

From the Paris Agreement to COP 26: How "sustainability" is shaping the political playing field

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G.E.O. - Politics

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ABSTRACT

With the upcoming 26th United Nations Conference of the Parties in November 2021, the urgency for a just transition towards a sustainable form of development is moving to the center of the international agenda. Described as the greatest challenge of our time, the Climate Crisis is currently redefining the foreign policies and the relations between States, becoming one of the most debated issues in international politics. Since the First Industrial Revolution, the almost exclusive use of fossil fuels for production, together with several other phenomena such as pollution, have contributed to deepening the problem of climate change, making the impact of human action on the environment almost irreversible. In order to confront the mounting issue of climate change, the Paris Agreement places great emphasis on the collaboration between realities with different levels of development, leading more countries to actively contribute to the sustainable development process. This report aims to analyze this cooperation process, taking into consideration the heterogeneity of the emerging economies, the role of the major polluters and of the most developed countries, and the relevance of the upcoming COP26 in the international sustainability efforts, providing suggestions for and expectations of the results of the Conference.

I. The Changing Face of Sustainability: The Paris Agreement and its Predecessors

The Brundtland Report, drawn up by the World Commission on Environment and Development (WCED) on August 4th, 1987, defines sustainable development as "the development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability for future generations to meet their own''. This definition is rather generic and wide-ranging, and was therefore accepted without further discussion by the international community. It left room for manoeuvre to governments both from a theoretical and practical point of view[1]. Although there are different dimensions of sustainable development, the environmental one has been attracting more media attention than the others because of the real urgency that environmental problems represent for people: in fact, due to the heavy reliance on highly polluting energy sources, the level of emissions of CO2 in the atmosphere has been increasing. It is widely known that the production paradigm in force in modern societies since the First Industrial Revolution relies on the almost exclusive use of fossil fuels for production and, as a direct consequence, for the GDP growth of a country[2]. However, there are huge environmental costs: the reduction of non-renewable resource basins, pollution, the worsening of air quality both in urban and rural areas, the progressive increase in the Earth's temperature with consequent damage to the ozone layer and the sea level rise, the greenhouse effect, deforestation, natural disasters that affect entire populations displacing people like tsunamis, earthquakes, and hurricanes. All these phenomena contribute to the deepening problem of climate change[3].

To address these issues, the international community agreed to start a debate on the best practices to protect the environment. The first example of this new commitment was the United Nations Conference on Human Development which was held in 1972; however, the milestones of environmental cooperation were set with the Rio de Janeiro Conference, better known as the Earth Summit, which was held in 1992. There were two direct consequences of this international conference: the first was the creation of the Agenda 21 action program, which establishes intent and objectives on sustainable development, and the second was the United Nations Framework

[1] Brundtland, G. , “Report of the World Commission on Environment and Development: Our Common Future”, United Nations, 1987.
[2] For example, see “Fossil Fuels account for the largest share of U.S. energy production and consumption”, US Energy Information Administration, September 14, 2020.
[3] “The Hidden Costs of Fossil Fuels”, Union of Concerned Scientists, August 30, 2016.

Convention on Climate Change - UNFCCC[4]. With this framework convention, negotiations on climate are said to have officially begun.

Another important step in the fight against environmental degradation was the Kyoto Protocol drawn up in 1997, which entered into force only later in 2005. It serves as an implementation tool of the UNFCCC and under this document, the ratifying countries pledged to reduce their emissions to mitigate climate change. They were divided into *Annex I countries*, bound to the reduction of greenhouse gas emissions and *Non-Annex I countries*, not bound to the reduction but instead beneficiaries of support to initiate and carry out voluntary actions to mitigate climate change[5]. The Non-Annex I countries originally included China, because it was classified as a 'developing country'. This classification caused reprisals from the United States, which for a long time considered such a categorization unacceptable. According to the United States, it was necessary to derogate from the principle of "common but differentiated responsibilities, of the respective capabilities, in light of different national circumstances"[6] within the UNFCCC, under which countries such as China, India and Brazil, racing towards the coveted economic development, could produce without constraints; these countries, unlike the 'developed' countries, did not have to reduce the huge amounts of CO2 emissions deriving from their production processes. For this reason, in 2001 the USA, together with other countries, decided to withdraw their ratification to the treaty[7].

Climate negotiations have evolved over time through the COPs, the Conferences of the Parties, during which international activities whose aim is to mitigate climate are discussed and planned. Each country occasionally pledges to voluntarily undertake its INDCs or Intended Nationally Determined Contributions, national contributions that the countries intend to provide to reduce climate change over a fixed period. The problematic and critical nature of the INDCs lay precisely in their voluntary character; each nation sets goals to be achieved in the short and long term and assesses the improvements and the effectiveness of the actions undertaken. Thus, notwithstanding these actions, today, the goal of keeping earth's temperature below 2 ° C is far from being achieved[8].

Following the COP21, 196 states signed the Paris Agreement, a legally binding international climate treaty which was nonetheless based on INDCs. The next COP, COP26 should have been held in

[4] "United Nations Conference on Environment and Development, Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, 3-14 June 1992", United Nations.
[5] "United Nations Framework on Climate Change", United Nations, 1992.
[6] *Ibidem*.
[7] Phillipson, M., "The United States Withdrawal from the Kyoto Protocol", *Irish Jurist* Vol. 36, 2001: 292.
[8] Clémençon, R., "The Two Sides of the Paris Climate Agreement: Dismal Failure or Historic Breakthrough?" *The Journal of Environment & Development* Vol. 25, no. 1, 2016: 4.

November 2020 but due to Covid-19 pandemic it has been postponed. It was recently rescheduled and should take place in November 2021 in Glasgow, UK. Italy will partner with the UK for this round of negotiations, and it is expected to host all the preparatory events in Milan in September and October 2021[9].

a. The Birth of the Paris Agreement

The Paris Agreement is the result of the negotiations undertaken during the 2015 United Nations Climate Change Conference (COP21), which was attended by representatives of 195 countries and was held in Le Bourget, near the French capital. The Agreement, entered into force on 4 November 2016, aims to respond more effectively to the risks posed by climate change. Article 2 of the Agreement establishes that the treaty intends to improve the implementation of the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC), therefore representing an evolution of the Kyoto Protocol[10]. The main objectives of the Agreement are: to keep the global average temperature increase below 2° C, to limit the increase to 1.5° C compared to pre-industrial levels, and to improve the resilience of countries to climate change and reduce greenhouse gas emissions.

Article 3 establishes that the contributions of each country to achieve the objectives must be set by the country itself. There will therefore be 'Nationally Determined Contributions' (NDCs), based on the will and common responsibility of the contracting parties rather than on compliance with a legal obligation of international law. Awareness and knowledge of the real extent of the problem by the signatories are essential for achieving the objectives of the Agreement[11]. This mechanism, which functions "from the bottom-up" rather than "from the top down", is the main innovation with respect to the Kyoto Protocol. Contributions must ideally be ambitious and must grow over time. Every five years, each contractor's contributions must be recalculated and updated to a higher level than the previous one. The contributions established in Paris during the negotiations represent only the first step[12]. Although the contributions are not binding on the countries, the five-year progression principle is mandatory. Furthermore, the Agreement does not introduce a sanctioning mechanism for non-compliant countries regarding times or quotas, but a 'name and shame' or 'name and encourage' system applies. In fact, there is an obligation to publicize the data and commitments

[9] UN Climate Change Conference (COP26) at the SEC.
[10] Paris Agreement under the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change.
[11] "The Paris Agreement - Putting the first universal climate change treaty in context", Baker & McKenzie, 2016.
[12] Derwent H., "Analysis of the Paris Agreement", *Paris Agreement: how it happened and what next*, May 1, 2016: 11.

made by countries. Furthermore, it is very difficult to calculate the contributions determined at the national level, having to consider both energy efficiency, resilience and the reduction of emissions: in order to resolve this difficulty, a sort of 'quota inventory', the Global Stocktake, was created to assess progress and push for increased contributions from the parties[13].

The Paris Agreement also removes the annex to the Kyoto Protocol which distinguishes contractors between developed and developing countries[14]. According to the conditions, each country, regardless of its development condition, will have to contribute to the achievement of the goals, albeit in a manner proportional to its economic capabilities and compatibly with its needs. In this regard, the Agreement places great emphasis on the need for collaboration between realities with different levels of development. Industrialized countries are encouraged to provide technology, technical assistance, know-how and economic contributions to the poorest countries[15]. Showing a particular sensitivity towards the most disadvantaged contracting parties, the Agreement specifies that the reduction of greenhouse gases must not compromise food production. Only the introduction of this condition has made it possible to avoid worsening the problem of world hunger.
Thus, for the first time in a climate agreement, human rights are directly mentioned in the Paris Agreement. Although the reference in the draft has been removed from Article 2, the preamble expressly mentions: human rights, the right to health and the rights of indigenous peoples, local communities, migrants, children and people with disability or in vulnerable situations. In addition, the concept of climate justice is introduced for the first time[16]. These innovations aim, inevitably, to emphasize the common interest and the involvement of all humanity in the topics covered by the Paris Agreement.

II. The US and China: A Race for Green Leadership?

a. The United States

The United States' actions against climate change can be divided into three phases which correspond to and represent the last three administrations governing the country. On one hand they are certainly an example when it comes to Climate Change (see Obama and Biden's case), but, they have

[13] *Ibidem*.
[14] Kyoto Protocol to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change, 1998.
[15] Derwent H., "Analysis of the Paris Agreement", *Paris Agreement: how it happened and what next*, May 1 2016: 11.
[16] Atapattu S., "Climate Change, Human Rights, and COP 21: One Step Forward and Two Steps Back or Vice Versa?", *Georgetown Journal of International Affairs* Vol. 17, No. 2, Summer/Fall 2016: 49-52.

also been a paradox because of a number of decisions that were only a temporary setback for the country (see Trump's case).

Immediately after his election, Barack Obama drafted a comprehensive climate and energy strategy, known as the 'Climate Action Plan' (CAP). Obama was well aware of the importance of the issue at stake and his aim was to achieve mainly three goals: cutting domestic carbon pollution, preparing the United States for impacts to come from climate change and the risks Americans were facing, and paving the way for the US to act as a leader in this global effort to reduce all the problems caused by climate change[17].

The CAP was first articulated on June 25th, 2013 during a speech that the president held at Georgetown University[18]. The first goal--that of cutting domestic carbon pollution--was to be reached by reducing emissions coming from the power sector, as well as by promoting clean energy, energy efficiency and rationalising energy usage. In order to prepare the United States for the impacts of climate change, he aimed at reinforcing people's resilience in case of natural disasters by providing them and their state governments with the resources they needed to manage the risks and the outcomes of crises linked to the impact of Climate Change. Finally, the goal of making the United States a leader in Climate Action refers to the bilateral and multilateral agreements the US was undertaking at that time in order to become the most influential player at international level to set the international agenda on Climate Change; in this way, the US would have a major impact on the decision regarding the emissions cuts. Overall, the CAP shows a great understanding of the means necessary to reduce Climate Change and of the efforts that each country has to make willingly to contribute to this cause[19].

Contrary to what his predecessor did, Trump overturned these principles, almost completely isolating the country. Even before being appointed, Trump expressed skepticism of global warming and the climate crisis; for example, on November 6, 2012 he published a Tweet affirming that global warming had been created by Chinese people to reduce and limit US production[20]. The US thus withdrew from the Paris Agreement, leveraging the argument of the excessive and onerous restrictions imposed on the country by the treaty (seemingly the same formula which was used in 2001 to withdraw from the Kyoto Protocol) and, while receiving praise for placing 'America first', was

[17] "President Obama's Plan to Fight Climate Change", The White House.
[18] *Ibidem.*
[19] *Ibidem.*
[20] "Congress Climate History", Center for Climate and Energy Solutions.

subsequently criticized for having left a global leadership vacuum that would be most naturally filled by China[21].

Current President Joe Biden, on the other hand, has expressed commitment to contributing to Climate Change mitigation, which is why he decided to re-enter the Paris Agreement in 2021. February 19, 2021 is the official date in which the Agreement entered into force for the US[22]. On April 22, 2021, during the Leaders Summit on Climate held by President Biden, he announced the United States' new INDC, which consist in reaching "net zero emissions economy-wide by no later than 2050"[23]. The actions to tackle the climate crisis fall within Biden's larger plan to improve Americans Lives by creating new jobs and increasing the country's economic competitiveness as well as protecting the environment[24].

b. China

Being one of the world's largest polluters, China's efforts to implement efficient climate measures would undoubtedly represent a necessary step in the global fight against climate change. However, Chinese environmental statistics show that despite its past climate commitments, a green revolution is still far from being achieved. Indeed, according to the data gathered by the *International Energy Agency*, in 2019, China not only was the biggest emitter of CO_2 emissions, making up for almost 30% of world's total emissions, but it was also the world's biggest producer of coal[25].

Furthermore, Chinese climate statistics are still not consistent with the Paris Agreement's target to maintain global warming below 1,5°C. Indeed, according to Climate Action Tracker's report, China's Nationally Determined Contributions (NDCs) rating is "highly insufficient"[26]. As a matter of fact, the data provided by the Climate Transparency Report 2020 shows that China's total Greenhouse Gas (GHG) emissions have more than tripled from 1990 to 2017 and they are still above the G20 average[27]. Moreover, the Report highlights that fossil fuels account for 88% of Chinese energy mix, and that China is still producing 65% of electricity from coal. The report of Climate Action Tracker

[21] Zhang, H. et al, "US withdrawal from the Paris Agreement: Reasons, impacts, and China's response", *Advances in Climate Change Research*, Vol. 8, 2017: 221.
[22] UN News, Secretary-General welcomes US return to Paris Agreement on Climate Change, 20 January 2021.
[23] "President Biden Sets 2030 Greenhouse Gas Pollution Reduction Target Aimed at Creating Good-Paying Union Jobs and Securing U.S. Leadership on Clean Energy Technologies", The White House, April 22, 2021.
[24] *Ibidem.*
[25] "IEA Atlas of Energy", International Energy Agency.
[26] Climate Action Tracker, "China: country summary", September 2020.
[27] Climate Transparency, "China, Country Profile 2020".

also underlines that Chinese coal activities remain inconsistent with the Paris Agreement as Beijing 'is going against the global shift away from coal and now possesses roughly half of the world's coal power capacity as well as coal-fired power plants in development'[28].

For all the afore-mentioned reasons, there is a strong necessity for new efficient climate commitments from Beijing that would sustain the fight against climate change. Richard Black, the director of the Energy and Climate Intelligence Unit (ECIU), stressed this point arguing that, China being the world's biggest energy financier and market, its "decisions play a major role in shaping how the rest of the world progresses with its transition away from the fossil fuels that cause climate change"[29].

More recently, China managed to demonstrate its will to implement new environmental policies in multiple sectors. In particular, on the 22nd of September, Chinese President Xi Jinping made a speech before the UN General Assembly in which he announced Chinese intentions to scale up its NDCs by adopting stronger policies with the aim of peaking greenhouse gas emissions by 2030 and reaching carbon neutrality by 2060[30]. These new green goals are important both from a domestic perspective, as the energy transition is likely to boost China's economic growth, but also from an international perspective as, if carried out efficiently, they may position China as the leader in climate diplomacy. In order to meet these aims, important environmental targets were also laid down in China's 14th Five Year Plan for 2021-2025, which is a policy blueprint released by the Chinese government every five years to guide the country's social and economic aims and initiatives. In particular, in the section called 'New progress of ecological civilization', the new Five Year Plan requires China to reduce the country's energy consumption per unit of GDP by 13.5% and to reduce its CO_2 emissions per unit of GDP by 18%. Moreover, the Five Year Plan calls for an extension of forest coverage and an increase in the use of non-fossil energy. Indeed, energy is really at the center of the new Plan, which sets out a list of "construction projects for the modern energy system', for instance including the establishment of eight clean energy bases and of electricity transmission routes[31].

Nevertheless, given the difficulty of the challenge, many scholars are skeptical about the success of the new Chinese commitment to peak emissions by 2030 and to reach carbon neutrality by 2060. In

[28] Climate Action Tracker, "China: country summary", September 2020.
[29] McGrath, M., "Climate change: China aims for 'carbon neutrality by 2060'", *BBC News,* September 22, 2020.
[30] Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, "Statement by President Xi Jinping at the General Debate of the 75th Session of The United Nations General Assembly", September 2020.
[31] Cooper, B., "China-s 14th Five-Year Plan", Hill & Knowlton Strategies, April 1, 2021.

fact, having an energy system which strongly relies on coal, China must bring about significant changes in its energy supply and consumption system. Moreover, according to many scholars, the 14th Five Year Plan is still too vague, and it fails to provide a real acceleration of climate action[32]. For the moment, the international community is still waiting for more specific measures and policies to be announced by the Chinese government to understand what will be the impact of the new commitments; despite lack of clarity on domestic measures, however, China has shown immense interest and engagement in investing in sustainable development in fellow emerging economies, as will be outlined in the following section[33].

III. A 'Wicked Problem': Emerging Economies' Role in Achieving Sustainable Development Goals

The BRICS countries (Brazil, Russia, China, India, and South Africa) have great potential in the international arena, partly for their increasing economic importance and partly for their active involvement in the cooperation with Less Developed Countries (LDCs). In fact, through 'South-South cooperation', they have been able to involve an increasing number of countries in the path towards sustainable development[34]. China and India have played a particularly dominant role in establishing bilateral development accords with emerging economies in Africa; in 2000, the former established the Forum on China-Africa Cooperation, a sort of 'win-win' cooperation in which African countries receive access to investments and funding from China, while China receives the resources in which Africa is rich[35]. On the other hand, throughout the 21st century, India preferred a soft-power approach with African countries, founded upon shared experiences of anti-colonial resistance. With the rise of the new millenium, India has continued to prefer to engage in soft-power ties with Africa, focusing on strengthening ties with its diaspora in Africa and professional training for African students[36].

[32] Grunberg, N., and Brussee, V., "China's 14th Five-Year-Plan--strengthening the domestic base to become a superpower", Mercator Institute for Chinese Studies, April 9, 2021.
[33] Fergen, M., "How China is Reshaping International Development", *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace,* January 8, 2020.
[34] Basile E., Cecchi C., Will the BRICS succeed in leading the way to sustainable development?, in Rivista di Studi Politici Internazionali, Vol. 85, No.2, 2018: 338.
[35] *Ibidem*.
[36] Morreale, B., "Asian Powers in Africa: Win, Win, Win, Win?" In *Prosperity*, edited by Golley J. and Jaivin L., Acton ACT, Australia: ANU Press, 2018: 107.

At a multilateral level, the BRICS countries carry out South-South cooperation efforts through two main channels: the New Development Bank (NDB) and the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB)[37]. The objective of the former institution, according to its Articles of Agreement, is to

...mobilize resources for infrastructure and sustainable development projects in BRICS and other emerging economies and developing countries, complementing the existing efforts of multilateral and regional financial institutions for global growth and development[38].

So far, the NDB has focused its efforts on funding sustainable development projects within the BRICS countries[39]; the self-professed main function of the AIIB, on the other hand, is to fund sustainable and green infrastructure projects throughout the Asian continent[40].

In order to pursue collective aims in terms of sustainable development, cooperation among countries with different income levels is necessary. In this regard, the Paris Agreement explicitly acknowledges the joint involvement of developed and developing countries, based on the principle of "common but differentiated responsibilities and capabilities"[41]. Thanks to the BRICS, South-South cooperation is now a valid candidate to pursue and enhance collective action for sustainable development, complementing and limiting the traditional North-South cooperation.

Nevertheless, the heterogeneity of emerging economies, while being the motor of South-South cooperation, is also the Global South's greatest obstacle to cooperating to achieve sustainable development goals; despite multilateral efforts to act as an alliance on the world stage, the BRICS countries demonstrate extreme discrepancies in terms of human development, population, GDP growth, and socioeconomic inequality, which are undeniably problematic for cooperation efforts[42]. Furthermore, the BRICS--rather than being a homogeneously-led group--demonstrates a clear power imbalance in favor of China[43]. The following sections present an overview of the individual BRICS countries' interests in regards to sustainable development in light of COP26.

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[37] Basile E., Cecchi C., Will the BRICS succeed in leading the way to sustainable development?, in Rivista di Studi Politici Internazionali, Vol. 85, No.2, 2018: 229.

[38] Articles of Agreement, New Development Bank, July 15, 2015.

[39] Basile E., Cecchi C., Will the BRICS succeed in leading the way to sustainable development?, in Rivista di Studi Politici Internazionali, Vol. 85, No.2, 2018: 229.

[40] About AIIB, Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank.

[41] UNOSSC, Climate Partnerships for a Sustainable Future: An initial overview of South-South cooperation on climate change in the context of sustainable development and efforts to eradicate poverty, New York, United Nations Office for South-South Cooperation, 2017.

[42] Basile E., Cecchi C., Will the BRICS succeed in leading the way to sustainable development?, in Rivista di Studi Politici Internazionali, Vol. 85, No.2, 2018: 230.

[43] *Ibidem*.

a. Brazil

At the ratification of the Paris Agreements, Brazil assumed a pioneering position among developing countries in regards to climate commitments, ambitiously agreeing to cut 37% and 43% of their 2005 emissions by 2025 and 2030, respectively[44]. Furthermore, in 2015 the EU and Brazil entered into a Joint Proposal to govern the use of the carbon market through an Emissions Trading System (ETS)[45]. The ability of Brazil to stay true to its commitments, however, seems dubious; first, the very success of an ETS depends upon structuring the System in a way which offsets the potential economic 'losses' with a directly positive economic impact, rather than relying upon long-term positive externalities as an incentive[46]; such an approach is particularly urgent under the current administration of Jair Bolsonaro, who has traditionally allowed and promoted the deforestation of the Amazon rainforest (the preservation of which is essential to the achievement of the goals set forth in the Paris Agreement)[47]. In December 2020, Brazil submitted its NDC[48] to the Paris Agreement, which the Brazilian *Ministério das Relações Exteriores* claims to be one of the most ambitious NDCs of those of all developing countries, and in which the Brazilian government claims to aim for carbon neutrality by 2060[49]. The Brazilian NDC, however, has been criticized by governing institutions and activist organizations alike, who claim that 2060 is much too far into the future, given the urgency of carbon neutrality[50].

b. Russia

Sustainable development was first introduced in Russia in the 1990s, when the Russian Federation Government Order (August 19, 1992 No. 1522-r) commissioned the creation of the Interagency

[44] Oliveira, T., Gurgelb, A., Tonry, S., "International market mechanisms under the Paris Agreement: A cooperation between Brazil and Europe", *Energy Policy* Vol. 129, 2019: 398.
[45] An Emissions Trading System (ETS) is a mechanism through which a cap is set on emissions, and emitters must hold a permit for each ton of CO2 emitted; there is a limited number of permits available, thus, if an emitter does not hold a permit, they are forced to either cut back on emissions or purchase a permit from another emitter. See: Pannel, D., "Explainer: The difference between a carbon tax and an ETS", *The Conversation*, June 30, 2011.
[46] Oliveira, T., Gurgelb, A., Tonry, S., "International market mechanisms under the Paris Agreement: A cooperation between Brazil and Europe": 399.
[47] Maccarone, G., "Europe and the Role of International Cooperation in Combating Climate Change", Istituto Affari Internazionali, September 2020.
[48] "Nationally Determined Contributions (NDCs)", IRENA.
[49] "Brazil submits its Nationally Determined Contribution under the Paris Agreement", Ministério das Relações Exteriores, December 9, 2020.
[50] Spring, J., and Abnett, K., "EU Commissioner Blasts Brazil's Climate Pledge for Not Going Far Enough", *The Wire*, April 15, 2021.

Commission to develop proposals for implementing the resolutions of the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development. Moreover, in 1996 Decree No.440 issued by the President of the Russian Federation approved the Concept of transition of the Russian Federation towards sustainable development[51]. Environmental matters are regulated at both the federal and regional level. Codes and federal laws cover issues such as: environmental protection and assessment, use of natural resources (land, subsoil, forests, water), sanitation and epidemiology, waste management, wildlife protection, activities on the continental shelf and in the territorial sea, and nuclear power[52]. Furthermore, technical regulations on specific aspects are adopted as well. These include matters such as: sanitary hygiene standards and requirement, hygienic norms, construction norms and rules, and State standards. The current environmental framework is regulated by Federal Law No. 7-FZ on Environmental Protection, dated 10 January 2002[53]. According to the Partnerships for SDGs online platform, Russia is listed as a partner or lead entity in many partnerships or voluntary commitments for sustainable development. For example, the "All-Russian Competition" is a competition that has been held since 2009, the aim of which is to stimulate local governments activities and best practices in the development of the livability of the housing and communal services. Furthermore, it includes indicators that allow for the evaluation of sustainable development of settlements[54]. Furthermore, the State Programme for energy conservation and energy efficiency, adopted in 2010, is considered crucial to national economic growth and is aimed toward decreasing energy intensity of GDP of the Russian Federation by 13.5 percent, which was supposed to reduce energy intensity of GDP by 40% in 2007-2020. Unfortunately, no further updates have been given, and the initiative does not fulfill the SMART criteria adopted for the evaluation of initiatives. Thus, several initiatives have been presented in the past years, but unfortunately the result of Russia's commitment shows a slow progress towards the implementation of the principles of sustainable development.

c. India

India, on the other hand, has played a central role in shaping the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), and as a crucial player, India seems committed to achieving the goals that have been set. In

[51] "Report on implementing the principles of sustainable development in the Russian Federation, Russian outlook on the new paradigm for sustainable development: Preparing for "Rio+20"", The United Nations, 2012.
[52] Bartholomy, M., Omelchenko, E., Tolkachev, D., and Chivragova, M., "Environmental law and practice in the Russian Federation", Thomas Reuters Practical Law, June 1, 2020.
[53] Integrated environmental permits are granted for seven years but they can be extended by a further seven years if certain conditions are met.
[54] "All-Russian Competition", The United Nations.

recent years, the country has been focusing on the fight against poverty, in particular through social inclusion and empowerment of the poor. Although the main focus is combating poverty, India remains committed to protecting the environment, as a matter of fact, India has committed to minimizing the emissions intensity of GDP[55].

Several forums have been organized by the country's Parliament to develop policy on the elimination of poverty, promoting gender equality and addressing climate change. The NITI Aayog has been organized to provide coordination that can assure the achievement of the goals in a timely manner, and its chairperson is the Indian Prime Minister. The institution has mapped in detail all 17 Goals and 169 to Nodal Central Ministries[56].

Thus, the fact that India is strongly committed to the Sustainable Development Goals is undeniable. In fact, Article 38 of the Directive Principles of State Policy states that "the state shall endeavor to protect and improve the environment and to safeguard the forests and wildlife in the country"[57]. It is worth noting that many environmental NGOs are active in India, and media coverage is often very effective in raising awareness on environmental issues; as a matter of fact, the High Court and the Supreme Court are known to take up environmental cases based on media coverage of such topics[58]. Citizens are quite involved as well, since some laws explicitly refer to their rights. For instance, Article 51-A of the Directive Principles of State Policy states that "it shall be the duty of every citizen of India to protect and improve the natural environment including forests, lakes, rivers and wildlife and to have compassion for living creatures"[59].

d. South Africa

South Africa presents a particularly complex conundrum in reconciling development with sustainability; with a Gini Index of .63 (as of 2015), it is the country with the highest level of income inequality in the world[60]. Throughout the pandemic, the economy contracted by 7%, and the World Bank states,

[55] Singh, M. P., Singh, J. K., Mohanka R., *Forest Environment and Biodiversity*. Daya Publishing House, 2007: 116–118.
[56] *Ibidem.*
[57] *Ibidem.*
[58] *Ibidem.*
[59] Singh, M. P., Singh, J. K., Mohanka R., *Forest Environment and Biodiversity*. Daya Publishing House, 2007: 116–118.
[60] "South Africa Overview", The World Bank.

South Africa entered the pandemic after several years of low growth. In 2019, the economy grew by 0.2% (in 2018 it was 0.8%)… The persistence of the pandemic at the global and domestic levels will continue to constrain the economic recovery during the first half of
2021. In addition, as economic activity restarts, pre-existing structural constraints, such as electricity shortages, are becoming binding again[61].

Furthermore, more than 70% of South Africa's electricity is produced from coal (also the country's main source of pollution). In order to meet its ambitious goal of reducing emissions by 34% (by 2025) and 42% (by 2030), a carbon tax was implemented in 2019; the tax, however has been criticized, both for the fact that consumers, with extremely few clean-energy alternatives, would bear the brunt of the costs, and for the fact that the tax policy applies exclusively to domestic products, meaning international products would outcompete with the domestic products while completely undermining the goals of such a policy[62]. Overall, consulting firm PwC has concluded that carbon intensity, in spite of the carbon tax, has increased by 1.4% in 2018 and 2019, while GDP growth remained stagnant (0.2% compared to a global average of 2.34%)[63], and that approximately $700 billion in investment would be necessary in order for South Africa to achieve the outlined "2°C scenario" by 2100[64].

IV. The European Union: A Breeding Ground for Sustainability Efforts?

Announced by the European Commission (EC) on December 2019 to the cry of "turning environmental challenges into opportunities", the "European Green Deal" (EGD) is a roadmap of key policies for the climate agenda designed to turn Europe into the first "carbon neutral" – or "climate neutral" – continent by 2050. The aim of the EGD is exceptionally ambitious: transforming the 27-country bloc from a high-carbon economy into "a fair and prosperous society", investing in many sectors (including construction, biodiversity, energy, transport and food) and implying a total paradigm shift in the conception of sustainability[65].

[61] *Ibidem*.
[62] Kalaba, M., South Africa's carbon tax: Balancing climate action and economic development. *South African Institute of International Affairs*, 2020: 2.
[63] GDP Growth (annual %), The World Bank.
[64] Arnoldi, M., "At this rate, South Africa will not meet Paris Agreement decarbonization goal, says PwC", *Engineering News,* February 5, 2021.
[65] "Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the European Council, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions: The European Green Deal", The European Commission, December 2019: 2.

Reconstructing the genesis of the praiseworthy initiative, the EU has long pursued a leading role in policies to tackle climate change. The Bloc adopted a climate change strategy as early as 1992 and endorsed the goal of limiting global warming to 2 degrees Celsius above pre-industrial levels in 1996. After strengthening its credentials as an international leader in addressing climate change when it secured enough followers for the Kyoto Protocol to enter into force (despite the withdrawal of the United States), the EU launched in 2005 the Emissions Trading Scheme, the world's most important greenhouse gas emissions trading scheme and flagship of the EU's climate policy.

Furthermore, it is important to remember that the EU has had the merit of continuing to pursue its domestic climate targets after the international community essentially failed to secure a global agreement on limiting greenhouse gas emissions at the 2009 UN Climate Change Conference in Copenhagen; the Paris Climate Agreement of December 2015 was a success for EU diplomacy, a rather unique feat with the worldwide rise to power of leaders who are often considered hostile to climate action. Thus, it is clear that the EU is definitely no stranger to environmental concerns: "not only a model for the rest of the world but also a frontrunner"[66].

a. The main pillars of the European Green Deal

Going into the detail of the EGD, it is based on what can be considered, as much of the literature does, four foundational pillars: carbon pricing, sustainable investments, industrial policy and a just transition[67].

The first pillar, that of carbon pricing focuses on the idea that all the reform action to be carried out by the Commission must ensure effective carbon pricing throughout the economy. The EU intends to extend the European Emission Trading System (ETS) to new sectors, and make sure that taxation is aligned with climate goals. The aim is commendable, but the potential disadvantage could lie in the fact that "a single price for all the sectors may be economically efficient but triggers considerable distributional effects, affecting in particular poorer EU countries, which generally have higher emissions. One of the major risks is linked to the industrial delocalization into countries with less

[66] Aguilera Vaqués, M. "Mainstreaming Sustainable Development Goals into EU Policies", in Eritja, M.C. (Ed.) "The European Union and Global Environmental Protection: Transforming Influence into Action" (1st ed.),, Routledge, November 2020, 158.

[67] We point out in particular two important contributions: Claeys, G *et al*., "How to make the European Green Deal work", Policy Contribution Bruegel Institute, Issue n. 13, November 2019.: Belladonna, A.; Gili, A., "How the European Green Deal Will Drive the Next Generation EU", ISPI, June 2020.

strict carbon rules"[68]. In this sense, the Commission intends to propose a "carbon border tax" for specific sectors, in order to minimize the risk of "carbon leakage". Belladonna and Gili express themselves positively in this regard: "It would be effective because all products consumed in the EU, regardless of their place of production, would be required to comply with carbon reduction targets. Carbon-intensive imported products will be subject to a tax to enter the European market. Secondly, a carbon tax will also push other countries to decarbonize"[69].

The second pillar focuses on sustainable investments, as the Commission has adopted an EU industrial strategy to boost the green and digital revolutions. Energy-intensive industries, digitalization strategies and transport policies will be at the forefront of the transformation[70].

The third pillar is represented by a new EU industrial strategy, adopted in March 2020. Interestingly, it is centered on the idea of investing in Research and Development, in a more coordinated way among member countries, taking advantage of economies of scale. Other important themes that emerge lie in: joint environmental standards, a common energy taxation and shared support measures for clean technologies, which can help to create cleantech companies of European dimensions[71].

The fourth and final pillar is embodied in the so-called "Just Transition Mechanism" (JTM), a compensation scheme to counter the adverse distributional effects of the transition. The JTM disposes of a 'Just Transition Fund' (JTF), conceived of in order to support, in particular, the territories with high employment in coal, lignite, oil shale and peat production, as well as territories with greenhouse gas-intensive industries, which could be severely impacted by the transition[72].

b. Challenges for a European Transition

It goes without saying that, to access the funds, the member countries must commit to reach the target of becoming climate neutral by 2050, a task that becomes pivotal for coal-rich countries like

[68] Belladonna, A.; Gili, A., "How the European Green Deal Will Drive the Next Generation EU", ISPI, June 2020.
[69] *Ibidem.*
[70] *Ibidem.*
[71] "Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the European Council, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions: The European Green Deal", The European Commission, December 2019: 2.
[72] Fleming, R.; Mauger, R., "Green and Just? An Update on the European Green Deal", Journal for European Environmental And Planning Law, Vol. 18, Issue 1-2, February 2021.

Poland. The case of Poland deserves more careful consideration: traditionally reluctant to invest in climate change related issues, Poland has long been the most unwilling country to commit to implementing an EU climate neutrality target for 2050; "more vocal than any other member State in its opposition"[73], as defined by the European Council on Foreign Relations (ECFR). In recent months, the government has finally opened the door to the possibility to comply with the European guidelines; negotiations are ongoing[74].

There are also other countries that opposed the EGD or have been slow to tackle the climate; for example, we can mention Bulgaria, the Czech Republic, Romania and Slovakia. Even assuming, however, a full involvement by the member States, we have to recall that the EGD's implementation should not be evaluated in the short term; as "The Green Deal is designed to have a substantial impact on both medium-term goals, for 2030, and long-term targets for 2050"[75].

Turning now to the financial issues – and to the first main challenge for the EGD – the Green Deal's implementation also requires very high investments: it suffices to consider that the EU is set to mobilize around € 1 trillion of investments in the next 10 years[76] but it may not be enough without a solid contribution by the European Investment Bank (EIB), which, in November 2019, launched a new climate strategy and Energy Lending Policy, "becoming de facto the EU Climate Bank"[77].

The EIB will gradually increase the share of its financing dedicated to climate action to reach 50% of current emissions by 2025. Moreover, it is also worth mentioning that the Commission has estimated that achieving the current 2030 climate and energy targets will require € 260 billion in additional annual investment, an ambitious target in a context in which the EU budget will play a key role together with the private sector[78]. The target becomes even more ambitious if we recall that – in a world that pays little attention to sustainability – sustainable finance (that branch of finance that

[73] Dennison, S. *et al*, "Europe's green moment: How to meet the climate challenge", Policy Brief (1), ECFR Publications, April 2021.
[74] *Ibidem.*
[75] Siddi, M., "The European Green Deal: Assessing its current state and future implementation", FIIA, Working Paper 114, May 2020, 7.
[76] This is what is established by the "Sustainable Europe Investment Plan" (SEIP), the EGD's investment plan (also referred to as: EGDIP, "European Green Deal Investment Plan").
[77] Belladonna, A. and Gili, A., "How the European Green Deal Will Drive the Next Generation EU", ISPI, June 2020.
[78] Sikora, A., "European Green Deal - legal and financial challenges of the climate change", ERA Forum 2021, 21, 681-697, February 2021.

takes due account of environmental, social and governance considerations when making investment decisions) is considered as a key aspect of the EGD[79].

These considerations about sustainable finance also give us the opportunity to introduce another key challenge – interconnected to the above-mentioned one – for the EU's environmental policies, and in particular for the EGD's implementation. More specifically, it is important to stress the importance of striking the correct balance between sustainable finance and social stability in a scenery led by interests and capitalism.

V. The Significance of COP26

The 26th United Nations Conference of the Parties, or COP26 is set to take place in the city of Glasgow from the 1st to the 12th of November 2021. Although it was originally scheduled in October 2020, it was postponed in the light of the current COVID-19 pandemic crisis. The COP26 is particularly relevant due to several reasons.

First, it is essential to specify that, according to the Paris Agreement of 2015, "Each Party shall communicate a nationally determined contribution (NDC) every five years in accordance with the decision 1/CP.21"[80]. It implies that the Parties are demanded to submit, for the first time, updated pledges of their efforts to achieve the purpose of the Agreement in 2020, or ahead of the upcoming summit of 2021. These pledges will represent crucial evidence of the effectiveness--or ineffectiveness--of the Paris Agreement of 2015: thus, the COP26 shall be the first iteration of this sort of assessment method. Secondly, in the light of COVID-19 pandemic, several States have refocused on their priorities, stressing the importance of environmental issues. This awareness has put the emphasis on the necessity to rebuild their economy respecting the environment and supporting the efforts against climate change, through a green recovery. Furthermore, the COP26 is the first Convention after the United States' withdrawal from and subsequent rejoining of the Paris Agreement: their contribution to the summit will be carefully observed by the International Community.

a. Current status of the NDCs

[79] Trippel, E. "How green is green enough? The changing landscape of financing a sustainable European economy", ERA Forum 2021, October 2020: 155-170.
[80] United Nations, "Paris Agreement", *United Nations Climate Change*, 12 December 2015.

In February 2021, a synthesis report concerning the NDCs was expected to be produced by the UNFCCC. However, as a consequence of the postponement of the Conference and the impact of COVID-19, the secretariat decided to issue the report in two editions, an initial version, published the 28th of February 2021, and a final version, ahead of the COP26. The aim is to grant the Parties a further opportunity to communicate an update, or a new NDC, during the course of 2021, in order to achieve a more complete synthesis in view of the Conference[81].

According to the initial version of the synthesis report, 75 Parties have so far provided 48 new or updated NDCs, through the sharing of useful and transparent information on mitigation targets: in particular, 65 percent of NDCs included economy-wide absolute emission reduction targets from a specified base year; 27 per cent included emission reductions below typical levels; and few Parties included strategies and actions aimed at reaching low-emission development to be implemented within a specific time frame. On the basis of the current information of the initial report, the Parties total GHG emissions were estimated at 0.7-1.2 Gt CO_2 eq. estimating a reduction of the emission between 87 and 93 per cent compared to the 2017 level[82].

b. The Implications of the COP26 Postponement

Although many Parties mentioned the pandemic crisis in their NDCs, they have not reflected its eventual potential impact on their pledges[83]. However, according to the Climate Transparency Report of 2020, the impact of COVID-19 crisis is still uncertain. On one hand, the measures implemented to contrast the spread of the virus brought about a drastic reduction of emissions, as in the case of China in the first half of 2020, and in the US and EU, in the second half. The data shows an important reduction of global emission, of 7.5%, compared to 2019 levels, even though the concentrations of CO_2 in the atmosphere continued to rise. On the other side, the evidence suggests that the recovery responses to the consequent crisis have been largely directed towards emissions-intensive and environmentally damaging sectors, which will eventually contribute to emissions rebounding at a faster rate[84].

[81] "NDC Synthesis Report", United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change, February 26, 2021.
[82] "Nationally Determined Contributions (NDCs)", IRENA.
[83] "NDC Synthesis Report", United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change, February 26, 2021.
[84] "Climate Transparency Report 2020: Comparing G20 Climate Action and Responses to the COVID-19 Crisis", Climate Transparency, 2020: 8.

The COVID-19 crisis has been generating several impacts on climate action. On one side, it is necessary to mention the positive effect of the delay of the COP 26. For instance, as it was mentioned before, the further elaboration of the Parties' NDCs provides the opportunity to consider their future climate action in the context of the economic recovery in the aftermath of the pandemic crisis. On the other hand, it is necessary to mention several side effects. The postponement of COP26 could lead to a loss of value of the certified emission reductions, issued under the *Clean Development Mechanism*, or CDM, established by the Kyoto Protocol, since the transition from the CDM to the market mechanisms of article 6 of the Paris Agreement has not been finalized yet. Thus, due to the lack of agreement over article 6, the carbon credits cannot be transferred, although the second commitment period ended in 2020. Since the issue is supposed to be discussed during COP 26, the negotiation process has been postponed to November 2021, postponing the flow of resources expected by several emerging economies in order to support their climate actions[85]. The postponement of COP26, together with the pandemic crisis, could ultimately result in low ambitions when it concerns the NDCs.

c. Tasks and Goals of the Conference

The tasks of COP26 are aimed toward finalizing the *Paris Rulebook* in order to implement the Paris Agreement and to conclude the outstanding topics of the Madrid COP25. The Parties are willing to deliver on the essential negotiations' issues for 2020 and 2021. The aims of the negotiations are "to reduce the emissions; strengthen the adaptation and resilience to climate impacts; scale up finance and support"[86]. In order to achieve these objectives, the Parties are invited to pursue the protection and restoration of nature, to actively interact with climate science experts and to empower inclusive action

The Parties will discuss the most commonly raised priorities, including:

Enabling ambition through carbon markets; Rules for the transparent reporting of action and support; Common timeframes for emission reduction commitments; Enabling enhanced adaptation action; Averting, minimising and addressing loss and damage; Means of implementation, including the initiation of deliberations on a new goal for global climate finance after 2025; Responding to the latest science and the ambition of current emission reduction targets; Promoting fair, inclusive climate action[87].

[85] Lindblom A., "The Combination of COVID-19 and the delay of COP26 has an impact on climate ambition", *Stockholm Environment Institute*, 29 May 2020.
[86] "Negotiations", UN Climate Change Conference UK 2021.
[87] *Ibidem*.

Notwithstanding the challenges posed by the COVID-19 crisis, the United Kingdom, host of the COP26, is committed to ensure transparency, inclusiveness and solidarity in the frame of the Conference, also through the collaboration with both Chile, the current President of the COP, and Italy, partner and host of the pre-COP.

The goals pursued by the Parties at COP26 are several and driven by the common purpose of challenging the climate crisis. First of all, the UN claims the necessity of radical emissions reductions by 2030, to reach net zero by the middle of the century. To carry out this first goal, the Parties will need to accelerate the transition away from coal, to cut down the deforestation, to accelerate the transition towards electric vehicles, and to incentivize investments in renewables. Secondly, the UN stresses the importance of protecting fragile ecosystems via global actions aimed at encouraging countries widely affected by climate change. Furthermore, in 2020 the developed countries were due to deliver the target of at least $100bn in climate finance, as a capacity-building support to developing countries and to private and public sectors to secure global net zero. Thus, the UNFCCC is expected to produce a review whether this goal has been achieved ahead of the Conference. The final goal is to tackle the climate crisis through the collaboration between governments, businesses and civil society[88].

d. The United Kingdom – Italy Partnership

Working in close collaboration with the UNFCCC secretary, the United Kingdom will take the Presidency of COP 26, in partnership with Italy, hosting instead preparatory events, as a Youth Event and Pre-COP Summit. The partners, leading this year the G7 and the G20, respectively, and sharing a credible low-carbon vision, have committed to putting climate change and the reversal of biodiversity loss as priorities of the multilateral agenda of 2021. Rt Hon Alok Sharma MP, Secretary of State of Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy, has been appointed as President of the Conference: his role is to preside over the negotiation process. The presidency of the Conference will be supported by twenty-five experts, the so-called 'Friends of the COP'. The Conference is composed of three modules: the negotiations, the exhibitions, and the events around the city.

[88] "Goal", *UN Climate Change Conference UK 2021*.

1. The British role

The UK will be heading the COP for the first time as a Nation State and not as part of the EU delegation. Due to its crucial role and influence, the international expectation is for the UK to show leadership on climate change action, being a crucial driver of the conference. The British Government appointed the city of Glasgow as host due to its commitment to sustainability and world-class facilities.

In 2020, the UK, together with Mexico and Germany, are among the G20 members with the largest CO_2 reduction. According to the UK's pledge, the ambition is to reduce gas emissions by at least 68% by 2030, compared to the 1990 levels. Compared to the other members of the G20, the UK has one of the most ambitious policies for reducing emissions of their power sectors. In the last five years, its emissions have been drastically reduced, by 51%. The delivery of the UK's NDC is meant to draw on a set of policies and measures already in place, together with new policies and measures to be developed in the future. For instance, the contribution mentions the *Ten Point Plan* for a green industrial revolution, set out by the Prime Minister; the *Clean Growth Strategy*, which describes the UK Government's current policy and measures to decarbonize all sectors of the UK economy through the 2020s and beyond. It expresses its commitment to develop a comprehensive *Net Zero Strategy* ahead of COP26[89]. Furthermore, in light of the current economic crisis, the Green Party MP and the co-chair of the Environmental Justice Commission called for the establishment of a Net-Zero and Just Transition delivery body, expected to supervise the effectiveness of the transitioning to a net-zero society and mitigating adverse economic effects on the sectors most affected (i.e. coal, automobiles, et cetera). The formal body has only been enforced at the subnational level since Scotland has established an independent Just Transition Commission[90]. Although the airlines and car manufactures have received unconditional support, the Government concentrated its green bailout on the public transport, while energy efficiency is also being advanced. Moreover, several investments have been made in cycling and walking paths. Furthermore, the coal consumption of the UK has experienced an important reduction in 2019 (by 29%); in fact, it expects to phase out coal by 2024. In the first half of 2020, renewable energies provided 47 per cent of power generation, while achieving the longest period of coal-free power generation[91].

In this context, the British NDC would represent an important encouragement for other major economies to present increased commitments. For instance, in coordination with the European

[89] "United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland's Nationally Determined Contribution", UK Government, 12 December 2020.
[90] "United Kingdom", Climate Transparency, 2020: 2.
[91] "Climate Transparency Report 2020: Comparing G20 Climate Action and Responses to the COVID-19 Crisis", Climate Transparency, 2020: 38.

Union, the UK could motivate China to increase its emission reduction pledges. However, it is clear that climate change is not the exclusive urgent item on the UK agenda, but its engagement towards a green recovery could result in a crucial asset for the success of the COP26.

2. The Italian Role

As co-hosting partner of the UK, Italy is expected to push forward a process of recovery that would guarantee a transformative and inclusive economic shift towards climate neutrality. The Pre-COP will be held in Milan, as a preparatory meeting preceding the official Convention. The meeting aims at providing the possibility for debate around key political aspects of the negotiations to a select group of countries, in order to provide a clear political path to follow in the successive negotiation processes. Italy will also be hosting the Youth Summit; the Youth4Climate is part of the process of involvement of young people and a great opportunity for them to express their ideas and thoughts on climate change, elaborating proposals on related topics. This involvement started in 2019 with the United Nations Youth Climate Summit, held in New York. The topics will be divided in four major categories: youth driving ambition, sustainable recovery, non-state actors' engagement, and climate conscious society[92]. The delegates are asked to elaborate proposals for each group of topics.

The necessity for a clear direction towards a global green recovery should be a priority. Although the Italian government is willing to focus its recovery program on healthcare and emergency support for businesses, it is true that it is also promoting green recovery measures domestically and internationally. As a matter of fact, Italy is encouraging building renovations, through the provision of investments in renewable solutions. At the supranational level, it is strongly supporting the European Green Deal and its climate neutrality goal, while embedding the G20 motto "people, planet, prosperity". As per EU binding decisions, Italy is investing a large part of the NextGenerationEU fund on energy transition, appointing its former Minister of Ecological Transition[93]. Italy will in fact benefit from the largest share of the European Recovery fund focused on six priorities, according to the draft's expenditure proposal, and among them there is the will to decarbonize the economy. For instance, Italy is increasingly producing power from renewables, and according to Climate Transparency performed well in among the G20 countries in 2019[94]. Furthermore, Italy is considered

[92] Ministero della Transizione Ecologica, "Youth4Climate: Driving Ambition – Dai giovani proposte e raccomandazioni per i governi", Ministero dell'Ambiente, 24 May 2021.

[93] Bianchi M., "The Italy-UK Tandem: Resetting Climate Action in the Run Up to COP26", *Istituto Affari Internazionali*, IAI Commentaires 21, 11 March 2021: 3.

[94] "Italy", Climate Transparency, 2020: 6.

one of the most progressive G20 countries in regards to industrial energy efficiency policies.[95] In particular, Italy's climate ambitions rely mainly on its solar energy potential, the expansion of its existing railway, and the improvement of the construction sector's emissions, currently responsible for a fifth of the country's GHG emissions[96].

VI. Conclusion

The previous paragraphs delineate an overview of the sustainability efforts, focusing on the major accomplishments in the international debate around the best practices to protect the environment. A primary prominence has been given to the Paris Agreement of 2015 and its evolution in comparison with its predecessors. For instance, the introduction of the Nationally Determined Contributions, based on the will and common responsibility of the contracting parties, is an innovative aspect with respect to the Kyoto Protocol, together with the suppression of the annex system, placing great emphasis on the need for collaboration between States with different levels of development.

Subsequently, the analysis takes into account the role of the major polluters, the United States and the BRICS countries, in the achievement of Sustainable Development Goals. In fact, their actions are crucial due to their impact on the global sustainability efforts and their influence at the international level. Through South-South cooperation, the BRICS have been able to involve an increasing number of countries in the path towards sustainable development, enhancing the principle of the Paris Agreement of common but differentiated responsibilities and capabilities. The research has also underlined how the heterogeneity of emerging economies, represents a great obstacle to cooperation on climate issues, concerning human development, population, GDP growth and socioeconomic inequality. In this context, the climate agenda, majorly designed by the European Union's Member States, is tremendously ambitious. The European Green Deal aims at transforming the European high-carbon economy, into a "climate neutral" continent by 2050, and it is based on four foundational pillars: carbon pricing, sustainable investments, industrial policy and a just transition. This project has been criticized by uncommitted Member States due to the onerous investments required.

[95] "Climate Transparency Report 2020: Comparing G20 Climate Action and Responses to the COVID-19 Crisis", Climate Transparency, 2020: 49.
[96] "Italy", Climate Transparency, 2020: 1.

The limitation of this research stands in the lack of the totality of the NDCs, not yet submitted by all the Parties. At the same time, the expectation for the imminent COP26 is to enhance the cooperation among States and the facilitation for those developing countries that are willing to implement at the best of their capacities, sustainable policies; and to finalize the *Paris Rulebook* and conclude the outstanding topics of the COP25.

To conclude, the relevance of the COP26 relies on the submission of the nationally determined contributions by each Party. In this regard, its postponement due to the pandemic crisis has several impacts on climate action, mainly regarding the elaboration of green recovery plans in the aftermath of the crisis.

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