

# WHAT'S NEXT FOR UN CLIMATE NEGOTIATIONS?

THE UNFCCC IN THE ERA OF POPULISM AND MULTIPOLAR COMPETITION

**Antto Vihma**



## WHAT'S NEXT FOR UN CLIMATE NEGOTIATIONS?

### THE UNFCCC IN THE ERA OF POPULISM AND MULTIPOLAR COMPETITION

- After the agreement reached in Katowice in December 2018, The Paris Agreement is finally operational. This is a major diplomatic achievement.
- Two large-scale political developments have cast a shadow over the implementation phase of the Paris Agreement: the rise of right-wing populism and emerging multipolar competition.
- The evidence so far seems to suggest that right-wing populism often frames climate change as an elite agenda – and international agreements are perceived as a pet issue of the corrupt elite, at odds with the interests of the people.
- Relatedly, tightening competition among great powers makes multilateral cooperation and consensus-based decision-making among 197 parties increasingly challenging.
- With the Paris Agreement in place, the UNFCCC can provide a long-awaited legal framework for national climate contributions, but it will not be able to increase the ambition of national climate policies via multilateral negotiations.



**ANTTO VIHMA**

*Senior Research Fellow*

ISBN 978-951-769-600-5

ISSN 1795-8059

Language editing: Lynn Nikkanen.

Cover photo: ESA/A.Gerst. Used under the Creative

Commons license

# WHAT'S NEXT FOR UN CLIMATE NEGOTIATIONS?

## THE UNFCCC IN THE ERA OF POPULISM AND MULTIPOLAR COMPETITION

### INTRODUCTION

In October 2018, after a summer characterized by heatwaves in the entire Northern Hemisphere, the IPCC published its Special Report on the impacts of global warming of 1.5 °C above pre-industrial levels. The report received wide global publicity. Its message was clear: if we overshoot 1.5 °C of warming, the impacts of climate change will quickly scale up and become more and more destructive. Some sense of urgency was also transferred to the international politics of climate change, as many leaders called for more ambitious policies and quick operationalization of the Paris Agreement. Secretary General of the United Nations (UN) António Guterres stated that “this report by the world’s leading climate scientists is an ear-splitting wake-up call to the world”, while the EU’s commissioners for Energy and Climate Action noted in a joint statement “saving our planet Earth should be our number one mission”. In Finland, President Sauli Niinistö framed climate change as “a fundamental question of peace and security”.<sup>1</sup>

In December 2018, the UN climate negotiations convened in the yearly Conference of the Parties, held this time in Katowice, Poland. The intense round of negotiations reached a compromise and, as a result, the Paris Agreement now has a detailed rulebook, making the landmark agreement operational. Without much hyperbole, one could say that the UN Framework Convention for Climate Change (UNFCCC) has been negotiating a workable agreement with broad participation for the last 15 years. After an incredible amount of work, many disappointments, and some turns in the wrong direction, that agreement is now in place. Overall, this is a major diplomatic achievement.

However, two large-scale political developments are casting a shadow over the implementation phase of the Paris Agreement, and especially over the calls to increase the level of ambition of countries via UN negotiations. The first is the withdrawal of the US, still the world’s most powerful country by most standards

and, more broadly, the rise of populist right-wing authoritarianism in several countries on different continents. The second, related development is the intensifying multipolar competition that characterizes current global affairs. Times are hard for multilateralism. Some carefully negotiated trade agreements, as well as several UN initiatives, have encountered a series of setbacks. Both of these factors, the rise of right-wing populism and the paradigm of great power competition, concern the future role of the UNFCCC and its main purpose from now on.

In the general publicity, amid the scientific urgency of climate change, the UN negotiations are often framed as failing to increase the level of ambition for countries. In the annual aftermath of UN climate meetings, many reporters, experts and civil society organizations criticize the UNFCCC for yet another disappointing outcome. The round of UN climate talks typically “agrees on rules but fails on climate ambition”.<sup>2</sup> Media coverage notes the procedural decisions and laments the fact that deeper cuts in greenhouse gasses do not emerge as a result of the multilateral negotiations.

These tendencies give rise to several questions on the future role of the UNFCCC. Will the UN climate negotiations settle for a managerial role, administering the Paris Agreement, its reporting procedures and the global stocktakes? Or should it aim at engineering the ambition levels of the climate policies of its parties? This Briefing Paper contextualizes these questions and argues that the latter role is politically out of reach in the foreseeable future.

### BACKGROUND: THE LONG BATTLE OF ARCHITECTURES

The UN climate negotiations have been analyzed as a choice, and indeed a conflict, between top-down and bottom-up approaches. Sometimes the “top-down vs bottom-up” debate has also been cast in terms of “targets and timetables vs pledge and review” in academic

1 “Statement by the Secretary-General on the IPCC Special Report on Global Warming of 1.5 °C”, 8 October 2018; “Commissioners Miguel Arias Cañete and Carlos Moedas welcome the UN climate change report on 1.5° C global warming limit”, 8 October 2018; “Sauli Niinistö puhui suurlähettiläspäivillä ja kehotti ulko- ja turvallisuuspolitiikassa ratkaisuihin, jotka kestävät ‘yli vaalikausien’”, *Helsingin Sanomat*, 28 August 2018.

2 See, for example, “Global climate talks end in progress but fail to address the galloping pace of climate change”, *The Washington Post*, 15 December 2018; “Nations agree on Paris Agreement rulebook, fail on climate ambition”, *Euractiv*, 16 December 2018.

articles and policy papers. Early on in the climate negotiations in particular, many advocated the top-down approach. Inspired by the perceived successes of the ozone regime, European countries and their progressive allies campaigned throughout the 1990s to put into place a number of formal institutions and procedures for climate change policies through the UNFCCC. These goals for negotiations included procedures for adapting legally binding obligations, procedures for the regular review of the adequacy of contributions in light of the latest available science, and the development of institutions and procedures for identifying and responding to non-compliance. The Kyoto Protocol, including legally binding obligations for developed countries, was signed in 1997 and entered into force in 2005. It has typically been presented as the pinnacle of the top-down approach. The core idea of this approach is negotiating and defining particular ambition levels and policies internationally, which parties would then undertake nationally.

In a similar vein, for a considerable period, many have argued for a bottom-up approach, which would allow each participating state to define its own contributions unilaterally. The virtues of the bottom-up system are typically presented as flexibility and dynamism and, above all, the potential for attracting broad participation. Emerging economies such as China and India have long argued for sovereignty, national circumstances, and development priorities. For the US, on the other hand, ratifying an agreement with deep substantial obligations has been next to impossible. Even the historic Kyoto meeting of 1997 in many respects produced a bottom-up agreement, based on horse-trading within a small group of developed countries, which in practice listed their own nationally determined targets in the Annex to the Protocol.

The Paris Agreement represents a bottom-up approach spiced with some top-down elements. Nationally determined contributions submitted by countries are at the core (bottom-up), while the internationally agreed frame (top-down) includes legally binding rules and guidelines for reporting and transparency. The Agreement adds some order to the variety of national contributions. Without this legal framework, the contributions by countries would lack common accounting and comparability metrics. In addition, the Paris Agreement establishes cycles for global stocktakes, which assess progress towards the aim of the Agreement – keeping the global mean temperature rise well below 2 degrees compared to pre-industrial times.

The Agreement and the rulebook establish a system that is based on the same rules for all parties. The old and deep divide of developing countries and developed countries – as listed in an annex to the Convention in Rio de Janeiro in 1992 – is not formally recognized. The Agreement does not refer to the annexes of the Convention. There are a number of points of flexibility for developing countries, as is typical of public international law across fields. The Paris Agreement casts flexibility as a case-by-case issue, in broad terms of “national circumstances”. This is a major and important change of paradigm, a compromise that was extremely difficult to make. It took thirteen years of informal and formal negotiations, which began as a “long-term dialogue” process in 2005.

The Paris Agreement is in force and operational, but there are dark clouds on the horizon. The “gigatonne gap” or “ambition gap”, the difference between current climate contributions and the reductions that would keep the planet somewhat safe, is well known.<sup>3</sup> Moreover, increasing the level of ambition of current climate policies via international politics is facing two huge, intertwined challenges: the rise of populism and emerging great power competition.

## POPULIST PUSHBACK

For a long time now, US commentators in particular have theorized about the shortcomings of formal multilateral diplomacy and conventional rulemaking, calling for less rigid, less centralized approaches to international climate cooperation. Somewhat ironically, the Paris Agreement – with its purportedly more accommodating architecture – still failed to retain the participation of the US.

Although conceptually appealing, the assumption that greater flexibility would promote broader and, over time, deeper climate engagement clearly failed to anticipate the populist, nationalist entrenchment of the current White House occupant. Donald Trump and his strategy are not concerned with the subtleties of regime architecture. His overarching project, one that is shared by large segments of the electorate, is more sweeping in scope: it is about “taking the country back” from a perceived cultural and economic decline, a decline that many blame on globalization and the elite’s liberal ideology.

3 See Emissions Gap Report 2018, UNEP, available at: <https://www.unenvironment.org/resources/emissions-gap-report-2018>.

Although his climate change policy was initially unclear and characterized by contrasting statements, it did not take long for Trump to initiate the process of leaving the Paris Agreement. In June 2017, he announced the withdrawal, presenting the Agreement as something that is against US interests, too soft on other countries, especially China, and generally harmful for the heartland of America, such as coal mining communities in rural Ohio. For President Trump, leaving the Paris Agreement served as a platform for two important themes, namely i) the fight for nationalism and a symbolic strike by the “people” against the “elite”, and ii) unravelling the legacy of his predecessor, Mr Barack Obama.<sup>4</sup>

It is important to note that the first theme is in no way limited to US politics. There is a rising tide of populism across continents. More than a quarter of Europeans voted for a populist party in their most recent elections.<sup>5</sup> The political contexts in countries such as the US, Poland, Turkey, Russia, Brazil or the Philippines are naturally very different from one another. However, the successful populist movements and leaders have used similar themes in their campaigns for power. Their core messaging has been laced with nationalist sentiments that frame international cooperation as an elite project that damages the “real” nation. This differs significantly from the more traditional sovereignty concerns or scepticism towards ambitious multilateralism.

Populism casts the “pure people” against the “corrupt elites”. It can be defined as a thin ideology attached to right-wing or left-wing host ideology, or as a practical toolkit for political movements.<sup>6</sup> The messaging of right-wing populism typically includes a notable element of political nostalgia, as seen in slogans such as “take back control” and “make America great again”. The ideologues of these movements, such as Mr Stephen Bannon during Trump’s presidential campaign, tell a narrative that begins with a happy, well-ordered state where people who know their place live in relative harmony. Then alien ideas promoted by intellectuals – liberal leaders, writers, journalists, professors – challenge this harmony and the will to maintain it weakens at the top. According

to professor Mark Lilla, elite betrayal is always central to this populist narrative.<sup>7</sup>

This kind of political strategy does not necessarily work everywhere in a similar way against climate policies. However, the evidence so far seems to suggest that climate change is often framed as an elite agenda – and international agreements in general are perceived as a pet issue of the corrupt elite, at odds with the interests of the people. Brazil’s President Jair Bolsonaro, for example, raised the theme on his campaign trail, where he also threatened to leave the Paris Agreement. As his foreign minister, Bolsonaro selected Mr Ernesto Araujo, who has advocated that climate change is part of a plot by “cultural Marxists” to stifle major economies and promote the growth of China.<sup>8</sup> A similar framing of the Paris Agreement as an internationalist scheme that stifles growth has been used by several other populist leaders, including President Rodrigo Duterte of the Philippines. In general, the victories of anti-globalist strongmen will make multilateral cooperation and consensus-based decision-making among 197 parties increasingly challenging.

## MULTIPOLAR MELANCHOLY

The second challenge, intertwined with the anti-globalist tendencies of right-wing populism, is the structural condition of multipolar order. After the Western “unipolar moment” and the great advances of multilateralism, especially during the 1990s, there has been an increasing tendency for actors and analysts to view the world in terms of an emerging multipolar competition. The issue is broader than the question of how many powerful “poles” there are in global politics. Multipolar competition suggests a balance-of-power approach that is fundamentally different from the spirit of globalization and multilateralism, in which increasing interdependency, commonly agreed rules, and a degree of shared sovereignty benefits all great powers.

There are several interrelated reasons for this relative change in world politics. A major factor is the rise of China and the subsequent shifts in global economic power. There is wide debate in the contemporary academic and policy discussion about the consequences of

4 Michael Mehling and Antto Vihma, “‘Mourning for America’: Donald Trump’s climate change policy”, *FIIA Analysis* 8, 2017.

5 “Revealed: one in four Europeans vote populist”, *The Guardian*, 20 November 2018.

6 Cas Mudde and Cristóbal Rovira Kaltwasser, *Populism: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford University Press, 2017); Tuukka Ylä-Anttila, *The Populist Toolkit: Finnish Populism in Action 2007–2016* (University of Helsinki, 2017).

7 Mark Lilla, *The Shipwrecked Mind: On political reaction* (New York Review of Books, 2016).

8 “Brazil’s new foreign minister believes climate change is a Marxist plot”, *The Guardian*, 15 November 2018.





The so-called *gilets jaunes* protests in France were sparked in December 2018 in part by a raise in fuel tax, connecting them to climate sceptic populist movements. In a tweet US President Donald Trump even blamed the Paris Climate Agreement for the protests. Image: Patrice Calatayu/Flickr. Used under the Creative Commons license.

the increased economic and political leverage of China. Currently, many analysts and practitioners are concerned about a possible escalation in the trade conflict between China and the US. These kinds of geopolitical and geoeconomic tensions do spill over to UN climate negotiations, as was notable in the troubled Copenhagen climate meeting as early as 2009.<sup>9</sup>

Additionally, a long list of closely related developments has highlighted protectionism, sovereignty and zero-sum thinking, and weakened the case for ambitious multilateralism. One is the rise of the state capitalist model for development. The versions of bureaucratically engineered capitalism are particular to each government that practises them, and the working tools include national oil and gas corporations, other state-owned enterprises, privately owned national champions, sovereign wealth funds, and state-owned banks. Secondly, the growing focus on resource scarcity highlights security of supply issues and zero-sum thinking. The rapid growth, industrialization, and urbanization of Asia's populous economies have, at least temporarily, resulted

in high prices for several resources and the return of neo-Malthusian anxieties.

Third, recent conflicts, particularly the ones attached to Russian military aggression in its neighborhood, have resurrected the vocabulary of spheres of influence and empires, which many European policy-makers and analysts in particular have previously neglected. Fourthly, multipolarity is affecting the reforms and negotiations in multilateral institutions like the IMF and WTO, while mega-regional trade negotiations, such as the TTIP and CPTPP, are perceived as geostrategic instruments in a competition between great powers. Taken together, these factors underscore the paradigm that casts global affairs in terms of tightening multipolar competition.

Another reason for diminished expectations of groundbreaking multilateral outcomes is the potential lack of leadership in international climate policy. This argument seems worryingly convincing in the post-Obama climate talks. Brexit is consuming a lot of the EU's diplomatic resources, and ultimately the EU will lose one of its own climate champions. The respective leaders of France and Germany seem increasingly vulnerable in their domestic sphere. Former proponent of ambitious climate policies, once known as "the

9 Antto Vihma, "Elephant in the Room", *FIIA Briefing Paper* 62, 2010.

climate chancellor”, Ms Merkel has so far rejected the idea of raising the ambition of the EU’s 2030 climate targets.

China has not shown signs of aspiring multilateral leadership either. In spite of its impressive growth, and being a firm beneficiary of the rules-based order, China has not become the multilateralist many Westerners had hoped for when the country was accepted into the WTO in 2001. On the contrary, China has erected different kinds of trade barriers, notoriously ignored copyrights and patent issues, protected its national champions with subsidies, and dumped overproduction of steel in world markets. In the UN climate negotiations, China has emphasized sovereignty concerns and its status as a developing country, for example as a member of the conservative group of Like-Minded Developing Countries.

## **WE’LL ALWAYS HAVE PARIS**

After the Paris Rulebook was agreed upon in Katowice, one could hear an audible sigh of relief. Multilateral negotiations among 197 parties are hard and time-consuming – and in the coming years, due to the factors external to the UNFCCC outlined above, they are bound to become even harder. It is evident that the Paris Agreement, which was based on an intensive diplomatic effort by the Obama administration and China, would have been impossible to negotiate in the current Trump era. With the rulebook agreed in Katowice, that result is now secure. “We’ll always have Paris”, the famous line from the iconic 1940’s film *Casablanca*, may well become a dictum in multilateral climate diplomacy too.

The fact that the Paris Agreement is operational, and ready to bring transparency and a level of order to the bottom-up contributions of countries, is a significant achievement. It is a durable framework that progresses in cycles and includes reviews of its own rules. There is even a dash of accountability in the form of a facilitative compliance mechanism. As the costs of staying in the Paris framework are relatively low, leaving the Agreement requires a considerable, ideological anti-globalist and/or anti-climate policy position. And unless populist governments begin abandoning the Paris Agreement en masse, the UNFCCC can perform several important functions and provide the long-awaited legal framework for national climate contributions.

The UN negotiations can also gather global media attention and act as a node in a network of climate professionals, perhaps even as a “marketplace of ideas”.<sup>10</sup> The UNFCCC may also keep track of other climate initiatives and perform coordination functions. Increased transparency and accountability may create conditions that indirectly encourage countries to increase their ambition over time.

On the other hand, the top-down idea of increasing ambition internationally, a position that is still frequently suggested by the media and commentators, simply looks bleak. In the coming years, the emerging multipolar competition is likely to create new tensions between great powers. The rise of right-wing populism challenges climate change policies and even the factual basis of climate change itself. The question of going further, engineering a cycle of ambition top-down, seems even more utopian in 2019 than it did in 2015. Even reviewing, not to mention increasing, the ambition of national climate policies internationally would be difficult enough at the best of times. And these are not the best of times. Under the conditions of multipolar competition, difficult may become impossible. The UN climate negotiations might not reinforce these tensions, but the prospects of a new breakthrough have diminished.

The optimist vision rests on a revival of climate diplomacy between the US and China. Only five years ago, these two powers revealed their climate pledges together, arguably going further than they could have gone alone. Under a leadership that would continue the climate policy of Obama’s second term, the US could again build an alliance with China at the highest political level, announce new targets, and volunteer for an ambitious, international review of emissions and policies. Before this kind of dramatic change in the politics of great powers takes place, the UN climate negotiations will have to settle for a more modest role of maintaining and managing the legal framework of the Paris Agreement.

<sup>10</sup> Antto Vihma and Harro van Asselt, “Great Expectations: Understanding why the UN climate talks seem to fail”, *FIIA Briefing Paper* 109, 2012.