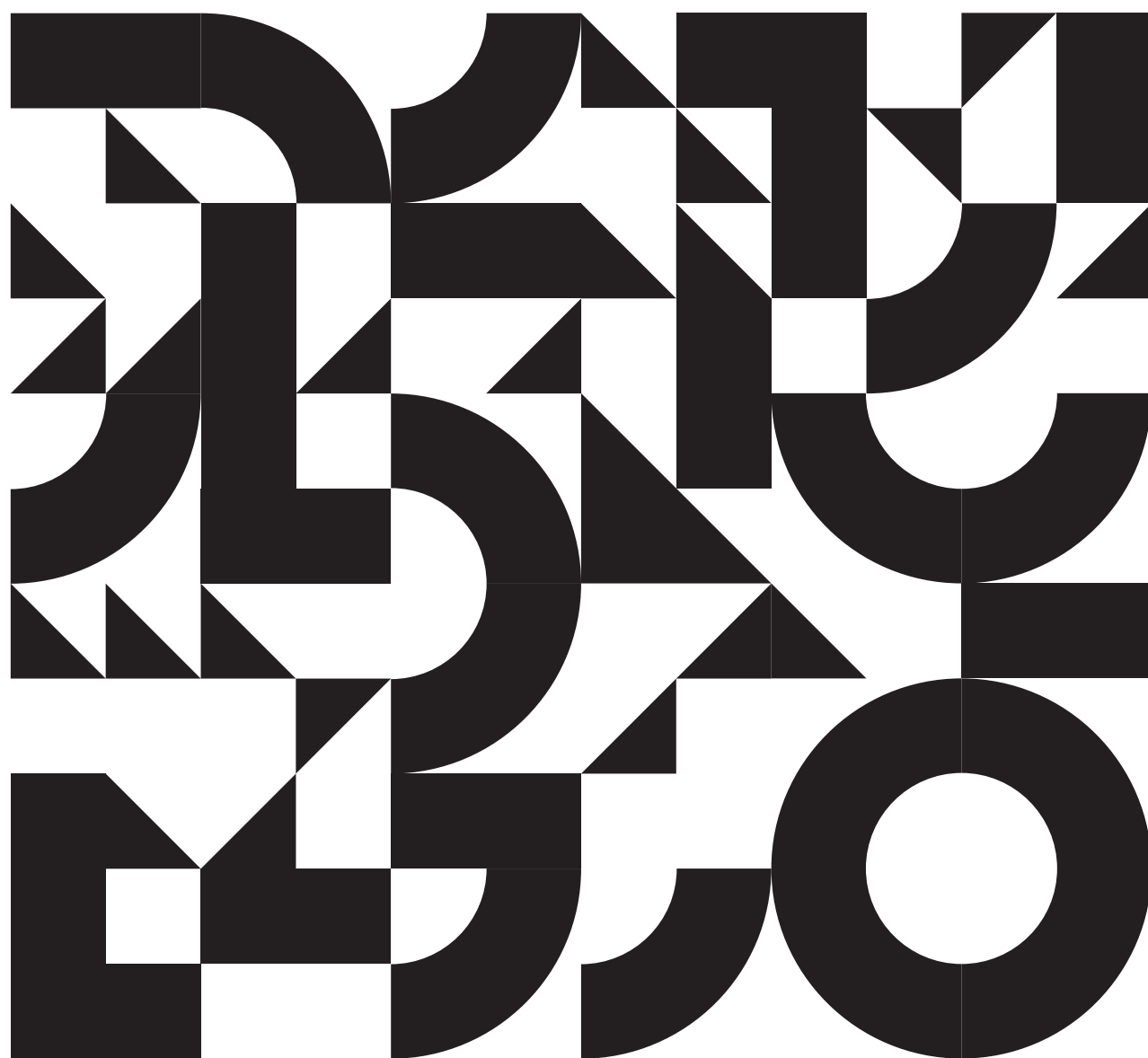


Laying the Groundwork for a Geopolitical Approach of Climate Change

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Laying the Groundwork for a Geopolitical Approach of Climate Change

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Foreword

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FROM ÉCOLE NORMALE
SUPÉRIEURE, ÉCOLE NATIONALE
D'ADMINISTRATION AND
PROFESSOR AT SCIENCES PO

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ECONOMY

Two inescapable but little considered problems undermine France's foreign policy today: on one hand, its economic dimension (geoeconomics), and on the other, its politicization.

The political organization of the international economy is once again becoming a major preoccupation for European countries who long abandoned it to the European Union and international organizations. It should be mentioned that Donald Trump's protectionist presidency and China's geoeconomics ambitions – best exemplified by the Belt & Road Initiative – have hastened the cure for this denial. The development of geoeconomic thinking, still in its infancy, must incite us to move away from the soft European consensus which believes that the international economy can be organized simply by the self-regulation of markets, the harmonious interaction of international law and institutions, and the regulatory monopoly of the European Commission on trade negotiations, which the author pleasantly refers to as the “hummingbird” approach. If multilateralism must remain a future prospect and a collective ambition, it should nevertheless be completely reconsidered.

At first glance, the state of the world seems to confront us with a rather contradictory picture. In certain ways, we have never been so interdependent and interconnected – as much in an economic and financial sense as informational and human – as the Covid-19 crisis has brutally revealed. Geographer Michel Lussault has called this the first “complete Anthropocene fact”¹. Climatologists observe this every day. This interdependence is not limited to citizens within a given society; it extends to all humans and even beyond, as demonstrated by the virus' extreme spread from animal to humans. The ever more pressing challenge of climate change reflects this fact. This interdependence is nevertheless accelerated by the political choices underlying the free movement of goods, capital, and information, as well as the explosion of new technologies.

However, the nation-state remains a firmly rooted political reality, as Pascal Ory points out in his latest book². This «globalization of the nation-state» is accompanied by a resurgence of sometimes aggressive sovereignist projects almost everywhere in the world, with the possible exception of Western Europe. In Brazil, India, China, Russia, and even the United States under Trump, nationalist leaders are adopting a stance which is both authoritarian and shows that they are unwilling to cooperate.

The result of this growing financial, economic, and informational integration is not a sort of symmetrization of the world as we would have commonly and naively believed in the 1980s and 1990s (as Thomas Friedman proclaimed in his best-selling essay “The World is Flat”). On the contrary, monetary and financial gains which were consolidated by the crises of 2008 and 2020, as well

1 — Michel Lussault, *Chroniques de géo virale*, Ecole urbaine de Lyon, 2020

2 — Pascal Ory, *Qu'est-ce qu'une nation ?*, Gallimard, 2020.

as technological ones since the end of the 1990s, combined with the return of sometimes aggressive nationalism, have contributed to reinforcing asymmetric development in a world that is nevertheless increasingly interdependent.

It is precisely this «imbalance» between increased integration and the return of asymmetrical power which makes our world unstable and dangerous. The multilateralism promoted following the collapse of the USSR is gradually being replaced by multipolarity, which implies a more «Thucydidean» world in which a few giants confront each other through means of currency, trade, and technological competition. For the time being they are not resorting to direct military confrontation, but hegemony has not been achieved.

As a result, the international policy promoted by the EU and France can no longer have as its sole working hypothesis the symmetrization of the world and can no longer be based simply on a body of values and rules whose limits have been shown. This is this assessment which underpins the calls for European strategic autonomy. But these points seem to ignore the fundamentally political dimension of foreign policy and the difficulties in bringing to life a plan for shared international action; for a Europe with a still nascent *Demos* and *Kratos*. Furthermore, to this point, the two authors of this introduction are not in complete agreement. Where one (Shahin Vallée) believes it is urgent to accelerate the emergence of a European *demos*, the other (David Djaïz) believes that the democratic principle will long remain rooted within nations and that European Power must above all develop its *kratos*.

Despite these differences, we share the conviction that we must not give up the fight for European strategic autonomy. It is, however, necessary to envision a new framework for globalization to deal with global threats, starting with climate change. We must also take into account the resurgence of national or regional sovereignty and the new imbalances that are potentially unfavorable to Europe, which the market power of American platform capitalism and Chinese nationalized surveillance capitalism impose.

In this sense, the climate geoeconomy and re-politicization of international relations lead to two promising paths for a new European and French foreign policy. Why? First of all, because they lead to a way out of the global village's naivety. Can the European Union forego the power struggle in climate matters? Perhaps it can by adopting an ambitious position on the inclusion of environmental, social, and health standards in all trade agreements and WTO rules, by drafting a solid framework for carbon taxation at its borders to demonstrate its preventative power, or by strengthening its arsenal of sanctions to be more of a deterrent in the face of climate or human rights violations. The creation of a common debt to finance the recovery plan should allow us to take a step in this direction.

What's more, if it is more efficient to let the EU negotiate commercial accords in the name of all its Member States, the strategic dimension of these accords must once again be up for political debate, including nationally, prior to giving a negotiation mandate to the Commission. Europeans must be prepared for a world in which this cooperative structure collapses (the unilateral departure of the US or a pandemic/global crisis) or breaks down (the creation of regional institutions which are often subordinate to a regional power and challenge the liberal international order, ie. AIIB, Chiang Mai, or the development of new kinds of digital currency zones).

It is, however, unlikely that foreign policy in Europe will be re-politicized, particularly the aspects which are most immediately in the hands of European institutions, without agreeing to re-politicize the international question in France. It is needed to leave behind a national political consensus which reflects the confiscation of the foreign policy debate by diplomatic services on the one hand, and by French commercial interests on the other.

As for the issue of climate change, these political debates will be inevitable. At a moment when we are understandably overjoyed by the United States rejoining the Paris Agreement and China's commitments in this area, it is important to recall that even if the Paris Agreement offers a useful foundation for these commitments, it is in no way binding. At the end of 2018, only 16 of the 197 countries who had signed the Paris Agreement were actually meeting its trajectory and their commitments. The geopolitical dimension of climate policy remains a largely abandoned and misunderstood subject, including by economists and environmentalists. The Paris Agreement, as symbolically important as it is, rests on two naïve hopes. On one hand, that the commitments are sufficient enough to produce effects without resorting to sanctions, inspections, or internalization of failures. On the other hand, that the interconnected nature of pollution rights markets on the COP's agenda as well as the convergence of global carbon prices will ensure a rapid and efficient climate transition and avoid the most disruptive global warming scenarios.

Camille Roussac's work, which seeks to create a blueprint for a climate foreign policy, is beneficial. Denouncing the European strategy on this subject is fair, but the alternatives are still difficult to envision. Nevertheless, we are entering into a world in which the two greatest powers of the moment, the United States and China, seem determined to make the fight against climate change a central diplomatic tool. On the American side, Joe Biden's presidency is looking to break with the Trump era's climate skepticism and to regain ecological and democratic leadership over a «free world» with increasingly blurred edges. On the Chinese side, Xi Jinping's stunning announcement promising his country's carbon neutrality for 2060, was a bombshell which ridiculously passed under the radar in France. France's new Five-Year Plan seems to be a step back from verbal commitments, but we should not underestimate the potential of a Chinese economy which, for reasons of prestige (the new race for the moon) as well as geostrategic independence, would pursue an aggressive energy transition.

These are the questions raised by the two thought-provoking texts published by *Grand Continent*, reminding us not only about the emergence of the climate issue in international politics, but also of the need to accept conflict and debate in national and European foreign policy.

Laying the Groundwork for a Geopolitical Approach of Climate Change

CAMILLE ROUSSAC • CIVIL
SERVANT, THE NAME IS A
PSEUDONYM

INTRODUCTION

The climate summit organized by the United States on April 22 and 23 resulted in a series of announcements from the world's major powers on their climate ambition. The current geopolitical context is marked by international tensions, between China and the United States of course, but also with Turkey and Russia. Yet, the summit managed to get the leaders of all these countries speak successively, showing the importance that has taken the geopolitical dimension of the fight against climate change. Indeed, the fight against climate change can only be effective if it includes at an international level the primary emitters of greenhouse gases¹. As the international relations expert Dominique Moïsi states, "climate change not only alters the balance of power in the world. It should compel us to look at the world differently."² As such, the challenges posed by climate change and the low-carbon transition should compel us to take action.

However, those who animate this debate in France, and in particular the political movements which wish to put ecology at the heart of their program, do not seem to put this dimension at the heart of their political discourse. If environmentalists have invested more in the field of international relations since the aborted negotiations in Copenhagen and the Paris Agreement, they have not yet acquired a real geopolitical doctrine on climate change. Political agendas that wish to seize upon the matter and engage decisively in the fight against the causes of climate change and its effects must therefore complement their approach with a policy of *climate geopolitics* which, today, is largely absent. These approaches must include a foreign policy agenda based on an analysis of the expected behavior of other important global actors, especially States. These elements must be taken into account in order to propose effective solutions to achieve the goal of drastically reducing greenhouse gas emissions *at a global level*.

We propose first and foremost to outline the ways in which climate change

1 — Reducing greenhouse gas emissions in a single country, even a major emitter, is not enough to significantly limit global warming. Moreover, without international coordination, emission reduction policies in one country tend to displace emissions: imports of the most carbon-intensive goods replace domestic production and, in the end, global emissions fall little or not at all

2 — [Editorial](#) pour Les Echos, 3 oct. 2020.

compels us to rethink international relations (1), its causes, its consequences, and the means to fight against it as all three are global in nature. The emerging Chinese-American battle for climate power (2) and the challenge faced by France and the EU to maintain their position as leaders in the fight against climate change (3) stress the importance of such a reflexion. While this global dimension is not unfamiliar to environmentalists, they must move past their current exclusively moral-legalistic approach (4) in order to develop a true geopolitical doctrine that goes beyond the simple «bottom-up» logic of the Paris Agreement (5).

We can then draw the outlines of a new geopolitical doctrine (6) around four paths which expand upon Arthur Mira's thoughts for *Grand Continent*³. We will first broach the climate question in order to share it with all multilateral organizations with the help of a "3 R" approach: reinvestment in all multilateral bodies; reconnect their regulatory powers; rallying like-minded countries in a club of ambitious states. At the same time, a group of like-minded countries could be created: the «Green 20». Additionally, the climate soft power of France and the European Union should be invested in. Finally, in order to implement this strategy, it will be necessary to decompartmentalize the administrations in charge of dealing with climate, as well as international and economic challenges.

1. CLIMATE CHANGE IS FORCING US TO RETHINK INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS

There is today a consensus on the fact that climate change represents a global problem. It has been a central fact within public debate since at least 2015 with the Paris Agreement and later with actions led by Greta Thunberg. Unlike other public policy challenges, it is not simply a concern that is shared by numerous countries and for which we can make the choice of how much to coordinate our national policies. In order to be effective, a low-carbon transition policy must be thought of *above all* in its global dimension. Three reasons for that: the global nature of the negative externality associated with greenhouse gas emissions; the challenge to the capitalist development model that it suggests; and finally, the extraordinary impact of climate change on international relations.

1.1 Greenhouse gas emissions are negative global externalities

A fundamental characteristic of greenhouse gas emissions is that their location has no importance for climate change. Wherever it is emitted, one ton of CO₂ has the same impact⁴. This characteristic is known, but its political consequences are not always well understood. Any measure that avoids the emission of one ton of CO₂ has the exact same impact on the climate, whether it is adopted by the French National Assembly, the Russian Duma or the American Congress. There exists few, if any, public policy challenges – environmental or social – which have this characteristic of non location, where the policy choices of one country on the other side of the planet do not have any less of an impact on the rise in global temperature or the increase in frequency of natural disasters which affect the national territory than national policy choices.

3 — Arthur Mira, Une France, puissance verte et européenne. Réflexions sur une politique étrangère, écologiste et sociale, Groupe d'études géopolitiques, Note pour l'action 5, septembre 2020

4 — The same reasoning can of course be used for the other greenhouse gases, the main ones being methane, nitrous oxide, and fluorinated gases in addition to carbon dioxide.

A consequence of this non-location⁵ is that no country can shield itself from climate change. Faced with numerous global threats, the logic behind de-globalization is theoretically possible or at least conceivable (commercial protectionism to fight against agro-food goods containing phytosanitary products, or creating substitutions of American tech giants with European equivalents for example). No de-globalization effort, however, can protect a country against the effects of climate change. The issue of climate change could therefore be seen as the first purely global issue.

1.2. The fight against climate change requires a restructuring of development models which cannot take place in one single country

The fight against climate change requires a reevaluation of the capitalist model of economic development. The ecological crisis fundamentally calls into question hopes for GDP growth in the coming decades and could therefore considerably weaken the promise of progress and improved standards of living. Economically, the models predicting «green growth», which suggest that the only way the economy will be more prosperous is by massively investing in the energy transition, remain fragile. They almost always rely on the sole mechanism of economic activity which has lower «carbon intensity» (i.e. the number of tons of CO₂ needed to produce 1 euro of GDP). To reach climate neutrality within a few decades would require a massive reduction in this carbon intensity. This is not realistic with current technology and could be still unlikely even with new technologies that could be invented in the near future. From this point of view, the excessive use of the concept of «green growth» is not far removed from the rhetoric of U.S. President George W. Bush, who was betting exclusively on new technologies to fight climate change. In fact, the economic growth of recent decades has largely been based on cheap energy resources. Oil is an easily transportable, safe, and efficient energy source. Not being able to use it is, from a production-driven point of view, a true stumbling block, just as doing without coal is a stumbling block for developing economies.

And yet, even today, it is extremely difficult to call the capitalistic growth model into question in just one country, as Emmanuel Macron noted in his recent interview with *Grand Continent*⁶. An uncoordinated, unilateral challenge to this model is at once economically costly (notably due to the flight of capital to destinations where greater profits can be expected in the short term) and politically costly (deterioration of trade and diplomatic relations with our partners). Even small steps are not easy to implement. For example, as Stefan Aykut⁷ indicates, national commitments to no longer utilize hydrocarbons, like France has made, do not deal with the issue of international commerce of fossil fuels and their use, which French businesses participate in.

What is more, this rethinking of development models must also reconsider

5 — In this text, the concepts of «climate change» and «global warming» will be used alternately to refer to the climatic modifications associated with the increase in greenhouse gases since the pre-industrial era.

6 — That is why I believe very deeply that we are at a break point, which is a profound break point too, in addition to these political issues, which is also a break in contemporary capitalism. Because it is capitalism that has become financialised, that has become over-concentrated and that is no longer capable of handling the inequalities in our societies and internationally. We can only respond to it by re-forging it. First of all, it is not addressed in a single country, and the policy I have put together is not at all in that vein, and I stand by it. As much as socialism did not work in one single country, the struggle against this mechanism of capitalism is ineffective in a single country."

7 — Interview with Stefan Aykut, AOC, 12 décembre 2020.

current international development aid policies which aim to allow so-called “developing” countries to follow a path of economic development similar to the one followed by many developed countries. Even if climate issues are being progressively integrated into the development policy of most international financial institutions, it is more a question of favoring certain energy resources (renewable energy) over others (fossil fuels), and of limiting the financing of failed assets (particularly due to a better understanding of the physical impacts of climate change), rather than seeking to truly redefine long-term economic models. In more general terms, the interdependence of developing, emerging, and developed economies make it necessary to simultaneously question developing countries’ economic development and their transition to a low-carbon model.

1.3. Climate catastrophe is geopolitical catastrophe

If the causes of climate change are structurally international, so are their impacts on human activity. The additional difficulty posed by climate change is that the consequences of inaction will not only be irreversible, but also that they will not immediately occur and will not be visible at the moment when decisions must be made. This poses a considerable challenge, in large part because any coordinated action at the international level assumes beforehand that there is a shared consensus on the consequences of inaction. This need for shared consensus further shows the political importance of the IPCC’s work.

According to the IPCC, if current trends hold⁸, climate change will cause a rise in temperatures which could surpass 2°C between now and 2050 and 4°C by 2100, compared to the pre-industrial era. This rise in temperatures will be accompanied by a slew of phenomena: rise in sea level of over 1m by 2100, increasingly destructive natural catastrophes, ocean acidification, etc. These phenomena will alter the quality and conditions of life in all regions of the world. It is also worth noting that geographically these impacts are spread in a very unequal manner, developed countries being overall less affected than developing countries (in addition to having more resources to help them adapt).

It is, however, important to not solely focus on these reports of the physical impacts of climate change but to also examine the *indirect* consequences of these phenomena on human activity in affected regions, such as territorial conflicts or migrations. If the localized consequences for affected populations will be considerable, their indirect consequences will be no less important. It certainly seems that if climate change follows current trends, it will cause a slew of catastrophes to a degree never before seen in history, particularly in developing countries. To cite just one example, a large part of India will become inhabitable in one way due to the combined rise in temperature and humidity⁹, and in another way by the flooding of entire sections of cities such as Chennai¹⁰ and Mumbai¹¹, one of the most populated in the world. The displacement of populations and resulting conflicts could therefore begin to appear in a major way in the next few decades.

8 — RCP 8.5» scenario. The IPCC scenarios are explained simply and effectively on a dedicated page on the Météo France website

9 — Mora et al., Global Risk of Deadly Heat, Nature Climate Change, 2019

10 — <https://www.indiaspend.com/mumbai-kolkata-chennai-may-be-submerged-by-2050-latest-data/>

11 — Explained: How climate change could impact Mumbai by 2050, The Indian Express, 2019.

Even before creating waves of international migration, these movements and their associated socio-cultural-economic problems have the potential to be sources of political tensions, economic crises, or even armed conflicts. As such, climate change not only creates new types of threats, it also amplifies “classic” threats related to war and peace that international relations forums are used to debating. This underscores the need to remove the barriers between thinking about climate change on one hand, and national challenges of defense and security on the other¹². As such, in 2019, the United Nations Security Council identified climate change as a “threat multiplier¹³” and as early as 2014, an analysis by the American Department of Defense made clear that the indirect effects of climate change “are threat multipliers that will aggravate stressors abroad such as poverty, environmental degradation, political instability, and social tensions - conditions that can enable terrorist activity and other forms of violence.¹⁴»

2. CHINA AND THE UNITED STATES HAVE STARTED A RACE TO CLIMATE POWER WHICH COULD QUICKLY REACH ITS LIMITS.

In the context of a change in administration in the United States and China’s ever-growing presence on the diplomatic scene, 2021, with the COP26 summit in Glasgow in November, could set the stage for conflict between the United States and China for the role of the leading climate power. This desire for power not only happens through leadership (meaning the ability to shape the climate agenda), but also through effective, economic, and strategic domination in order to impose choices made and reap the greatest benefits. If the commitment of China and the United States in the fight against climate change is good news, their standoff may not necessarily mean a reduction in greenhouse gas emissions to the ambitious level which is necessary, it could even have harmful consequences.

2.1 The Chinese-American competition to be the first low-carbon superpower

United States President Joe Biden has made his country’s reintegration into the Paris Agreement the symbol of the United States’ return to an internationally cooperative foreign policy, in opposition to the direction taken by Donald Trump. The April 22-23 leaders’ summit on climate is in this respect a successful media stunt. While, on other international issues, Joe Biden is far from having made a U-turn compared to his predecessor, the climate issue could represent for the new president, an expert in foreign affairs, the main stake on which the United States intends to exercise multilateral leadership. The nomination of former Secretary of State John Kerry as a U.S. Special Envoy for Climate, a position created for this purpose, is a significant demonstration of this ambition. If there will be probably strong national opposition, mainly from the Republican party, to the domestic climate policy agenda, the international

12 — One can note that, since 2017, the French Ministry of Defense has developed a « Observatory of — Climate Change Impacts on Defense and Security» in partnership with the French Institute for International and Strategic Affairs, which focuses, for example, on the security challenges posed by climate change in the Western Indian Ocean, identifying the increase in the intensity and frequency of terrorist acts or health crises as major risks associated with climate change

13 — <https://www.un.org/peacebuilding/fr/news/climate-change-recognized-%E2%80%99threat-multiplier%E2%80%99-un-security-council-debates-its-impact-peace>

14 — <https://www.americansecurityproject.org/qdr-the-national-security-challenge-of-climate-change/>

approach to climate ambition could be more transpartisan¹⁵. This is especially true if it is viewed through the lens of national security and competition with China. A number of Republican figures are critical of China's lack of guarantees in regard to its climate ambitions, even though their party mostly halted even modest initiatives seeking a low-carbon transition for the United States¹⁶.

This ambition should, in effect, compete with that of Xi Jinping's China, who, on September 22nd, announced to the surprise of everyone – including part of his administration¹⁷ – the adoption of a carbon neutrality goal for 2060. As Pierre Charbonnier notes in his article for *Grand Continent*¹⁸, this announcement could be interpreted as the beginning of a desire to give China the status of a climate power. China also announced, this past February 1st, the launch of its carbon market which includes more than 2,000 coal- and gas-fired power plants¹⁹ and, for the first time at the climate summit on April 22, a trajectory of reducing its coal consumption.

This race to be the first low-carbon superpower requires a mobilization of all the tools at a country's disposal in order to exert its climate leadership. And so, climate ambition runs through the whole of foreign policy in the form of including climate clauses in trade agreements and imposing financial sanctions on countries not respecting their commitments. The Biden administration's recent announcements of Gina McCarthy's nomination as White House National Climate Advisor (she formerly lead the American Environmental Protection Agency) as well as the former Global Head of Sustainable Investing at BlackRock as the Director of the National Economic Council, shows the cross-sectional character that this administration intends to give its climate policy. The issue of waste, whose incineration causes not only greenhouse gas emissions but also local pollution, is a striking example of these new areas of conflict which are at once commercial and geopolitical, all while being firmly an issue of values. This past January 1st, the final phase in the total import ban of solid waste took effect in China²⁰ following several years of progressive restrictions, creating tensions with countries who are the main consumers of plastic. At the same time, the EU has also banned, effective January 1st, the export of non-sorted plastic to any non-member countries of the OECD, which includes China. The reason for this is Europeans' weak confidence in the effectiveness of recycling in developing countries as well as the desire to develop Europe's recycling industry²¹. This is a clear example of the line which runs through moral issues, economic decisions, and desire for power.

The power logic could even result in an open conflict against a country whose impact on the climate is considered as threatening other countries' security.

15. — Based on the model of the U.S. Climate alliance, a group of 26 U.S. states committed to the Paris agreement and including four states led by a Republican governor (Massachusetts, Vermont, Maryland and Montana)

16 — Jordan Schneider, *Why Xi Is All In On Climate Change*, ChinaTalk podcast, Octobre 2020

17 — Concerning this announcement's background, see [the article in Bloomberg News](#) *The Secret Origins of China's 40-Year Plan to End Carbon Emissions*

18 — Pierre Charbonnier, *Le tournant réaliste de l'écologie politique*, *Le Grand Continent*, septembre 2020.

19 — [Toothless Initially, China's New Carbon Market Could Be Fearsome](#), Scott Carpenter, *Forbes.com*.

20 — China had already banned the import of plastic waste since 2018.

21 — [Recyclers fret as EU plastic waste export ban comes into force](#), *Euractiv*, 7 janvier 2021.

The concept of national security is broad in nature, and the approach adopted by the American geopolitical doctrine²² in relation to security and climate – which Joe Biden made clear during his campaign²³ – suggests that this possibility is far from being completely ruled out.

2.2 US-China confrontations could undermine climate multilateralism

This race to the position of low-carbon superpower poses several problems. First, by definition, this is a matter of competition and not cooperation. This competition can have value if it leads each party to increase its ambitions. Yet, the fight against climate change requires a high degree of coordination (political, scientific, technological, and economic) whereas a purely competitive logic risks relegating cooperative challenges to the background. A strategy purely based on competition suggests reasoning in terms of relative gains (ensuring supremacy over competitors) and not in absolute gains (reducing global emissions to below the permitted levels to limit climate disturbances). In the end, however, the only thing that matters in the fight against climate change is the quantity of emissions at the global level.

Finally, power logic alone does not lead to the North/South solidarity which is indispensable when it comes to climate change. Of course, the desire for leadership can be accompanied by the will to increase North/South cooperation (especially financial) to guarantee hegemony and prevent countries receiving aid from falling into a competitor's sphere of influence. But as certain past experience has shown, such as the *Belt and Road Initiative*²⁴, this logic can lead to the increased dependency of developing countries. In the fight against climate change, developing countries could find themselves marginalized by this power logic and, unable to find their footing, lose interest in a climate issue which is monopolized by two main powers. Despite this, the fight against climate change requires a reduction in emissions everywhere – not just in China and the United States.

2.3 Conflict could override effectiveness

The race to the position of low-carbon superpower rests on the ideas of increased gains associated with the status of being a pioneer in the low-carbon transition. It is also not clear whether, on an individual level, these gains are important enough that they can compel a country like the United States to choose a rapid transition away from coal and petroleum products. While the announcement of the United States' return to the Paris Agreement costs nothing, Joe Biden's announcement during his campaign of the country's quick transition away from petroleum is something else altogether. More generally, the new target set by the United States to achieve a 50-52 percent reduction

22 — For example, the use of this argument to justify extraterritorial measures against certain countries such as Iran or in trade matters.

23 — Joe Biden, then candidate in the Democratic primary, highlighted these issues during CNN's special «climate change» interview in September 2019: «[Climate change] dramatically reduces our national security... The first thing that happened when President Obama and I were elected: we went into what they call the tank, at the Pentagon. We got the briefing on the greatest dangers facing our security. You know what they told us? It's climate change. The biggest concern for war and disruption in the world, after an immediate nuclear exchange.

24 — See for example Tenenbaum, 2019, *Belt and Road Initiative: quels enjeux pour la Chine et ses partenaires?*

from 2005 levels in economy-wide net greenhouse gas pollution in 2030²⁵ will not be reached at no cost. In this regard, the next few months will therefore be an interesting test. Without concrete action to back up these words, climate leadership could simply amount to a passing fad which will not help to sustainably resolve the climate crisis in the long term. In other words, the short-term gains associated with carbon energy seem too important to step away from in the current non-cooperative dynamic by a simple race to leadership.

The logic of competing for climate power is fragile in that it assumes that every actor is interested in pursuing competitiveness. Yet, if a powerful actor remains in an extractor mindset (even if it remains destructive in the long-term) it will increase the effort other actors have to make in order to prevent climate change. And so, if the United States does not significantly reduce its greenhouse gas emissions, it will be that much more costly for China to work to reduce global emissions, thus reducing its incentive to act. At the same time, this power logic also creates the risk of ending up with a power which breaks away and ventures to extract a majority of the economic and strategic benefits of the low-carbon transition; for example, by shaping standards to its advantage, or by holding most of the intellectual priority of low-carbon technologies. Therefore, the interest that other powers have in participating in the competition for climate power could be greatly diminished. All the more so since, if a power remains in an extractive / carbon-based logic, it could well benefit from it in the short term, not having to face the economic, political and social obstacles that faces a State wishing to engage in an ambitious low-carbon transition.

From the point of view of greenhouse gas reduction, the power logic's effectiveness therefore relies on the supposition that the principal powers are rational in the long-term and assumes that they are prepared to put their positions at stake in the short-term. If these fragile hypotheses are not checked, there is a great risk of arriving at a situation where the sincerity of China's and America's commitments to this transition are mutually denounced and each of these two powers realize that the cost of asserting their climate power is too high.

2.4 Neither China nor the United States are questioning their development models

Allowing China and the United States to fight for low-carbon supremacy finally raises the problem of the socio-economic model that the two powers offer. As explained *supra*, the fight against climate change requires questioning a fundamental part of the current economic development model, in particular its production-driven aspect. Yet, in spite of the large differences in their models, what China and the United States have in common is the fact that their status as superpower is based on increased activity. The U.S. economic model is based on supporting consumption through public and private debt. China's is based on public or semi-public investment and hegemony in a number of export markets, and is now, at the same time, looking to develop domestic consumption in order to sustain growth. What's more, these models create large amounts of inequality and instability which hinder the social transformations necessary for the low-carbon transition.

Despite the ambitious declarations of their leaders, the Chinese and American models are far from opening up the shift in development models and, more

importantly, the lifestyle changes that a low-carbon transition requires. Neither the progress in renewable energies, notably in California – the leading state when it comes to climate change – nor Joe Biden’s good-willed speeches, can make us forget this country’s delay in this realm or its dependence on fossil fuels. The Democratic administration’s hope is that massive domestic public investment in «green» technologies will create jobs and contribute to economic recovery and a national reconciliation following the pandemic crisis and the institutional trauma of the difficult transition from the previous administration. But the democrats will quickly be confronted with the difficulty of changing Americans’ lifestyle and consumption, starting with the transformation of the American car fleet – along with its reduction, which is inevitable in any credible low-carbon strategy – even though the use of the private car is particularly rooted in the country’s geography and urbanism. If the White House now seems ready to recognize that the American way of life is threatened by climate change, it is not certain, years after George HW Bush’s famous phrase, that it is now ready to “negotiate” it²⁶. It is not certain under these conditions that the social contract on which their models are based is resilient to the transformations implied by a low-carbon transition, which will be all the more sudden as it is postponed.

But it is above all in regard to China that the naivety of certain rhetoric is striking: many believe that, next to an institutionally fragmented European Union and an American democracy which changes every two years, it is China’s centralized and undemocratic power which has the best chance to impose a low-carbon transition in the coming decades – even if most analysts point out the democratic problems that this poses. Certain analysts even seem to have more confidence in the Chinese authoritarian model to enable the energy or agricultural transition than the European Union’s ambitions in the framework of a «green pact»²⁷. But the effectiveness of an ecological planning dictatorship is at the very least debatable. The societal transformation required by the low-carbon transition seems more fragile without the population’s active support or democratic deliberation. Conversely, the transition represents an obstacle for autocratic powers which can no longer promise the continued increase in consumption and production of goods. This has been argued by economist Judith Shapiro and environmentalist Yifei Li, who studied Chinese public policy through an environmental lens and showed that, more often than not, Chinese authoritarianism undermines its environmental goals²⁸. Of course, China is by far the largest global investor in renewable energy: \$83 billion in 2019, more than the United States, Japan, and India combined²⁹. However, these numbers hide the fact that, with a growing economy, China is also building coal-powered power plants. The plants *currently under construction* in China represent around 120 GW³⁰, roughly the same level as the total current French electrical

26 — “The American way of life is not up for negotiations. Period.” Georges H.W. Bush, 1992 Rio Summit, 1992.

27 — On the subject of the Chinese agricultural model, Sébastien Abis, co-author of *Géopolitique de l’agriculture*, went so far as to say: «Perhaps China will do what Europe claims to be doing in terms of decarbonizing its economy with the green pact by 2050. Perhaps China will not only say it, but will do it, because it has the means, the capacities and perhaps a political model, which sometimes allows it to carry out, over time, with constancy, the strategies it can deploy. » (*Géopolitique le débat*, broadcast November 27, 2020, RFI)

28 — China’s authoritarian approach won’t save the environment, *The Economist*, September 2020.

29 — Source : Bloomberg New Energy Finance

30 — <https://www.wired.com/story/china-is-still-building-an-insane-number-of-new-coal-plants/>

production capacity³¹. Above all, beyond the rhetoric, there is a lack of tangible evidence that China not only intends to undertake this transition, but is also ready to confront the changes to its socio-economic model that this implies. Of course, the communication coming from Xi Jinping around the five-year plan for 2021-2025³² suggests an evolution toward “green” growth and a reconsideration of performance indicators beyond just the GDP³³, but the publication of this plan last March raised many questions as to the solidity of this shift³⁴.

If the recent evolutions in China and the United States offer a glimmer of hope, and if a struggle for climate leadership can give real momentum to the low-carbon transition at the global level, France and the European Union cannot simply follow this lead and expect nothing more. They must equip themselves with their own geopolitical climate strategy.

3. FRANCE AND THE EU'S POSITION AS LEADERS IN THE FIGHT AGAINST CLIMATE CHANGE IS A FRAGILE ONE

3.1 France is caught in between international leadership and nationalist backsliding

Since presiding over the Paris Agreement, France has pursued its role as a leader in environmental and climate issues in the European Union and the world. Within the European Union, France was one of the rare countries, along with the Scandinavians, to take (almost) systematically an ambitious position at the European Council on climate issues. France has endorsed a strengthening of the European carbon market and accepted taking on a particularly large role in the division of effort within the European Union. In addition, for nearly ten years France called for a carbon tax at the borders, a proposition which was finally taken up by the European Commission in its “European Green Deal”. On the international level, France continued to be at the forefront after hosting the COP21. By launching the “Make Our Planet Great Again” initiative following the American announcement, inviting leading American researchers to join a France which was more welcoming to them, Emmanuel Macron wanted to symbolically demonstrate that France was taking the torch back from the United States as the natural leader of climate matters. He continued this effort by organizing a *One Planet Summit* in December 2017, followed by several more modest events that allowed the emergence of interesting initiatives between the public and private sectors³⁵.

Yet, the increase in initiatives, which do not always have adequate follow-up, is sometimes more rhetoric than action. For example, a report from February 2020 from the Center for Strategic and International Studies remarked that the primary interest of One Planet was to “to maintain [the] narrative of an international mobilization launched at the COP21 ” but that it had not really

31 — <https://bilan-electrique-2018.rte-france.com/production-totale/#>

32 — The five-year plan was discussed at the Chinese Communist Party's meeting in late October 2020 and has been released in March 2021.

33 — What is China's 14th Five-Year Plan all about?, Wang Guan, 7 November 2020, CGTN

34 — See “Q&A: What does China's 14th ‘five year plan’ mean for climate change?”, Carbon Brief, 12 mars 2021

35 — [The One planet summit website lists these initiatives](#)

managed to be an “important laboratory of solutions”³⁶. Above all, setbacks on certain key initiatives diminish France’s power of conviction, starting with the matter of carbon prices. Whatever one may think of his political opportunism, the choice of Emmanuel Macron and the government of Edouard Philippe to suspend *sine die* the carbon tax increase rather than looking for ways to make it socially acceptable, gave affirmation to those who believed that the low-carbon transition was too great a political risk to take. France appeared to be giving lessons to the international community and promoting politically untenable solutions that it could not itself implement. It was the same case with the ambiguities behind the rhetoric coming from the President of the Republic on whether or not to adopt, in its entirety, the proposals made by the Citizen’s Climate Convention.

By failing to integrate the carbon tax issue into a broader economic and social perspective of capitalist reform, the “Yellow Vests” crisis seriously weakened France’s leadership by example. As the President of the Republic himself notes in his interview with *Grand Continent*, the low-carbon transition policy has, to this point, sent conflicting messages by promising on the one hand a desirable carbon-free future and, on the other hand, the manifestation of these transitions essentially in the form of additional short-term constraints³⁷. But in order to “engage our societies in this change³⁸”, we must go beyond the simple leadership of large international conferences and be able to propose, in practice, the implementation of a policy which takes into account the risks associated with the low-carbon transition in all their dimensions, including social. The critique outlined *supra* on the absence of questioning of development models can also be applied to France’s actions.

3.2 The EU is not yet equipped with an international climate strategy

Taking into account all of the economic and social dimensions of the transition requires that it be thought about at the European level. On the one hand, it is at the European level that a certain number of tools can serve as levers, whether financial (with the financial power of the European Investment Bank), monetary (with the European Central Bank’s very gradual shift towards climate change), or commercial (via climate conditions in trade agreements). On the other hand, even if France sometimes likes to think of itself as a totally independent diplomatic power, it needs the European Union to be able to carry any weight. In recent years, France has therefore had to progressively leave its place as COP21 president, overseeing debates, in order to further integrate into the European strategy³⁹ for defending the integrity of the Paris Agreement and the details of its technical application. In more general terms, the dimension of capitalist reform that the low-carbon transition implies (see below) must also,

36 — Franck Mithieux, L’initiative One Planet : quel bilan pour une gouvernance climatique mondiale libéralisée dans l’ère post-accord de paris, IRIS, février 2020

37 — “The European and Western democracies’ middle classes have experienced change as synonymous with sacrifice. When we said, «We are going to change things for the better,» like trade, they lost their jobs. If we now tell them, «Climate transition is really good because your children will be able to breathe, but it’s you who will pay the price yet again because we are going to change your jobs and your lives, but not the lives of the powerful, because they live in fancy neighbourhoods, don’t drive a car anyway, and will still be able to fly to the other side of the world,» it will not work.

38 — Ibid.

39 — Within the COP process, the European Union speaks with one voice, and decisions are first made as 27 and then relayed by the Commission to the other parties at the COP

if not especially, be considered at the European level.

The launch of the «European Green Deal» represents a major political turning point. Indeed, it is not just a question of positioning the ecological transition and the long-term climate outlook as one of the European Union's priorities – which is not at all obvious as ecological thinking has not progressed at the same pace in all EU countries, particularly in the Eastern most countries, which are still highly dependent on coal⁴⁰. In fact, the European Union is the only geographical area of several hundred million inhabitants that has committed to climate neutrality by 2050⁴¹.

However, the EU has not yet developed a geopolitical strategy with climate issues at its core. And so, even if Ursula Von der Leyen promised a «geopolitical European Commission» in her first speech to the European Parliament on November 12, 2019, the Commission has not yet developed a coherent vision or put the climate issue at the center of its foreign policy. If this challenge could play a central role in its relationship with Joe Biden's United States, the Commission still remains very cautious in its proposals of using diplomatic instruments to encourage its trading partners to be more ambitious on climate.

4. WE MUST MOVE PAST THE MORAL-LEGAL APPROACH TO INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS FAVORED BY ECOLOGICAL MOVEMENTS

The way environmentalists deal with international affairs is marked by a great mistrust of multilateralism and inter-state relations. In fact, political ecology tends to distrust the State and its centralizing ambition, preferring decentralized organizational forms which come more directly from civil society or are even self-governed. However, what is true at the national level is also true at the international level: political ecology refers much more easily to ideas of people than to those of States. Strongly criticizing institutions such as the G7 or the G20, the ecologist agenda focuses on reforming the extensive multilateralism of the United Nations and its «17 Sustainable Development Goals» by proposing to expand it to a «global social contract»⁴².

This mistrust often leads the international aspect of the environmentalist movements' political rhetoric being limited to a moral-legal stance. This is characterized on one hand by prioritizing national public policy challenges in its rhetoric over the challenges of international coordination and, on the other hand, an essentially legal approach to international challenges. These approaches have their merits but limiting oneself in this way leads to an international approach which is not very functional and ultimately ineffective. They also run the risk of consisting solely of reiterating national proposals and calling for their application to the whole world, without any clear strategy. This approach would therefore benefit from being complimented by a geopolitical approach which

40 — It should be mentioned that while in France, fossil-based electricity production accounts for less than 10% of total production, this percentage is 50% in the European Union, with some European countries exceeding 70% (the Netherlands) or even 80% (Poland).

41 — It should also be noted that the EU is at this stage the only large geographical area that, with the emissions trading scheme, has acquired an instrument that makes it possible to translate into hard law, in a direct (i.e., quantitative and binding) manner, its international commitments to reduce emissions across many sectors (industry, electricity production and the aviation sector).

42 — The analysis developed in this section is based in particular on *Towards a World of Peace and Social and Environmental Justice*, the section of the program of Europe Ecologie Les Verts, a rich political ecology discourse on international relations (in French)

sometimes seems to be excessively mistrusted by environmental movements.

4.1 The limitations of the moral position of the “hummingbird”

The moral posture of environmentalists is often summed up by environmentalists themselves by the (caricatural but telling) fable of the hummingbird⁴³. According to this logic, France and the European Union must above all, like the hummingbird, “do their part”, regardless of other countries’ behavior. Admittedly, the moral dimension of a State’s action on climate is important and a State cannot be credible at the international level if it is not itself ambitious in its national policy. Undoubtedly, a geopolitical approach to climate must not fall into the trap of justifying a weaker national effort with an international policy which contributes to reducing greenhouse gas emissions in other countries (if only because all emissions reductions will be necessary).

This moral posture becomes problematic if the international approach to climate challenges is limited to this. First, France and the European Union’s “fair share” is not defined at the international level, and one should then rely on self-definition of “faire share”. However, to date, the logic of each party’s self-definition of their fair share, which is the approach adopted in the Paris Agreement, has not yielded convincing results: the current commitments of Paris Agreement signatories will lead to a rise in global temperatures of 3.2°C *if they are respected* (which no mechanism of the Paris Agreement, such as “peer pressure”⁴⁴, can guarantee) – very clearly above the goal of 2°C⁴⁵. Signing the Paris Agreement can therefore have the negative effect of being used by signatory countries as a “label” of climate virtue independent of the true quality of their low-carbon transition, which is not being implemented quickly enough in most countries. Yet each one can claim that it is “doing its part”. The main problem of the hummingbird logic is therefore its ineffectiveness. Even if France succeeds in reaching climate neutrality in 2050, this will only allow global greenhouse gas emissions to be reduced by 1% – 5% if carbon neutrality is reached at the level of the European Union. In both cases, it is not enough to have a significant effect on climate change. This mindset can even be counterproductive: implementing a radical transition in a single country is to take the risk of competing against countries who allow themselves access to fossil resources, which in many cases remains more economical than low-carbon ones. This can lead to the displacement of industry or flight of capital. This could even act as a counterexample for other nations: the yellow vest movement alone, initially triggered by an increase in the carbon tax, has been able to dissuade some countries from implementing similar policy.

Furthermore, the mutual interdependence of States cannot be ignored. Thus, the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change acknowledges the negative socio-economic impacts that «response measures» of developed countries, meaning the public policies to combat climate change, can have on

43 — One version of this fable is the following: «One day there was a huge forest fire. All the animals were terrified, dismayed, and watched helplessly as the disaster unfolded. Only the little hummingbird took action, fetching a few drops with its beak to throw on the fire. After a while, the other animals, annoyed by this ridiculous commotion, said to him: ‘Hummingbird! Are you crazy? It is not with these drops of water that you will extinguish the fire!’ And the hummingbird answered: ‘I know it, but I do my part’»

44 — That is, the mutual incentive of the Paris Agreement parties to increase their national emission reduction targets

45 — 2020 Emissions Gap Report, United Nations Environment Programme, 2020.

developing countries. For example, some developing countries, whose economies are now entirely based on agriculture, would suffer greatly from a drastic, unilateral, and uncoordinated relocation of agricultural production in developed countries.

4.2 An exclusively legal approach to global challenges

As a result of this mistrust of the inter-state approach, the key proposals of ecologists in terms of international relations are mainly based on legal perspectives: the ambition is to build a right that applies to people themselves and which can then be used against States. And so, the French ecologists' agenda proposes «to work for the recognition of the concept of climate crime and ecocide by the International Criminal Court», «to criminally recognize all attacks on nature and to reinforce international law in matters of pollution», or even to create a «World Environment Organization (WEO), whose recommendations will have a legal value superior to those of the WTO»⁴⁶. Likewise, in order to curb the power of multinationals, EELV proposes to oppose current «soft global law» in order to establish real obligations in international law⁴⁷. At the same time, most of the primary environmental NGOs have joined forces to file a complaint against the State for inaction against the climate in what they have called the «scandal of the century». In general, we are witnessing an increase of this type of initiative in Europe and North America. The Dutch organization, «Urgenda», made a name for itself by winning a «climate justice» case against the Dutch government while the *People's Climate Case* initiative brings together French, Italian, Fijian, and even Kenyan families to file suit against the European Union. In total, a UN report in 2017 listed twenty-three countries in which at least one «climate» case had been filed⁴⁸.

We should not expect this approach, which is useful in the long term, to produce results in the short term that will be able to meet the challenges of the coming years. It is hard to imagine, in the short term, the major powers of the planet accepting such binding proposals. If many legal disputes have been based on human rights, these have little support in international law since, as the UN points out, «The core international human rights treaties do not recognize a freestanding right to a clean environment, or to a stable climate.⁴⁹» And even if they did, they would still have to be binding: the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which is of major political importance, remains a proclamation that cannot be legally opposed. It is from the awareness of this fact that the proposal brought by Laurent Fabius for a «Global Pact for the Environment» was born. It seeks to create the basis for a new international environmental law, whose weak progress until now illustrates the difficulties of an international legal approach. Launched in September of 2016, a bit less than a year after the adoption of the Paris Agreement, his writing served to mobilize a number of legal practitioners in around forty countries with the support of presidents François Hollande and followed by Emmanuel Macron. Even if its objective is

46 — <https://www.eelv.fr/bienvivre/vers-un-monde-de-paix-et-de-justice-sociale-et-environnementale/pour-une-politique-mondiale-des-communs-et-de-justice-sociale-et-environnementale/>

47 — For example, by reversing the burden of proof: «it is the companies that must prove that they have done everything possible to avoid any violation of human rights or the environment, and not the victims who must prove the damage incurred.»

48 — [The Status of Climate Change Litigation. A Global Review. UN Environment Programme, 2017](#)

49 — Idem

broader, it is the international counterpart of the call to inscribe the crime of ecocide into French law. But these efforts proved fruitless as France has not followed through on its ambition and the project is now at a standstill.

5. THE PARIS AGREEMENT MUST BE KEPT BUT ITS LOGIC MUST BE EXPANDED UPON

The moral-legal approach to international relations is clearly reflected in the Paris Agreement, even though it is the result of multiple influences, intense negotiation, and a long history of climate negotiations under the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change. Yet despite the important step that it represents, the shortcomings of the moral-legal approach mentioned *supra* are reflected in the partial failure of the Paris Agreement five years after its signing.

5.1 The Paris Agreement represents an important step in the process of international coordination on climatic challenges

The visible satisfaction of the COP21 president, Laurent Fabius, as he struck his gavel on December 12, 2015 to confirm the adoption of the Paris Agreement by 197 countries, was completely legitimate. It was an historic moment following the failure of the Copenhagen Summit and the formalizing of an ambitious collective goal to keep global temperature increase “below 2°C and if possible 1.5°C” between now and the end of the century compared to pre-industrial levels. The Paris Agreement can therefore be viewed as an important step in the process of international coordination, but it is certainly not the end of the line. Five years after the adoption of the Paris Agreement, a number of commentators, led by Laurent Fabius, note its partial failure⁵⁰.

5.2 The Paris Agreement does not impose binding objectives and does not guarantee the domestic consistency of objective

The reasons for this partial failure are mainly found in the disconnect between the ambitions that have been attached to the Paris Agreement and what this accord actually contains. As economist William Nordhaus notes, the Paris Agreement suffers from two major flaws: it rests on a logic of voluntary effort and is not coordinated⁵¹. The voluntary aspect – each country defines its own emission reduction goals without dividing effort beforehand – was the condition of its adoption and the consequence of the Copenhagen Summit’s failure. That summit had tried, in vain, to get the different countries to agree on a logic of sharing efforts. Moreover, no control mechanism – and even less so a coercive one – is planned to evaluate the implementation of national commitments.

The lack of coordination between actors and even of internal consistency is another flaw of the Paris Agreement, which is less obvious but of equal importance, for the agreement is effectively based on three main principles: i) a collective commitment to reduce emissions through national commitments set by States; ii) a commitment to transparency about emissions and each country’s goals; iii) a commitment by developed countries to support developing countries. But there is no direct link made between these three principles;

50 — <https://www.lesechos.fr/idees-debats/livraes/quavons-nous-fait-de-laccord-de-paris-sur-le-climat-1243660>

51 — William Nordhaus, « [The Climat Club](#) », Foreign Affairs, Mai-Juin 2020.

the collective commitment to remain below 2°C of warming does not lead to setting a «global carbon budget» to be allocated among the different countries of the world or to the setting of public policies consistent with these national carbon budgets. Similarly, there is no direct link between developed countries' commitment to provide \$100 billion in financing per year starting in 2020 and the needs of developing countries. In fact, the matter of financing emissions reduction policies in developing countries still poses a problem: on one hand, a number of developing countries, especially in Africa, are still requesting that a direct link be made between their commitments and the aid that they receive, which is not currently the case. On the other hand, the distribution of countries between financiers (developed countries) and those financed (developing countries) is not changing even as the growth of emerging countries reduces developed countries' share of global GDP (and therefore their ability to finance development aid) a bit more every year. The consistency of the various countries' commitments is not even guaranteed – while the European Union has chosen to commit to a level of emissions reduction, China has, for example, committed to a date by which it will reduce its emissions, but not to a level that these reductions will reach by then⁵².

5.3 The partial failure of the Paris Agreement must lead us beyond the logic of perpetual promises

Five years after its adoption, it is clear that climate multilateralism must go beyond the simple logic of the Paris Agreement, which does not allow efforts to be sufficiently shared in order to reach the goal of limiting global warming to 2°C. Nor does it allow for an ambitious ecological transition to be made plausible in the countries that would like to commit to it. If Donald Trump's decision to withdraw the United States from the Paris Agreement could, paradoxically, mask the agreement's limits, the United States return to the Agreement must not be taken as an opportunity to simply make do with this framework.

More broadly, perhaps due to the magnitude of the challenge it represents, the climate challenge seems to be particularly favorable to believing in the performative function of political rhetoric, particularly in France. From Jacques Chirac's famous "Our house is burning down and we look away" to the goals of "carbon neutrality" announced by a number of countries during the climate summit this past December 12th for the five year anniversary of the Paris Agreement, climate is, for the moment, essentially a matter of rhetoric and commitment at the international level. As the political scientist Stefan Aykut points out, "we have fallen into a kind of economy of perpetual promises; a narrative that is always updated by announcements (...) but, at the same time, we remain far behind in the implementation of any painful decisions"⁵³. We must therefore develop climate geopolitics that go beyond this logic.

6. PROPOSALS FOR A NEW GEOPOLITICAL DOCTRINE FOR CLIMATE CHANGE

In the competition for climate power, France and the European Union are in a position to assume leadership of the climate issue while at the same time being

52 — Paris 2015: Tracking country climate pledges, 2015, carbonbrief.org

53 — Speech to the Plenary Assembly of the Fourth Earth Summit on September 2, 2002 in Johannesburg, South Africa

part of a cooperative, multilateral approach. But this requires a realistic vision of the international dimension of climate issues, going beyond a mere commitment to implementing the Paris Agreement and moral-legal approaches. A true doctrine of climate geopolitics based around four axes must be adopted: reinvesting in multilateralism, creating a group of like-minded countries, investing in cultural soft power, and decompartmentalize the administrations in charge.

6.1 Reinvest in all multilateral bodies, reconnect their regulatory power, and rally like-minded countries around climate challenges

In the competitive logic of the race for leadership or climate power, we must go beyond the logic of the Paris Agreement, which only brings together climate experts of each country, and incorporate the climate issue into all foreign policy. The solution could lie in a 3 «R» approach:

i. *Reinvest* in all multilateral bodies on climate matter. In all multilateral bodies it is necessary to not only address the climate issue – which is already the case – but to make it the main issue. In the United States, certain analysts are calling on the new administration to start down this path by proposing, for example, to put the climate issue at the top of the agenda in discussions with every country, starting with China, and in every international body, from the United Nations Security Council to the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation⁵⁴.

ii. *Reconnect* existing multilateral regulations and tools in trade, health, etc., in order to make them compatible with the low-carbon transition and put them at its service. It is the logical extension of the climate issue's generalization⁵⁵ in all multilateral spheres to ensure overall consistency and to make it effective.

iii. *Rally* like-minded countries wishing to engage in such an undertaking into coalitions. These coalitions can be of variable geometry depending on the forum, but this can also go as far as creating a club of ambitious countries (see below).

As Emmanuel Macron mentioned in an interview with the American think-tank *Atlantic Council* on February 4th⁵⁶, this threefold approach could make it possible to make the desire to coordinate multilateral efforts operational. Let us give some examples of implementation:

NATO, first of all, is one of the institutions in which climate change must take a central place. In particular, we must take advantage of the subject's political momentum on both sides of the Atlantic. On one hand, the European Union is strengthening its climate actions and, progressively, its actions for its citizens safety, especially through the European Defense Fund, even if the link between the two is not yet sufficiently established. In the United States, on the other hand, this link is now being made more clearly – the U.S. Special Presidential Envoy for Climate, John Kerry, will sit on the National Security Council and climate will be treated as a national security issue. France could take advantage

54 — As Steven Herz, Brendan Guy, and Jake Schmidt proposed in a November 25 op-ed for the magazine *Foreign Affairs*.

55 — Notion mostly known in its English version of mainstreaming

56 — But more than that, what we should work on very actively altogether in the coming months and years, is to build a common agenda between the World Trade Organization, the ILO, the IMF, and our multilateral regulation of climate change and biodiversity.

of this opportunity to propose that NATO adopt a new strategic concept which takes into account the major security risks in coming decades associated with climate change.

Reform of the WHO must also take into account the major health threats to come. Even if the American decision to withdraw from the WHO can be criticized from several points of view, the fact remains that the management of this organization raises many questions. The COVID-19 crisis should help push all its members to consider its reform. This is the occasion for the European Union to propose the creation of a branch dedicated to the health risks posed by climate change. The gain, on one hand, would be a better understanding of these risks and the ability to use the WHO network to. Bring them to the attention of leaders and populations. On the other hand, to better predict these risks by making the connection between a country's commitments to reduce greenhouse gases and by highlighting the additional benefits in terms of public health— which can be immediate, particularly if the implemented measures also reduce air pollution (this is the case with measures such as reducing the power of vehicles or shutting down coal-fired power stations).

Furthermore, the IMF and the World Bank must be made allies in challenging production-driven development models. These proposals would have seemed absurd only fifteen years ago coming from the two “Washington Consensus” institutions. Yet in the past several years these two institutions have seen a rapid evolution of their policies which are beginning to take climate challenges into account. In a February 2019 policy paper that went too much unnoticed, the IMF stated that it considered itself capable of proposing recommendations on how to meet countries' climate commitments in relation to their macro fiscal policies⁵⁷. Similarly, the World Bank is now focusing its efforts on climate issues and, at the end of 2018, announced an ambitious aid plan of \$200bn over five years. France and the EU must use their power of influence⁵⁸ to further focus these two institutions on the low-carbon transition. The risk is that, in the coming months, these institutions will be preoccupied by the short-term management of the Covid-19 crisis and its aftermath, and that this momentum to take climate into account will be slowed. From a fiscal point of view, the IMF must further integrate environmental taxation into its doctrine, and in particular a carbon tax that must take into account social justice issues. From a monetary point of view, the IMF must be able to assume that adapting the financial system to the low-carbon transition will become a primary objective, particularly for regulators and central banks. As the IMF is very influential, such a change would have a very significant impact on all economies, starting with those to which it provides assistance. As for the World Bank, its role in shaping development practices must be strengthened, particularly in terms of financing fossil fuels and taking adaptation issues into account.

Greening the WTO must also be an objective. With regard to the World Trade Organization, which is currently in crisis, the European Union must clearly announce the consideration of climate issues as its main priority in the modernization of the WTO's rules. In particular, these rules must explicitly authorize the implementation of a mechanism to charge for the carbon content of

57— [Fiscal policy for Paris climate strategies](#) – from principle to practice, Mai 2019, IMF Policy Paper.

58 — The EU member states together represent the largest constituency on the boards of the World Bank Group institutions in terms of voting power (about ¼ of the voting power on the board of the International Finance Corporation), ahead of the United States. Source: [World Bank](#).

products at the same price as they are subject to in the European Union.

Finally, at the UN, this logic could be manifested by making the UN National Security Council responsible for acting on climate risks under Chapter VII of the UN Charter (threat to international peace and security). In concrete terms, this would mean that a coalition of countries would request a report from the UN to propose an amendment to its charter on this matter. This would be paired with the creation of a real duty to preserve the environment at the level of the United Nations and its members.

6.2 Creation of a group of like-minded countries: the “Green 20”

France and the European Union could head up the creation of a group of like-minded countries which would meet, like the G20 and the G7, and coordinate their response. In reference to the G20, this group could be called the Green20 and initially aim to have about twenty members.

In effect, the current logic of large coalitions of variable geometry has reached its limits; if they have multiplied the last several years (*Powering past coal alliance, the “Tony deBrum” declaration for the maritime sector, the Carbon pricing leadership coalition*), adherence to these coalitions is too often opportunistic and too rarely associated with new commitments. This group would follow the logic proposed by the economist William Nordhaus and must be closed and limited to countries who accept mutual control of their climate policies and respecting a minimum level of ambition that is at once internal (emissions reduction goals, annual reduction of emissions, commitments to energy and agricultural transitions, etc) and external (an amount of development aid earmarked for climate projects, consideration of climate in trade policies and diplomatic relations, etc.) based on objective indicators from international organizations. This club could allow the coordination of member positions in order to increase their impact while allowing for joint efforts.

William Nordhaus points out that, in order to succeed, the logic of this “club” must especially include a certain number of characteristics, one of which seems particularly key: non-members must be able to be penalized in one way or another for not joining (in order to be encouraged to join). While William Nordhaus proposes the imposition of tariffs on imports from non-members, other options can be considered: strengthened cooperation agreements, mutual financial support between members, etc. The simple reputational impact of the presence or absence of a leader in a «family photo» of club members can act as a powerful initial tool for motivation. The matter of the United States’ presence in such a club would therefore be central – if it represents a powerful tool for mobilization, it could only, for the very credibility of the club, be conceived of once the United States massively commits itself to an ambitious low-carbon transition and once tangible effects of this policy are observed.

6.3 Invest in ecological soft power

To be efficient, a geopolitical doctrine of climate change supposes a cultural commitment to fight against climate change denial, in all its forms, whether it is obscurantism, nationalism denying the interdependence of countries or neoliberalism centered solely on the search for short-term profit. The cooperative equilibrium is based on the participation of the main actors, “free rider” being able to threaten the whole structure by capturing the short-term profits associated with the use of fossil fuels made. As stated earlier (see 1.3.), the impacts linked to contemporary emissions are delayed and therefore exceed the time horizon of most political decision-makers, and that of some citizens. It is

then necessary to invest massively, with like-minded countries, in popular education tools and a policy of dissemination via all relevant media and cultural channels of the mechanisms underlying the climate crisis, not only in France but also internationally.

This cultural struggle can be accomplished on three levels:

Relying on the cultural influence of France and Europe abroad. The Arts are increasingly taking up climate issues. It is a crucial vehicle for raising awareness of climate issues and considering the associated consequences, as shown by the success of the films *An Inconvenient Truth* by Al Gore or, more recently, *Demain (Tomorrow)* by Mélanie Laurent and Cyril Dion. Through Europe's powerful cultural network abroad (especially France's). A coordinated strategy of initiatives focused on climate issues could be launched, notably with the help of the powerful French cultural network abroad. In this area, cooperation with the powerful relay that constitutes the entertainment industry in the United States, seems essential.

Education policies. If the integration of climate issues in France's Education policy is progressing slowly, as shown in 2018 by an article addressed to the Minister of Education⁵⁹, it is a critical part of the cultural battle to be waged at the international level. The 2015 directive aims for the deployment of educating on sustainable development in all schools and universities⁶⁰, but this ambition still lacks quantified, prioritized and planned objectives. Initiatives could be launched, for example, through ambitious school programs set up in the French educational network abroad paired with adequate communication around them. More generally, cooperation between countries, or even the construction of a common educational program on climate issues, could also be explored.

This pragmatic approach will require close collaboration with NGOs, with whom the environmentalist parties are traditionally close. The mobilization of international NGO networks (Oxfam or Greenpeace have an extraordinary international network) is crucial, and this could imply, in a logic of international partnership, an increase in their financing, for example in the framework of the «club» mentioned *supra*. To do this, it would be necessary to overcome a certain mutual distrust observed between NGOs and States on the climate issue, the former tending to distrust the latter and wishing to preserve their autonomy at all costs, the latter considering that whatever they do, the former will consider that they are not doing enough. Large-scale partnerships, possibly in the form of contracts, between several states and several NGOs of sufficiently large size could help to restore the degree of trust necessary for a coordinated soft power approach between the state and civil society.

6.4 Decentralize responsible administrations

These changes would require administrative decentralization, particularly the Ministry of Ecological Transition, along with those of the two ministries in charge of the main multilateral institutions: Foreign Affairs and Economy and Finance. These three ministries operate too much in isolation. Successive Ministers of the Ecological Transition have therefore lost interest

59 — <https://reporterre.net/nous-etudiants-voulons-que-le-climat-soit-vraiment-enseigne-a-lecole>

60 — https://www.education.gouv.fr/bo/15/Hebdo6/MENE1501684C.htm?cid_bo=85723

in international issues: Nicolas Hulot, François de Rugy and Elisabeth Borne made limited trips abroad and the only major international initiatives, such as the One Planet Summit, have been directly managed by the Elysée. Neither the Economy and Finance Ministry (whose main objective remains to guarantee the highest GDP growth in the medium term), nor the Ministry for Foreign Affairs (the ambassadors' mission letters generally mention climate as one of many influential subjects) sufficiently put the climate issue at the core of their efforts. These three ministries must therefore be decompartmentalized. There exist today links between the three administrations, but they are too limited. In addition to the political push that needs to be given in this direction, several simple proposals can contribute to this decompartmentalization:

Mandatory training for all officials of the various ministries, beyond the departments concerned with international climate action. In particular, all positions related to international policy (diplomats, French representatives in international organizations, etc.) must be trained on climate issues. This training should include not only newcomers but also - *even above all* - managers and executive positions, which by definition are occupied by people who had very little contact with these issues in their own initial training.

The creation of an interministerial unit in charge of the coherence of climate action, headed by a deputy chief of staff common to the three ministers (Foreign Affairs, Economy and Finance, Ecological Transition). Ultimately, this development could be coupled with the creation of a post of Deputy Prime Minister in charge of the development model who would have authority over the ministers of economy and foreign affairs in any matter relating to climate issues.

CONCLUSION

The climate summit on April 22 and 23 puts the United States back at the heart of the race for climate leadership. If the EU and France want to continue to play a leading role in the fight against climate change, they must equip themselves with a geopolitical doctrine of climate change that does not simply follow the United States and China in a race for the low-carbon superpower which risks being deleterious. We have tried to draw some clues in this text.

Environmental movements in France and in Europe should complete their almost exclusively moral-legal approach to the fight against climate change - which can only be international. The timing is all the better for this as political positions at European level are rapidly changing, albeit relatively silently. Indeed, governments are coming under increasing pressure by public opinion and civil society to put climate at the center of international issues. Even in countries traditionally reluctant for the EU to engage in a proactive foreign policy, such as Germany, this may signal a rather rapid change of position. Political parties wishing to put the fight against climate change at the heart of their action must take advantage of this to renew their international software by adopting a real geopolitical doctrine on this subject.

By highlighting the threats to global stability posed by climate change and the need for cooperation in combating its causes, political ecology also has the opportunity to address, in a way that is consistent with its political software, an issue that has traditionally been exploited primarily by the conservative right. Politically, approaching the issue in this way also allows the political ecology actors to overcome their naive image to which these movements' position in regard to international relations (on military nuclear power, for example) may have led. While concentrating on the direct impacts of climate change does not allow the acceptability of the fight against climate change to progress beyond

those who are already convinced (and all the more so in developed countries that are relatively less affected), taking into account threats to security can massively mobilize a public that feels less concerned *a priori* with defending nature.

Beyond that, the climate issue is probably the only ideological vehicle available to rapidly consider challenging the current capital-intensive development model (sometimes simplified as the «Washington Consensus»). Certainly, in the Western world, there is an awareness of the problems posed by the hegemony of the market in societies and the social inequalities which result from it. But, at this point, it has not been powerful enough to bring progressive political forces to power, and neither Donald Trump nor Brexit is challenging liberal logic, on the contrary. Far from competing with this social critique of capitalism, its ecological critique is on the contrary an ally. A French government that would be committed both to the low-carbon transition and to a deep questioning of the excesses of capitalism, is therefore led to find favorable dynamics among States, civil societies and peoples, in particular in the European Union. This represents an opportunity, but requires for the political movements carrying this ambition to equip themselves with a solid and pragmatic geopolitical doctrine.