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What strategy to address global environmental challenges in the current context?

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As 2026 begins, a new set of geopolitical, economic and societal uncertainties is taking shape. At the same time, the ecological transition appears to have slipped down the list of political priorities. Against this backdrop, a series of questions arises: are there still credible ways to address global environmental challenges in a fair and effective manner, which strategies should be pursued, and how can the necessary capacities be built? These questions have guided IDDRI and its partners over the past 18 months through an internal and external participatory process that culminated in the adoption, by its Board of Directors, of the Institute's new strategic plan for the period 2026–2030.

Rising uncertainty at the start of 2026

The recent intervention of the United States in Venezuela and the publication on 7 January of an [executive order](#) announcing the withdrawal of the United States from numerous international organizations, conventions and treaties confirm—if further confirmation were needed—that a world-leading power is failing to comply with the rules of international law, despite having played a central role in shaping them. While many reactions see this primarily as an opportunity to breathe new life into a country ravaged by a leader who has largely disregarded the law, this episode serves for Europe as a further reminder of the growing pressure on its political model. That pressure was already evident in the speech delivered by US Vice-President JD Vance at the Munich Conference in February 2025, as well as in the [National Security Strategy of the United States of America](#), published in November of the same year. The Munich Conference scheduled for February 2026 will therefore represent a key moment to articulate a [clear and credible European position on security and defence](#), at a time when the European Union still appears uncertain about both its willingness and its capacity to assert itself.

Global macroeconomic imbalances, linked in particular to the US trade deficit and China's industrial overcapacity, and the resulting policies and effects, have major global repercussions and call for a strong European economic strategy based on its strengths and specific characteristics ([IDDRI, 2025a](#)). However, despite the [Draghi report](#) of September 2024, which called for a surge in innovation, decarbonization and economic security, recent policy momentum has focused instead on so-called “simplification” omnibus legislation—designed to streamline regulatory requirements across EU policies—with a high risk of weakening environmental requirements (). This trend must give way to the implementation of a strong and coherent economic strategy based on the Clean Industry Deal (with many key deadlines in 2026)[1](#), and underpinned by clear technological choices. In this respect, the discussion of the “automotive package” ([IDDRI, 2025d](#)) proposed by the European Commission last December will be important.

Last but not least, at a time when the social contract is weakening in most Western countries, with rising socio-economic inequalities (between households, businesses and regions) and a lack of future prospects for a growing share of the population, any project centred on security and competitiveness can only succeed if it is designed with and for the benefit of citizens. This implies, in particular, facilitating access for vulnerable groups to future-oriented choices (such as the electrification of transport and domestic heating, which has become a central issue in current debates in France and Europe). In 2026, a dense [electoral](#) calendar will take the political temperature across Europe, with national elections in Hungary, Sweden and Denmark; regional or municipal elections in Spain, Germany, France and Italy; and parliamentary elections in Slovenia and Latvia. The continued rise of political parties with illiberal agendas, fuelled by this fertile ground and reinforced by foreign interference, represents a significant risk.

In this context, what scope remains for addressing global environmental challenges (climate change, biodiversity loss, pollution) in a fair manner? What theory of change can still be identified when international rules are increasingly contested, and when environmental and social issues struggle to find their place on political agendas?

A new phase of the ecological project, calling for a new strategy

Over the past 18 months, IDDRI has conducted an internal and external participatory process to develop its new five-year strategy, which was adopted by its Board of Directors in December 2025.

This co-construction process has confirmed the hypothesis that, beyond the idea of an ecological backlash, which is far more visible in political decision-making circles than in the concerns of the general population, we are in fact entering a new phase in the politicization and implementation of the environmental project. Once a minority cause, environmental action has become omnipresent, and it is precisely this visibility that is now generating new obstacles ([IDDRI, 2025e](#)).

We are indeed at the end of a long phase of placing environmental issues on the political agenda. This phase began in the 1970s, notably under the impetus of scientists and civil society organizations, leading to the development of substantial bodies of international law and to the integration of environmental objectives, mainly climate-related, into public policies and corporate strategies.

Now that environmental action is both visible and consequential, it is facing growing opposition from those who perceive themselves as losing out from the—real—transformations underway, particularly where policy design and implementation have proved imperfect, as illustrated by debates around carbon taxation and the Yellow Vests movement. In this context, the environment has become the focus of new and intense political divisions, and is often instrumentalized in situations where deeper failures in the social contract should instead be at the centre of the debate.

This new phase calls for a radical strategy, which in our view rests on three essential elements:

- **diversifying the actors and alliances for change**, by recognizing and encouraging the diversity of actors capable of embodying and articulating different projects that integrate environmental objectives (for example, companies seeking to foster the development of promising markets through effective policies, stable regulatory signals and international cooperation), and by building new alliances around shared objectives to shift existing balances of power;
- **embedding the environment within social projects**, moving beyond the environment as a single-issue cause and positioning it as part of the response to key concerns of governments (such as security and competitiveness), businesses (predictability and efficiency) and citizens (purchasing power and employment);
- **strengthening the links between national, regional and international policies (for example in France, Europe and beyond)** to manage the interdependencies associated with flows of goods, people, capital and data, including from the perspective of economic security (such as access to critical minerals), and to facilitate the effective implementation of international rules conducive to sustainable development by the actors responsible for key domains.

IDDRI and you: working towards shared objectives

It is within this theory of change that IDDRI has developed its strategy, positioning itself as a facilitator of debate. This role is based on creating and convening spaces for multi-stakeholder dialogue, bringing together actors with different interests, and on developing analytical frameworks and analyses that enable positions to evolve and durable alliances to be forged, thereby shifting existing balances of power.

IDDRI intends to focus its actions on three key areas, with the following objectives:

- **contributing to renewed forms of international cooperation that are both more effective and more equitable in addressing global environmental challenges**, by identifying promising approaches and potential innovations and supporting them alongside key stakeholders, particularly emerging economies and businesses with a direct interest in these approaches;
- **strengthening the social legitimacy of the ecological transition**, by encouraging the development of projects and policy proposals capable of building broad and lasting societal alliances;

- **contributing to a reaffirmed European project**, in which sustainability is fully integrated as a pillar of security, competitiveness and strategic autonomy, particularly through industrial policy, the development of balanced and secure partnerships with third countries, and the relaunch of an agenda capable of driving transformation and resilience in the agricultural and agri-food sectors.

These objectives may appear utopian in the current context. However, we believe that many stakeholders recognize the value of building such forms of cooperation and alliance, and stand to benefit from them. IDDRI will actively seek to engage in dialogue with these actors in the months ahead.

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The Industrial Accelerator Act, postponed until 28 January, is intended to speed up the issuance of permits and stimulate pilot markets. The industrial decarbonization bank, which is expected to be established in the second quarter of 2026, should provide financing solutions for industrial decarbonization, with a target of €100 billion. With regard to **carbon markets**, a review of the EU Emissions Trading System (ETS) is expected in 2026, and a legislative proposal to extend the Carbon Border Adjustment Mechanism (CBAM) is planned for the first quarter of 2026. In terms of **financing**, as part of discussions on the European Competitiveness Fund ([IDDRI, 2025c](#)), both the Innovation Fund and the InvestEU mechanism are expected to be strengthened. The European Commission is also planning a **Circular Economy** Act in the second half of 2026, as well as the creation of a European centre for critical raw materials by the end of 2026. The **public procurement** directive is also expected to be revised to include criteria beyond price. Finally, **Clean Trade and Investment Partnerships** (CTIPs) should enable the EU to better manage its strategic dependencies by diversifying supply chains, while promoting cooperation on clean technologies.

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