**The International Politics of COP 26**

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**Abstract**

This paper considers the international political context of the UK presidency of COP26 and reflects upon past experience in which climate change discussions, despite their distinctive nature, cannot be effectively isolated from great power politics. It concludes that the deteriorating international situation threatens to make a successful outcome to the Glasgow conference much more difficult to achieve than its predecessor at Paris in 2015.

For the UK government the presidency of COP 26 (alongside Italy) provides a stage upon which to play out the role of an independent ‘Global Britain’, countering the loss of influence that most analysts predicted would follow British exit from the EU. Presidencies have been significant in the past; aligning different interests and mobilising coalitions, negotiating final texts and undertaking extensive preparation. Just before the outbreak of the Covid 19 pandemic , COP26 was claimed to be ‘the number one priority of the UK’s diplomatic network’(Chatham House 2020,p.3). The re-scheduled Conference in 2021 is a significant landmark because it is the point at which Parties are supposed to register a decisive shift towards de-carbonisation by raising the level of their nationally determined emissions contributions (NDCs)[[1]](#endnote-1) Yet the prospects for the UK presidency, in comparison with those that enabled the French presidency of the 2015 Paris COP, appear difficult at best. However skilled and well-connected , the ability of a middle ranking power responsible for only around 1% of global GHG emissions, to make a success of the COP is inevitably limited by the prevailing international power structure and pattern of interests..

The international climate regime represents a core element of multilateralism involving unprecedented international scientific endeavour and some of the largest diplomatic events ever staged. The slow erosion of the post 1945 liberal and multilateral order has markedly accelerated under the reckless disruptive nationalism of President Trump. His decision to repudiate US participation in the Paris Agreement, announced in May 2017, but only effective days after the 2020 presidential election, was only the most high profile of a variety of assaults upon multilateralism.[[2]](#endnote-2) This has been compounded by the downward spiral of US-China relations and growing difficulties in the latter’s relationship with the EU, over trade, human rights issues and the management of Covid-19. How far does all this prejudice the chances of achieving a positive outcome in Glasgow in 2021?

A critical question in determining the answer is the extent to which the international climate regime, constructed since the late 1980s, is detached from the overall power structure. This may imply that climate change provides possibilities for cooperation between otherwise hostile countries but it may also mean that it has less priority in foreign policy, lacking salience for ministers of security and finance. An alternative view summed up in the Realist concept of ‘hegemonic stability’ is that international co-operation, far from being the result of a conjunction of mutual interests in specific areas, could only be established and maintained by a dominant power.

During the life of the climate regime there have been seismic changes in the structure of the international system. At the outset, in the dying days of the Cold War, the US was clearly in an hegemonic position as its dominance in the West was given global scope by the collapse of the USSR. ‘Hegemonic acquiescence’ rather than leadership would best describe US policy. Prior to the Obama presidency, the last time the US was prepared to play a leading environmental role was in the negotiation of the 1987 Montreal Protocol on stratospheric ozone. This was not the only way in which the development of the climate regime did not follow the usual contours of world politics. The regime has its own distinctive patterns of interest –based alliances and sources of ‘issue structural’ power.[[3]](#endnote-3) The major states normally allied to the US have been divided between the EU, which assumed a leadership role in implementing the Kyoto Protocol from 1997- 2005, and the ‘Umbrella Group’; the US, Canada, Japan, Australia and New Zealand, itself split between outright opposition to the Protocol or lukewarm adherence. Russia and Saudi Arabia have traditionally acted as spoilers demanding compensation for any mitigation measures that might impact their vital national interest in fossil fuel exports.

Fundamental to the original mitigation provisions of the 1992 Climate Convention was the formula of ‘common but differentiated responsibilities and respective capabilities’. The price of participation by developing states was an agreement (Kyoto) that required the developed (Annex 1) states to undertake commitments to reduce their greenhouse gas emissions by internationally determined amounts. However, by the time the Protocol entered into force it was evident that economic globalization had decisively altered the trajectory of projected GHG emissions towards the emerging economies that were previously not required to make emissions reductions. The US had already renounced its signature of the Kyoto Protocol on the grounds that it advantaged its most significant economic competitor at the expense of American jobs. The large emergent economies: Brazil, India, South Africa and China banded together in the BASIC group to resist pressure to restrict the growth of their economies through emissions reductions in any new climate agreement. This coalition cut across existing political alignments and strategic conflicts, notably between India and China.

The most persistent fault line in global environmental politics exists between North and South. Running through all the heavily institutionalised structures of the Climate Convention where the quasi ‘democratic’ norms of the Convention emphasise the need for equal respect for all 197 Parties and agreement by consensus. While there was controversy over whether developing economies should take any part in mitigation actions the urgent focus for most countries was upon the need for assistance with ‘adaptation’ to the damaging effects of climate change. Nowhere is this more evident than in the leading role of the Alliance of Small Island States (AOSIS). The very existence of many of its members is threatened by sea level rise’, their survival dependent upon limiting temperature rise to 1.5˚C. In the history of the Convention they have exerted normative influence out of all proportion to their economic and political scale. The climate justice agenda also includes the question of ‘loss and damage’ compensation for developing countries subject to the severe effects of the GHG emissions associated with the economic growth of more prosperous northern hemisphere economies.

A decade of painstaking negotiations managed to create a package that went some way to address these issues in the 2015 Paris Agreement. Unlike the Kyoto Protocol participation in mitigation actions was to be universal but they were to have a voluntary character –NDCs – ensuring both US and BASIC involvement. Achieving the climate target was now not a matter of enforcement but rather of an emulative process whereby after 2020 nations would offer enhanced NDCs driven on by a global ‘stock-take’ and subject to transparent accounting rules. To ensure the participation of the majority of Parties, adaptation was to have equal status with mitigation and the Agreement was to be underpinned by major developed world contributions to the Green Climate Fund at the rate of $100 bn a year. No comprehensive agreement would have been possible without an understanding between the US and China between them accounting for around half of global GHG emissions. The outlines of Paris were in fact discernible in the much maligned and ‘disappointing’ outcome of the 2009 Copenhagen COP. Here, without a proper negotiating text, the new Obama administration cobbled together a last-minute rudimentary ‘accord’ with China and the other BASIC members. Crucial to success in Paris was a similar understanding between Obama and Xi Jinping in November 2014. Climate was one issue upon which bilateral progress could be made on the basis of perceived mutual interest. Many other Parties to the Convention did not take kindly to such super-power direction and it took extensive multilateral diplomacy under the ‘Cartagena Dialogue’ and within the ‘High Ambition Coalition’ under an active French presidency to achieve consensus in 2015.[[4]](#endnote-4)

In retrospect Paris benefitted from a particularly favourable conjunction of political circumstances. Since then the Trump administration has defined itself in terms of its opposition to Paris and increasingly to China. Expectations have been raised that an understanding between the EU-China could be decisive in persuading the latter to raise the the level of ambition of its NDC.[[5]](#endnote-5) Always an unlikely hegemon the EU has its own internal problems in establishing future emissions targets, but it is a powerful economic actor that prides itself on having led by example. The UK, previously a significant internal advocate of climate action, is now an outsider with an uncertain future relationship to the EU. It remains a member of the G7 and G20 groups which have in the past provided a setting for climate diplomacy, but their continuing efficacy is in serious doubt as the relations between the major players have deteriorated, amidst suggestions of a new G10 formation of democracies in opposition to China, hardly a basis for renewed climate collaboration.[[6]](#endnote-6) The BASIC group is also subject to new tensions. There have been clashes over Kashmir between India and relations between Bolsonaro’s government in Brazil and China have soured, but all continue to highlight their developing status and avoidance of climate responsibility .[[7]](#endnote-7) The UK’s leverage in persuading these large emitters to revise their NDCs upwards and to provide additional climate finance is distinctly limited and much depends upon internal political change in the United States. There has been active involvement in a number of collaborative climate partnerships which may help to build momentum and partnerships between North and South but they do not include the major emitters and coal producing economies.[[8]](#endnote-8)

COP 26 will occur in the shadow of an overwhelming Covid 19 pandemic which has already exacerbated international relations – notably between the US and China. The pandemic disrupts the conduct of diplomacy and changes the priorities of governments (even whether COP 26 remains the UK’s diplomatic priority). There are countervailing pressures to ‘build back better’ by exploiting the dramatic reductions in the costs of renewable energy or, sometimes simultaneously, to go for short term economic revival through public fossil fuel investments and sometimes engagement in oil resource conflicts as in the Eastern Mediterranean. The specifics of climate negotiations are to an extent abstracted from mainline international politics but they still ultimately depend upon the relationships between the major powers – including the EU. Neither can they avoid the imperatives of short-run economic survival. It is amidst such volatile underlying currents and perceptions of national interest that the UK presidency has to operate.

1. Unlike the 2015 Paris COP, which had to finalise a new Agreement, there remains only some outstanding detail to ‘complete the Paris rule-book’ notably the vexed issue of carbon trading under Art.6. Allied to this is the increasing need to ensure that developing countries stay committed to the Agreement through the provision of adequate finance for adaptation to the ravages of climate change. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Including withdrawal from UNESCO, the UN Human Rights Council, the World Health Organisation and even a threat to leave the Universal Postal Union!

   [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. Writing in the 1970s Keohane and Nye (1977) postulated that under condition of complex interdependence overall structural power, the dominance of superpowers would not necessarily determine outcomes. Rather ‘issue structural power’ would be significant. This analysis is applied to the climate issue in Vogler (2016, pp.131-156) [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. The High Ambition Coalition in Paris brought together the EU, AOSIS and a significant number of other states including LDCs. For an account of the conference see: Brun (2016). [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. This was to be a key task of the EU-China Leipzig summit scheduled for autumn 2020 under the German presidency of the EU (Gennard & Tollmann, 2019) [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. Proposals from London suggested a new D10 grouping adding South Korea, India and |Australia to the existing G7, *The Times,* 29 May2020**.** [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. Brazil and China were in alignment at COP 25. arguing that there should be no strong text on post 2020 ambition and the raising of NDCs unless developed country pre 2020 pledges were fulfilled and that developed countries should make the primary moves on mitigation and provide the lion’s share of climate finance for adaptation (Timperley, 2019,p.2). [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. The ‘Powering past Coal Alliance’ has 33 national members none of which figure amongst the top 5 coal producers (China, India, US , Australia and Indonesia) . The Climate Ambition Alliance co-chaired with Chile has 120 members, only two of which, Canada and Mexico, figure amongst the top 15 carbon emitters .

   **References**

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