



## **From Stockholm to Glasgow: 50 Years of UN Environment Conventions**

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### **Abstract**

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The upcoming Climate Change Summit in Glasgow (COP26) will take place in November. The past 50 years of environmental agreements have seen stronger engagement from civil-society actors, more science-based climate change assessments and a stronger voice of vulnerable island countries.

### **About ISPSW**

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The Institute for Strategic, Political, Security and Economic Consultancy (ISPSW) is a private institute for research and consultancy. The ISPSW is an objective, task-oriented and politically non-partisan institute.

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## Analysis

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### From Stockholm to Glasgow

Stockholm, Montreal, Rio, Kyoto, Paris - these cities represent stepping stones of global environmental policies. The 1972 “United Nations Conference on the Human Environment” in Stockholm was the first global meeting to focus on the global environment. Its main achievement was the creation of the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) to coordinate global environmental action. The 1987 “Montreal Protocol on Substances that Deplete the Ozone Layer” was one of the most successful environment treaties. Its aim was to phase out dangerous substances such as CFCs (Chlorofluorocarbons). The 1992 United Nations Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED) in Rio (when Singapore’s Ambassador Tommy Koh chaired the Main Committee of the Earth Summit), focused on balancing environmental protection, economic growth and social equality. Its major achievement was the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) with a commitment to reduce greenhouse gases. Other conventions created were the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD) and the Convention to Combat Desertification (UNCCD). UNFCCC established the yearly meetings of the United Nations Climate Change Conferences. These Conference of the Parties (COP) assess climate change progress. During the 3<sup>rd</sup> COP in Kyoto in 1997, 150 countries adopted the Kyoto Protocol (KP). It set emission reduction targets and paved the way for the 2015 Paris Agreement which was the first ever globally binding climate deal. The upcoming COP 26 in Glasgow will be important because, for the first time, member countries will have to submit their ‘nationally determined contributions’ to reduce greenhouse emissions.

### Science, Summits, Island Voices

New institutions, regional lobby groups and global platforms have become influential:

The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) was created in 1988 by UNEP and the World Meteorological Organisation (WMO) as the UNFCCC’s ‘scientific organ’. Thousands of experts, including Singapore scientists, have contributed to its ongoing work. They provide and assess scientific information on climate change and its impact on nature and the risks involved. They also make recommendations to political decisionmakers. It’s 6<sup>th</sup> Assessment Report is due in 2022. One of the three IPCC working groups, Working Group 1, which had examined “the physical science underpinning past, present and future climate change” presented its sobering scientific findings on August 9, 2021.

AOSIS (Alliance of Small Island States, established in 1990, Singapore being a member) has lobbied within the UN for its 37 (+7) member countries and for the Small Island Developing Countries (SIDS). For all of them, the threat is existential and very immediate. Despite its original lack of political and economic clout, AOSIS has become a change factor. Last year, it called for more ambitious climate goals and in June 2021, it passed a strong resolution on plastic ocean pollution.

Pacific Island countries (all AOSIS members) share similar challenges such as a high vulnerability to rising sea levels, droughts and increased cyclone intensity which threaten lives and affect livelihoods of its people. The regional governing body for the Island countries Pacific Island Forum (PIF) has become a strong advocate for climate change actions. Fiji’s presidency of COP23 in 2017 was a highlight of a Pacific country’s global climate engagement. Its focus on preserving the “Blue Pacific” and its “New Pacific Diplomacy” and pragmatic partner-



ships with bigger UN members have raised its profile. PIF have demanded simplified access to climate financing. In their virtual meeting with UN Secretary General Guterres on September 23, they urged developed countries to set more ambitious emissions targets for COP26.

G7 and G20 meetings became new platforms to gather support for climate goals. The G7 meeting in June 2021, however, only 'reaffirmed' a previous \$100bn a-year target to finance adaptation efforts of poorer nations, a 2009 pledge which G7 failed to implement. The G20 environment ministers in July 2021 unsuccessfully tried to commit to more ambitious climate commitments and to the phasing out of coal power plants. A Leaders Summit in April 2021, convened by US President Biden, was unsuccessful to commit more countries to "Net Zero" emissions.

### **Climate Change and Security**

The scholarly debate on the nexus between climate change and security has recently entered the political sphere. The UN Security Council recently characterized climate change as one of the greatest challenges to international peace and security. In its January 2019 debate it focused on security implications of climate related disasters. Improved early warning systems, climate risk management and mitigation measures were discussed.

NATO published in June 2021 an updated Climate Change and Security Action Plan and the US Department of Defence first identified climate change as a 'critical military security threat' in 2019. Last month in his Singapore Fullerton Lecture, US Secretary of Defense Austin signalled support for Asian partners in mitigating their climate security risks.

### **From Climate Advocacy to Climate Activism**

Since Stockholm, NGOs have played a key role due to their strengthened global information network. The number of observer organisations to the COPs has substantially increased and the consultative process with the NGOs was enhanced. NGOs were increasingly able to lobby negotiators and provide inputs to the negotiating agendas.

After the 2015 Paris agreement, mounting public impatience and anger surged because of alleged insufficient action by national governments and lack of enforcement mechanisms. Decentralised global climate activism networks arose in 2018. Among them was the #Extinction Rebellion with its non-violent civil disobedience campaigns and #Fridaysforfuture with its regular climate protests by young people, initiated by Swedish schoolgirl Greta Thunberg. Both criticised the lack of ambitious climate targets and immediate actions.

Some developments, including increased climate advocacy, are encouraging. The number of NGO-backed climate litigation cases against fossil fuel companies are increasing. We have seen some recent landmark judgements such as the one against Shell. Some global finance and insurance institutions have begun to decarbonize their portfolios with green financing becoming now becoming more often an economic option. And seven countries have so far pledged to stop building coal power plants.

### **Global Environment Policy: quo vadis?**

Since Rio, there has been a bifurcation of environmental conventions (CBD, UNCCD) and climate conferences (UNFCCC, COPs). We have witnessed stronger NGO and activist engagement, more involvement of affected



small island countries and a recognition of climate change as a threat to national security. Global environment agreements have been vital to focus world attention on climate change. COP26 in Glasgow will test whether the international community is ready for the challenge that NGOs, climate activists, vulnerable island countries and climate scientists have presented.

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**Remarks:** Opinions expressed in this contribution are those of the author. This article was first published by AIIA Australian Institute of International Affairs, Australian Outlook, September 30, 2021.

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### About the Author of this Issue

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