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The United States and the Rio heritage: a turning point?

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Multilateralism, which has been challenged since the COVID-19 crisis and Russia's war in Ukraine, has been further shaken since Donald Trump's re-election as President of the United States. International economic and political solidarity and cooperation are being called into question, traditional alliances are breaking up, and new, fragile ones are emerging. In this context, where does the international governance of sustainable development stand, and more specifically the universal spirit that presided over the adoption of the Rio conventions in 1992? Lucien Chabason, Senior Advisor at IDDRI and expert in French and international environmental policies, answers 3 questions on the motivations and potential consequences of recent decisions by the US administration in this area.

Question #1: one of Donald Trump's first acts was to withdraw the United States from the Paris Agreement once again. And in early March, the US representative to the United Nations denounced the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development claiming that the SDGs are not aligned with American interests. What does this mean for the cooperation agenda for sustainable development at the international level?

Three international conventions for sustainable development were adopted in Rio in 1992.¹ The two most prominent conventions from a political point of view are the Climate Convention (UNFCCC) and the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD). The United States is not a Party to the CBD, although, as observers, they are quite active within it. The US signed the UNFCCC and then the Paris Climate Agreement, left the latter in 2017, returned to it under Joe Biden, then announced its withdrawal last January when Donald Trump returned to the White House. But the US did sign and ratified the Convention to Combat Desertification (UNCCD).

The Climate Convention, together with the Paris Agreement, is the one that has caused the US the most problems, as evidenced by the executive order that President Trump recently signed:² the attack is crystal clear, particularly in the financial domain. The US contributed to the Green Climate Fund (GCF) when it was created in 2010 under the UNFCCC,³ then stopped contributing when Trump first came to power in 2017; and Joe Biden's announcement in 2023 of a very significant contribution⁴ will not be fulfilled. Yet the issue of funding is very high on the UNFCCC agenda; therefore, there is not only the withdrawal from the Paris Agreement, but also a mortgage on the funding of the GCF and other multilateral funds such as the recently created Loss and Damage Fund,⁵ from which the United States has just withdrawn.⁶

There have always been political questions in the United States regarding the country's entry into major international conventions, not just environmental ones. For example, in 1918, the United States proposed the creation of the League of Nations (SDN in French, the forerunner of the United Nations), but did not join it, nor did it join other texts, such as the Convention on the Law of the Sea (1982). There are several reasons for this. First, the concern not to bind the fate and freedom of action of the United States to international law, the idea being to keep one's hands free in all circumstances; this isolationist tendency is still at work. The second reason is the Senate: it is the body that must ratify the conventions, by a two-thirds vote, which is demanding. However, the Senate is reluctant on principle because it sees itself as the guardian of the freedom of the States, ensuring that they are not hampered by the federal level, which is bound by international law. All the more so as environmental issues often fall within the competence of the States, which would therefore be indirectly affected by the ratification of treaties. Nevertheless, in other areas, the United States has been more active, particularly in the areas of nuclear disarmament and the banning of chemical weapons.

The same mistrust is at work towards international organizations. A few years ago, the United States withdrew from UNESCO for political reasons. Recently, it left the World Health Organization (WHO) amid fierce attacks, considering that the organization had been insufficiently active in the search for the Chinese origins of COVID-19 and ineffective at the beginning of the pandemic. Other accusations (corruption, misuse of US funds, high costs in relation to China's contribution, etc.) have been thrown in, amounting to nothing less than a vendetta. The US has also decided not to attend the latest IPCC meeting.⁷

Question #2: Has the spirit of Rio died because of all these attacks? Are they ideological?

Firstly, there is an internal political argument: the legacy of Barack Obama, everything he was committed to, is considered by Donald Trump to be wrong on principle. But, indeed, all this clearly has an ideological character. Of course, the US puts forward financial arguments, and claims that they contribute excessively, compared for example to the Europeans or emerging countries such as China. But it is the political vision born in Rio and confirmed by the adoption of the SDGs in the 2030 Agenda in 2015 that is being targeted, and in particular its principle of inclusiveness, which covers a range of human activities: the economy, the environment, human rights, respect for minorities, parity, gender, participation of civil society, reduction of inequalities, and the fight against poverty. The rights-based approach, inspired by the Rio Declaration, is also being called into question. Basically, it is a criticism of the progressive and universalist philosophy that emerged from the Western Enlightenment. Organizations and

conventions explicitly working for inclusivity are the main targets, but those that focus on technical issues, such as the International Maritime Organization or the International Civil Aviation Organization, could remain “protected”.

Question #3: Is there a risk of contagion to other countries?

No, I don't think so. But I see other risks: what is likely to be affected is development aid insofar as it contributes to the implementation of major agreements for the protection of the planet. Several countries (the United States and the United Kingdom in particular, two of the most important donor countries) are already reducing it.⁸ In this context, and due to the scale of the cuts, multilateral funds, mainly provided by OECD countries and intended to help developing countries in their commitment to multilateral environmental agreements, might be affected, with potential political consequences for the functioning of the conventions. Beyond the conventions, these rebates are likely to weaken the implementation of the SDGs even further, with the risk of resentment and doubt as to the reliability of international commitments, however solemn they may be.

On the other hand, it seems unthinkable to me that other countries, with the exception of some aligned with US positions, would also leave the major international organizations or conventions. On the contrary, I see countries like China trying to take a growing place within these organizations, as they know that these are useful platforms for information and influence.

Furthermore, I also see the actions of three major countries that can combine, based on different philosophies, to weaken or confine the supranational dimension of multilateralism and the principles of the Rio Declaration. This *de facto* coalition is made up of the United States, Russia and China. Russia has a purely technical view of environmental law, which dismisses the principle of inclusivity; it regularly invokes the principle of non-interference, as we saw during the negotiation of the Global Pact for the Environment project. China is reluctant to include the rights-based approach in environmental conventions and emphasizes its vision of diversified development paths. These three countries can ‘ally’ to keep NGOs at bay and ensure that multilateralism is reduced to voluntary cooperation between countries; a position that nevertheless excludes interventions such as those of the International Atomic Energy Agency, aimed at guaranteeing the accountability of countries in the name of national sovereignty.

Will this ‘retrograde’ approach be a long-term one, or will the real need for effective international cooperation make a strong comeback? Future pandemics,⁹ and the foreseeable absence of a treaty to prevent them, could serve as a reminder of this reality: we share a single planet with living things, the habitability of which is threatened, and we must manage it as a common good. It is not idealism, but an acute sense of reality, that must guide humans in the management of their common interests.

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UNFCCC

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Associated Press

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UNFCCC

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Green Climate Fund, 20 April, 2023.

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World Bank, 10 June, 2024.

6

Novethic, 12 March, 2025.

7

Nature, 26 February, 2025.

8

The Economist, 8-14 March, 2025 ; p. 69.

9

Les Échos, 14 February, 2025.