

## **The challenges of climate action to diplomacy and multilateralism**

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1.

The signing of the Paris Agreement, on the 12<sup>th</sup> of December 2015, represented an important step towards the fight against climate change. For the first time, almost all nations of the world assumed the need to proceed with the decarbonisation of their own economies, and agreed to act, immediately and intensely, to curb global warming. This Agreement has clear goals, among which a fundamental one: that the increase in the average temperature would be less than 2°C, in comparison to pre-industrial levels and, more precisely, would be limited to 1,5° C, in an effort to significantly reduce the risks and impacts of climate change.

The negotiation of the Agreement was long and complex but was concluded with success. This same success was achieved for the ratification process. The date for its entry into force was set to 30 days after the 55 countries that represent at least 55% of the greenhouse gas emissions ratified it. This aim was achieved on the 5<sup>th</sup> of October 2016, a year after the signature. Portugal was one of the first countries to ratify it.

Therefore, the Paris Agreement is in full force since the 4<sup>th</sup> of November 2016. The first session of the Conference of the Parties took place in December of that year in Marrakesh. In that meeting, Portugal announced it would be reaching the carbon neutrality target until 2050. It was the first nation in the world to assume this commitment.

2.

The deep meaning of the Paris Agreement can never be overemphasized, both in terms of environmental awareness and action, and in terms of transforming the economy and the way of life. However, I would like to highlight, specifically, its diplomatic and international relations dimension.

The conclusion of the Agreement and the subsequent rapid and widespread ratification (for what is typical in major international conventions), represented, in themselves, a diplomatic success. The role played by France, by its President, François Hollande, by its Minister of Foreign Affairs, Laurent Fabius, and by its diplomacy, shall not be ignored, as it was crucial. The Agreement also benefited, largely, of the United Nations' commitment, during the term of the Secretary-General, Ban Ki-Moon. With the new Secretary-General, António Guterres, in office since January 2017, this commitment became even greater. Guterres has rightly made the fight against climate change the main focus of his action. He has been alerting nations, encouraging civil society and the public opinion worldwide, defending public policies and tirelessly placing the issue of the planet's survival in the multilateral agenda. As he said, on the 2<sup>nd</sup> of December 2020, in an interview to the newspaper "El País", humankind is at war with nature and we need reconciliation. Earth is our common good, its future is our future, and we shall assure it collectively.

European Union leadership on this topic should also be noted. Not all the 27 member-states feel and react the same way. On the contrary, this is one of the several and worrying fractures that sign Union's present. But the European Commission, the European Parliament, and a wide majority of the European Council understand the "existential" nature of the questions raised by climate change to our way of life as a society; and they act accordingly. While I am writing, in the beginning of December 2020, we still do not know whether we will reach a consensus in the European Council; however, what is on the table is the establishment of a target of at least 55% reduction of emissions until 2030, compared to 1990's numbers. The first Climate European Law is in the final phase of approval; and the European Ecological Pact outlines an ambitious framework for action.

On the other side of the Atlantic, the Obama Administration supported the elaboration and the approval of the Paris Agreement. Nevertheless, its ratification by the United States was only completed in September 2019 and, shortly after two months, President Donald Trump, who made the fight against climate change an absurd "battle horse", announced the decision to withdraw; this was consummated on November the 4<sup>th</sup>, 2020. Fortunately, President-elect Joe Biden pledged to return to the Paris Agreement on the first day of his mandate. On his side, the Chinese President Xi Jinping declared at the United Nations General Assembly, in September 2020, that China was committed to reach carbon neutrality by 2060.

All this combined, the current moment is again one of some hope, allowing a measure of return to the spirit felt at the end of the year 2015 when, in Paris, the world devoted itself to avoid the overheating of the planet.

However, it is not enough to consider some positive developments. The evaluations of the independent scientific panels coincide in showing that we are not winning the fight yet against climate change and that, in global terms, our “war against nature” unfortunately continues. The preservation of biodiversity, the stopping of deforestation, the reduction of residues, the rejection of hydrocarbons, the elimination of single-use plastics, the conservation of the ocean, the fight against the rising of sea level, and so many other priority environmental goals are still to be reached and, in several of them, we are further away today than in the past. Circular economy, green growth, clean energy, territory friendly agriculture, smart management of water and other scarce and essential resources, all continue to be policies and practices still in consolidation, facing enemies, adversities, and a lot of unconsciousness.

Therefore, both internally to the States and in the plan that I’m at present occupied with, which is that of international relations, it is time to act and not just to celebrate.

3.

Climate action is one of the fundamental areas of multilateral cooperation; it is everyone’s problem, a problem that can only be solved, or even lessen, together. It demands concertation and commitment, which is a very different attitude and language from this fracture between two rival political, economic and technological orders that have paralysed the world in recent years. Europe alone, without the United States of America or China, let alone other nations, or blocs, will not win this fight. And the same applies to any other fundamental actors. The Paris Agreement’ advocates must be multilateralists and multilateralists must understand that the enforcement of the Paris Agreement is, as of today, one of the very first priorities of the multilateral agenda. The United Nations are the most encompassing framework for this encounter; the Framework Convention on Climate Change, the conferences and meetings of the Parties and the assumption, by each of them, of their Nationally Determined Contribution are the instruments of success or failure of the implementation of our global action. That is why the balance of measures and results, as well as the 5 years evaluation are particularly important.

Portugal takes part in this global effort.

For several years now we envisaged the environment as a key matter of public policies. And, naturally, without considering the internal dimension, I draw the attention of the Portuguese to the fact that that assumption and its translation into concrete strategies and measures are well known to the international community. They're known, esteemed, and even taken as a role model.

Without worrying about being neither detailed nor exhaustive, I will highlight four aspects in which our European and international prominence seems well established; and I will add two more, in which I see an ongoing consolidation process. Among the first, the focus on renewable energies stands out. Hydro energy and wind power, and recently solar energy, and even more recently (in fact, in our most immediate present) the renewable gases and green hydrogen. Then, the attention given to oceans and the defence of a global strategy towards the preservation, the rational and sustainable use, and the good governance of the oceans. It is not an exclusively environmental topic, but the connection is self-evident. From the World Oceans Commission, chaired by Mário Soares, to the contribution towards the autonomy of Goal 14 of the Sustainable Development, from the role of cofacilitators in the First United Nations Ocean Conference, in 2017, to the responsibility of the organisation, with Kenya, in Lisbon, of the Second Conference, the position and added value of Portugal are evident. In third place, biodiversity's preservation and protection, either in land or in marine areas. And, finally, participation in the drafting and approval of major international documents and agreements on climate issues and the precocity with which, for example, we ratified the Paris Agreement, we committed to carbon neutrality, and approved the necessary national strategies. Just a few days ago, on November the 30<sup>th</sup>, 2020, the European Commission issued an official report which shows Portugal as the Member-State closer to reach European goals towards emissions' reduction for 2030.

The two associate dimensions in which we are creating and consolidating an international preeminent position are those of water policy and the connection between issues of cooperation and sustainable development. In the first one, Portugal is a voice increasingly heard and a case study, with national competences being demanded in international processes, for example within the framework of the United Nations. In the second one, the obvious connection between climate, human security against the consequences of catastrophic atmospheric and environmental phenomena, humanitarian emergency action and other more mediate, but essential, the action to train countries and populations to better

respond to climate change challenges. This connection is increasingly part of the conceptions and practices abided by Portuguese cooperation projects – and of its contribution to the reflexion and international strategy on this matter.

All of the above bestow upon us a big responsibility. Under the Portuguese Presidency of the Council of the European Union, in the first semester of 2021, the green transition on one hand, and on the other, the way it is articulated with the strengthening of the European social model and the role of Europe in the world, will be a demanding and dense line of work. It is related to the Climate Law and Ecological Pact, but also to mobility, to the European Year of the Railway, to the reform of the Common Agricultural Policy, to the “Meadow to Plate” Strategy (*Estratégia do Prado ao Prato*) and to so many other aspects, environmental, economic, energetic, infrastructural, and territorial. Within the United Nations, thematic responsibilities are also obvious: climate, oceans, biodiversity, water, and other essential resources... The same sense of urgency and integration emerges in other multilateral platforms, from the Community of Portuguese Speaking Countries to the Ibero-American Summit.

Despite all problems and obligations, climate change stands out for the seriousness and vastness of the effects and the scarcity of time available to solve them. The Paris Agreement is the main roadmap to face it. It is up to diplomacy, either Portuguese, European, or international, to favour the joint and cooperative work, without which we will not accomplish the fundamental steps of that roadmap.

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