

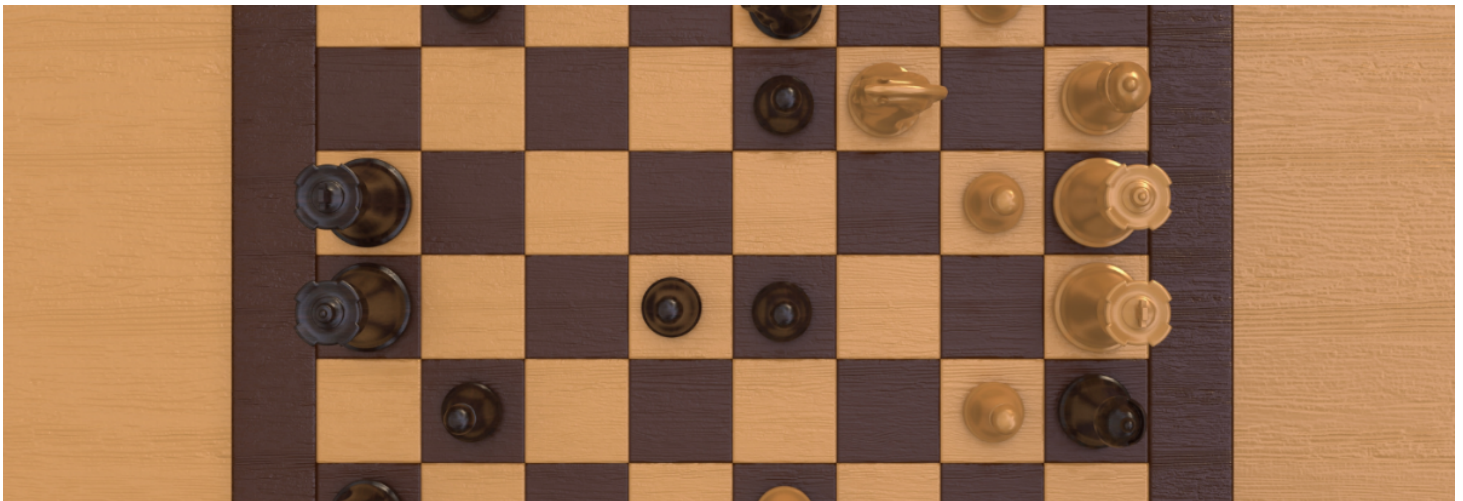
BLOG POST January 16th 2025

Are international environmental negotiations at risk from the weakened state of multilateralism?

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🕒 Reading time: 8 min



In a blog post published on 9 January ([IDDRI, 2025](#)), IDDRI highlighted the critical importance of dialogue and diplomacy at a time when the global order is being strained from multiple directions. It stressed the need to “counter purely transactional short-term approaches with agreements reached on the basis of well-understood long-term interests”. Based on this observation of current geopolitical challenges, this new blog post argues that environmental negotiations, first and foremost, face issues that are both specific to this domain and also historically rooted, while exploring potential pathways for advancing multilateral environmental cooperation.

Negotiations at a standstill

A number of seemingly consistent indicators suggest that the current state of multilateralism is hindering the progress and outcomes of negotiations under both long-established Multilateral Environmental Agreements (MEAs) and those still under development. Notable examples include the difficulties encountered in 2024 at the climate and biodiversity COPs, the low ratification level of the High Seas Treaty, and—with regard to new initiatives stemming from the United Nations Environment Assembly (UNEA) resolutions—the two-year negotiation stalemate on the draft treaty to eliminate global plastic pollution by 2040 and the postponed agreement to establish an international panel on chemicals, waste and pollution.

The obstacles to progress are linked primarily to differences over funding but also to divergent approaches, which indicate a declining consensus on the objectives of multilateral environmental cooperation and that geopolitical tensions are influencing environmental negotiations, raising concerns, particularly among NGOs and the scientific community. However, the impact of the geopolitical context should not obscure the fact that some divergences are specific to environmental issues and need to be identified and addressed.

Shifting pieces on the geopolitical chessboard

The issues are often framed as a contrast between a virtuous and committed West and a reluctant Global South, portrayed as eager for Official Development Assistance (ODA) credits and supported by China and Russia with a vision that further intensifies criticism of Western countries. In reality, the Global South is far from united in negotiations: coalitions are shifting and dynamic. China does not consistently support Russia's initiatives, as demonstrated at the recent United Nations Summit of the Future ([IDDRI, 2024](#)): Russia was left largely isolated, supported by only a few core allies (Iran, Cuba, North Korea, Venezuela, Nicaragua, and Syria) when its amendment, which forcefully reiterated the principle of non-interference, was overwhelmingly rejected by a majority of 143 votes. On this occasion, neither the Global South, the BRICS, nor China stood united with Russia.

The same applies to environmental negotiations, where ad hoc coalitions are forming, as seen in discussions on the future treaty to eliminate plastic pollution ([IDDRI, 2024](#)). However, the unity of countries in the Global South remains strong when it comes to financing investments and implementing conventions. This unity is grounded in consistent references to Principle 7 of the [1992 Rio Declaration](#) and Principle 12 of the [1972 Stockholm Declaration](#). These texts relate to the principle of “common but differentiated responsibility” (CBDR; [IDDRI, 2015](#)), which allows countries to differentiate their commitments and places a specific obligation on developed countries to provide additional financial support to developing nations. In this regard, the Ozone Fund was established in 1990 under the Montreal Protocol for the protection of the ozone layer, while the Global Environment Facility (GEF) was created in 1991 on a French initiative supported by Germany. The GEF was intended to support the implementation of obligations arising from international conventions, starting with the Rio Conventions and then the Chemical Conventions. Today it also funds the Kunming-Montreal programme of the Convention on Biological Diversity.

Finance at the heart of tensions

The dialogue on financing between developed countries and the [Group of 77](#) and China has become increasingly fraught due to the immense and ever-growing sums¹ required to implement the climate and biodiversity conventions. This is taking place in a context of mistrust, heightened by the funding shortfalls for the Sustainable Development Goals and the failure of all but five countries² to meet the political commitment to increase aid from developed countries to 0.7% of their gross national income.³ However, the issue of ODA should not overshadow discussions on the implementation of conventions by recipient developing countries, whose commitments need to be strengthened and made more effective.⁴ Aid, particularly multilateral aid, and the mobilization of international agencies and NGOs

to carry out projects in the countries concerned, must not lead to insufficient commitment from recipient countries, which is diminished under the pretext of the CBDR principle.⁵ It is also worth noting the highly symbolic but significant delay of donor countries in reaching the \$100 billion annual funding target under the Climate Convention.⁶ Emerging positions now appear to question whether compliance with environmental commitments by countries in the South should be a condition for obtaining external funding.⁷

Finance has therefore become a critical component of international negotiations on the environment and sustainable development, and it is crucial to address this issue at the Fourth International Conference on Financing for Development, scheduled to take place in Seville from 30 June to 3 July 2025.

New structural and disruptive injunctions

Whereas international environmental law once primarily addressed the negative externalities of human activities or heritage issues (such as remarkable areas or species), the focus has now shifted to economic issues and, more broadly, to economic, social and even cultural drivers. The [report published by the IPBES in December 2023](#) refers to “transformative change”, presenting a highly ambitious vision of the changes required to halt biodiversity loss. The gradual phasing out of fossil fuels is mentioned in the climate talks, while in the plastics negotiations, the High Ambition Coalition is advocating for the entire plastics cycle to be addressed, aiming to cap and reduce production. This position has faced strong opposition from certain producer countries, which prefer an approach limited to managing waste flows. Conversely, the success of the High Seas Treaty may be attributed to the decision to avoid addressing fisheries and broader economic issues.

The very concept of “transformative change” is likely to influence negotiations. However, many countries (such as Russia, China and Saudi Arabia, and even Trump’s United States) do not want to address economic issues in environmental forums. They are also unwilling to accept references to human rights. For instance, at COP 16 on biodiversity, Russia, supported by Indonesia, opposed the creation of a new body to represent indigenous peoples ([IDDRI, 2024](#)). The rights-based approach remains an unresolved issue at the global level.

Another issue that has emerged over the past decade is the strengthening of the accountability obligations imposed on countries, based on accepted interference by all in others’ affairs. Strengthened reporting requirements, the creation of compliance committees, peer reviews inspired by OECD practices, and in-country inspections modelled on those of the IAEA and WHO are all contributing to a perception in many countries that the principle of non-interference is being undermined. This in turn has led some countries to tighten internal regulations or expand the scope for minority countries to block decisions in the name of consensus. There is also discontent among civil society and certain stakeholders regarding their ability to influence negotiations, despite the increasing openness in the procedures of international organizations ([IDDRI, 2025](#)).

Possible ways forward?

These various developments in the negotiation processes are creating a context of mutual distrust, into which geopolitical factors are increasingly creeping. The Global South, through its diverse regional components, is becoming more active, driven by resentment towards Western countries, which are suspected of attempting to evade or minimize their commitments. This sentiment is further reinforced by “decolonial” approaches and criticism of Westernism.⁸

However, the countries of the Global South are also inclined to ally with developed countries when their interests converge. This creates a diplomatic context of shifting alliances that demands constant effort to foster mutual understanding and make progress in environmental negotiations—an imperative that remains critical. At the same

time, this context invites us to examine new dynamics in the positions in play and draw meaningful conclusions for advancing multilateral environmental cooperation. Nothing would be riskier than continuing to endlessly reproduce past diplomatic precedents. Instead, it is essential to consider new perspectives, including those informed by anthropology,⁹ and to give a positive meaning to the principle of shared but differentiated responsibility, reflecting the world's diversity. Updating the principles of international public law in this respect, strengthening expertise, particularly economic expertise in negotiations, adjusting the level of ODA as agreed for over 60 years, and finally building stronger alliances with poor countries that seek progress are all avenues that have either been initiated or should now be further pursued.

1

\$1,000 billion mentioned for 2030, \$1,300 billion for 2035, in the *report of the Independent Panel on Climate Finance published in November 2024* ahead of COP29 on climate. The expert panel mentions in particular the share that ODA could take in these amounts; in this respect, it should be remembered that the total amount of ODA financing reached \$223 billion in 2023.

2

<https://focus2030.org/La-politique-d-aide-au-developpement-de-la-France>

3

In this respect, the United States, which has always rejected this objective, is lagging far behind, with its Official Development Assistance amounting to only 0.25% of its GNI.

4

This is particularly the case for Asian countries in the context of the future plastic treaty, given that their contribution to ocean pollution by plastic waste has become critical due to a lack of appropriate infrastructure to treat pollution, and sufficiently active policies to control sources. Singapore provides a long-standing example of combining economic development with an active, though admittedly authoritarian, environmental policy since the 1970s. This demonstrates that concern for the environment should both accompany and form a core component of economic development.

5

The success of the project to save the Bengal tiger, an initiative launched by India in 1973 with its own resources and pursued steadily for 50 years, has almost doubled the tiger population (3,167 by 2023) in cooperation with local communities and supported by a dedicated administration.

6

<https://www.oecd.org/en/about/news/press-releases/2024/05/developed-countries-materially-surpassed-their-usd-100-billion-climate-finance-commitment-in-2022-oecd.html>

7

This is evident in the latest working document on the Plastics Treaty published on 1 December 2024, which includes a proposal of this kind, introduced by the African Group and placed in square brackets.

8

Ian Burma and Avichai Margalit (2004). *Occidentalism*, Atlantic Books, London; Dipesh Chakrabarty (2020). *Provincialiser l'Europe*. Éditions Amsterdam.

9

On this point, see Jordi Blanc Ansari's work on "Buen vivir".

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NÉGOCIATIONS INTERNATIONALES

MULTILATERALISM