinese market both as intermediate and final products. Admittedly, it is not yet an agreement between the EU and China on a common environmental regulation of these value chains. But the possible transparency of the reality of the flows and their impact would already be a great step forward, and it is a typical example of an effective intersection between environmental negotiations and major trade or economic negotiations.

Key political moments are postponed, but technical negotiations continue, as evidenced by the gradual progress of the text to be negotiated at COP15.⁴ These negotiations, which had a very tight schedule, have benefited from this additional time to move forward. But it would be a very bleak scenario if, in the coming year, only the multilateral

negotiations on the environment remained open when all the other issues - political, military and economic - were at a standstill: should they be only a pretext for maintaining contact, these negotiations could lead to the construction of a new edifice of environmental commitments, but with little chance of seeing them become a reality because they are out of touch with all these other major power relations.

It is therefore all the more essential to anchor the negotiations between countries as much as possible in a dialogue with all the actors (economic, civil society) on what constitutes the major priority of the crisis period we are experiencing, i.e. the needs for reconstruction and stimulus investments, which will have a decisive impact on the future state of our countries for decades to come, and therefore on climate and biodiversity: for example, if efforts to promote employment and economic recovery are based on infrastructure investments, what impact will they have on the fragmentation of ecosystems and can they be planned in a way that is compatible with the preservation of biodiversity?

What to expect from the Biodiversity Summit?

In this perspective, the UNGA Biodiversity Summit constitutes an indispensable first milestone, bringing together a certain number of Heads of State and key players, to give political meaning to these negotiations on biodiversity in a time of economic and social crisis, and in a context of political and economic tensions between major blocs. A number of clear signals are expected, indispensable for the success of an ambitious agreement on biodiversity in 2021, and for its credibility concerning the reality of the transformations needed in major economic sectors. Ideally, this momentum should continue and connect other important events in the coming year.

Among the key economic sectors, the agri-food sector is obviously in the spotlight, as highlighted by the IPBES 2019 *Global Assessment Report on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services*,⁵ which emphasizes that the entire food system, from production to processing to consumption, is one of the most critical factors in the degradation of biodiversity. The announcements that may be made at the summit in this regard will therefore be essential. They may find an important echo in the United Nations Secretary General's Summit on Food Systems, announced for 2021, whose preparation should make it possible to consolidate the commitments and dynamics on this subject. Although the Summit on Food Systems is the subject of bitter battles to define its mandate, it could nevertheless be a key event to ensure coherence between the framework of commitments on biodiversity to be defined at COP15 and the reality of developments in this crucial sector. Without prejudging the outcome of multilateral discussions seeking to take stock of the health crisis, which ideally could bring together human health, veterinary health and ecosystem health, this calendar offers an opportunity to also advance the One Health initiative through a summit whose purpose is both food and nutritional security, food safety, trends in farming and agriculture and respect for the planet's limits.

As the example of the food system also illustrates, climate and biodiversity can no longer be treated separately, because the social economic dynamics that need to be transformed to protect both biodiversity and climate are in fact the same. The convergence between climate and biodiversity ambitions will be the other major focus in the preparation of COP26 and COP15. The British Presidency of COP26 has made it clear that nature is one of the priority areas for the preparatory negotiations between now and the end of 2021. Despite the jolts in relations between Europe and China and between the European Union and the United Kingdom, the conjunction of the Italian presidency of the G20 and the British presidency of the G7 in 2021 should provide key opportunities for the EU, the United Kingdom and China to bring together coalitions of countries committed to a strong and coordinated ambition on both climate and biodiversity.

Last but not least, the discussion on the mobilization of financial resources for biodiversity ties in with the discussion on financing reconstruction in a sustainable development perspective, compatible with the climate and biodiversity

ambition. As mentioned above, it is not only a question of financing protected areas, but also of directing sectoral investments, particularly in the agri-food sector, towards models compatible with biodiversity, and ensuring that investment programs take biodiversity seriously enough to reduce their negative impacts on ecosystems as close as possible to zero. Thus, the entire development agenda is potentially at stake.⁶

Part of these debates will take place in Paris, which hosts the "Finance en commun" summit in November, during the Paris Peace Forum, which will bring together a number of public development banks, including the China Development Bank, whose impact of foreign investments in terms of climate and biodiversity is criticized in numerous reports. This summit should therefore be an opportunity to advance understanding of the challenges of financing for biodiversity and to push as far as possible an ambitious dynamic across all financing portfolios. Transforming the mistrust between actors regarding the credibility of the fulfillment of their commitments into a dynamic of emulation remains an immense challenge, where only frankness and objectification of the results obtained will allow progress to be made. Another key summit organized by France, the One Planet Summit, is scheduled to take place in January 2021, despite the postponement of the IUCN World Conservation Congress, to record a number of initiatives for biodiversity that are significant both in terms of conservation efforts and of political scope on a global scale, and that demonstrate that these commitments on biodiversity will be firmly anchored at the heart of the key economic decisions to emerge from the crisis.

France must maneuver very strategically to make these two summits, which it has initiated but under multilateral auspices, high-level political forums to show, and if possible strengthen, the common will of European and Chinese actors to work together to achieve environmental ambitions on biodiversity and climate, supporting multilateralism while being extremely demanding on the credibility of the commitments made by all parties. The stakes are high, and it is within this long political sequence that the results of the September 30 summit will have to be interpreted, as the opener of this sequence.

¹ https://estatemements.unmeetings.org/estatemements/10.0010/20200922/cVOFMr0rKnhR/qR2WoyhEseD8_en.pdf

² <https://news.un.org/en/story/2020/09/1073392>

³ In the end, the summit was held in a very small format and by videoconference between Chinese President Xi Jinping, European Council President Charles Michel, European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen and German Chancellor Angela Merkel, whose country has held the EU Presidency since 1 July.

⁴ <https://www.cbd.int/doc/c/3064/749a/0f65ac7f9def86707f4eaeafa/post2020-prep-02-01-en.pdf>

⁵ <https://ipbes.net/global-assessment>

⁶ In this context, for the magnitude of its potential impact, but also because China will preside over COP15, China's Belt and Road Initiative (whose 7th anniversary China is currently celebrating) should also be seriously debated.

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