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Competition and confrontation as dominant narratives: what space is left for cooperation?

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As we near the half year, elections expected in this exceptional electoral year continue unfolding. What are the impacts of this vibrant political life on international cooperation? How do domestic dynamics interfere with international discussions? This blog post takes stock of latest political developments and provides insights on actors, topics and fora that could give impetus to cooperation between countries and regions.

A major electoral year at a time of critical sustainable development needs

2024 was set to be a major election year, with votes taking place in some 64 countries, accounting for more than half of the world population, among which 8 of the world's 10 most populated countries—Bangladesh, Brazil, India,

Indonesia, Mexico, Pakistan, Russia, and the United States. In some instances, the elections can affect entire regional dynamics—this is the case in the EU where parliamentary elections took place in June, and in Africa where 19 countries are holding elections throughout the year ([ACSS, 2024](#)).

And though environmental issues have not taken centre stage in elections so far, their results will impact countries' continued engagement on climate and biodiversity. Indeed, 2024 is a pivotal year for international cooperation on sustainable development ([IDDRI, 2024](#)). It is a year when much cooperation is needed to ensure that ambition drives the expected ratcheting up of Nationally Determined Contributions (NDCs) and the delivery of National Biodiversity Strategies and Action Plans (NBSAPs). As time is running out to avoid catastrophic impacts, concerted decisive actions must be taken to transition out of fossil fuels in an orderly manner and preserve the environment in a meaningful manner. Cooperation and international solidarity are also of essence to address how to finance the needed actions, be it in the framework of the international finance architecture reforms, the new collective quantified goal on climate finance (NCQG), the doubling of adaptation money, the alignment of financial flows with the Kunming-Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework, or the preparation of fourth International Conference on Financing for Development.

This is happening at a time when geopolitics is seen as rather adverse to cooperation. Notwithstanding the wars that are profoundly dividing the world, country narratives seem to favour more brutal competition—as illustrated by the rhetoric around trade tariffs or the adoption of industrial new policies that prioritise “made at home”, security, competitiveness and strategic autonomy ([IDDRI, 2024](#)). As for many objects of international cooperation, negotiations on sustainable development appear to be affected by this more aggressive rhetoric. As we enter a more transactional world, we see conflicts spilling over in different fora and clashes between countries leading to negotiation dead ends or stalling such as on environmental discussions in the WTO Ministerial (MC13) ([IEEP, 2024](#)) or as illustrated by the bumpy road in the plastics treaty negotiations ([IDDRI, 2024](#)).

New alliances are emerging from the changing geopolitics ([IDDRI, 2024](#)) and the convergence of new interests that may provide leadership tomorrow on core areas of international cooperation—such as the group of “like-minded countries” involving oil producers opposing a full life cycle perspective on plastic management or the Africa group and the small islands pushing for a greater consideration of adaptation. Calls are also intensifying in the wake of COP Toika Roadmap to Mission 1.5 to improve and innovate international cooperation ([IDDRI et al., 2024](#)).

Midyear and no major political shifts so far but weakened leadership

As of midyear, several elections have already taken place, including in Bangladesh, India, Indonesia, Mexico, South Africa and South Korea. Almost everywhere, we see mostly continuity in power but with loss of parliamentary majority. In South Africa, the ANC lost its long-standing parliamentary majority. In India, PM Modi won a third term, but his Party lost its parliamentary grip. EU is no exception. The centre right EPP has held and can organise coalitions with the parties on its left but the far right is pushing and can be a disturbing force (in parliament as well as in Council) ([IDDRI, 2024](#)).

We are still pending the results of key elections: the UK general elections and the French parliamentary ones, both called by surprise for July, and likely to shift political majorities and priorities. And, clearly, all eyes are on the November elections in the US, which hold significant stakes with the possibility of a Donald Trump come back. The political colour of the next President is likely to determine the US continued push for climate action and its ambition for the next NDC as Trump has vowed to reverse the IRA and is a supporter of fossil fuels ([Carbon Brief, 2024](#)). It will also affect its position on critical negotiations areas, such as international taxation. Nevertheless, no major shift should be expected on trade, notably in the race to green tech with China and the made-in-America rhetoric.

In addition, in that exceptional electoral year, a number of major countries are not open to political changes—either because elections are not taking place (for instance in Brazil where the next general elections are planned for October 2026, although the upcoming local elections may influence the national dynamics, or in Germany where the elections are set for next year) or are reconducting without surprise the leader in place (Russia or China in 2023).

Continuity in narratives and stronger focus on just transition

It is difficult to anticipate the full repercussions of elections on international politics and cooperation. And it would also be a mistake to overinflate the impact of the on-going political shifts in countries on directions, that in many cases, have been given for the medium term. Typically, with the declination of the Paris Climate Agreement in legislations, policy tools (i.e. carbon markets) or long-term infrastructure investment, implementation and bureaucracies are at work in many countries and international organizations, and the economic system has started moving. This is typically the case for the Green Deal in Europe ([IDDRI, 2024](#)), but also in other parts of the world ([Economist Impact, 2024](#)).

As we mostly see continuity in leaderships across the world, we should also see some continuity in the narratives, with a confirmation of the priorities very much prompted by the COVID-19 pandemic, Russia's war in Ukraine and the green tech race, around security, strategic autonomy and competitiveness. With political continuity in major emerging countries, we should see a confirmation of the focus on the absolute need for co-benefits between environment and development.

But we should also hear the rising opposition and contestation in countries, illustrated by the loss of parliamentary majority and the push of extreme right parties in many countries. This opposition embodies the social claims and concerns that come with the reconfiguring of value chains, jobs and competences in industrialized countries and the perceived trade-off with poverty reduction in countries where significant efforts to connect entire populations to basic services remain. As the digital and green transitions affect all countries, their profound structural changes and distributional impacts—including in the reconfiguration of value creation worldwide—need to be managed both within and between countries.

The question of just transition has risen on both domestic and international agendas as illustrated by the number of voices lamenting the lack of a social project attached to the Green Deal in Europe ([CESE, 2024](#)) or the establishment of a Just Transition Working Group in the UNFCCC. Far from receding, this focus is likely to strengthen internationally—with South Africa following up on a Brazil G20 Presidency strongly focused on tackling inequalities as an important cross-cutting goal that translated in a strong push for international taxation, including in the form of a coordinated minimum taxation on ultra rich individuals ([G20, 2024](#); [Zucman, 2024](#)).

As the topic becomes a widespread concern in countries of both the North and the South, it is not clear whether it can become a renewed common ground for cooperation. It is a divisive topic where countries tend to favour nationalistic solutions to protect their own populations. *In fine*, this is an area where pure intergovernmental cooperation is likely not sufficient as civil society, affected communities, businesses or regions and cities hold important pieces of the puzzle—in that perspective, the recently launched [Global Coalition for Social Justice](#) is promising. In the area of just transition, as well as in others, non-governmental actors, also including scientists, think tanks and research centres, which are already playing an increasing role in international cooperation through their own networks or in contributing to multi-stakeholder initiatives, may be instrumental in providing both stability over time and political cycles and new pathways to cooperation.