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THE CONVERSATION

A ‘doom loop’ of climate change and geopolitical instability is beginning

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It is a common refrain to say that geopolitics gets in the way of climate action. From the war in Ukraine to trade tensions, each year seems to bring another immediate priority that diverts focus from the imperative to act on climate change.

This dynamic was on show at the recent UN climate conference – Cop29 – in Azerbaijan. Many world leaders stayed at home, busy handling political crises and conflict. A coalition of nations dependent on fossil fuel exports blocked any mention of phasing out fossil fuels in the final agreement. Long-held divisions between wealthy and climate vulnerable countries were on show in arguments over the final finance agreement. [...]

This is a vicious circle. Climate change is making geopolitics less stable, which harms climate action. This will worsen climate change, meaning more geopolitical instability, and so on. The risk is that this “doom loop” runs faster and faster and ultimately derails our ability to phase out fossil fuels fast enough to avoid the worst climate consequences.

The recent election of Donald Trump offers a potential case study of how this doom loop could be beginning to emerge. [...] In the years leading to the election, the US experienced its highest rates of inflation in over four decades. While inflation eventually fell, many Americans couldn’t cope with far higher prices. Trump made inflation a major focus of his campaign and it’s clear it played a role in his victory. What he didn’t mention was how climate change is increasingly a factor driving inflation.

At the moment, the link between climate change, inflation, and politics is a “weak signal” of how the consequences of climate change can frustrate our collective ability to tackle the causes of climate change. In a recent academic paper, we called this “derailment risk”, the risk that the world ultimately cannot stick to a path that rapidly phases out fossil fuels and avoids the worst climate outcomes. [...]

As warming continues – and the 1.5°C global warming target slips further from sight – the impact of climate change will grow, the world will be made even less stable, and a variety of derailment risks will escalate. [...] Meanwhile, history shows that periods of instability and crisis can provide fertile ground for rapid, positive change. This is the other side to derailment risk. [...] The case for tackling these inequalities is often made in moral terms. But there is also another rationale. The failure to protect vulnerable communities and recognise the unfairness of their predicament may push them into the arms of nativist parties and other political forces that often seek to block climate action. A derailment risk.

Instead, if communities and countries are better protected from climate impacts and can feel the benefits of climate action, then they might be more likely to support a fossil fuel phase out even when the going gets tough.

Escalating climate shocks mean we need to do much more to adapt to climate change and protect people and places. We also need to remember this adaptation enables us to better mitigate climate change itself. This will be essential to avoiding the doom loop of derailment.

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FINANCIAL TIMES

Geopolitical tensions loom over UN climate talks in Brazil

Attracta Mooney

November 10th 2025.

The UN's COP30 climate summit takes place in the "most complex geopolitical context" yet, the Brazilian hosts have warned as the country grapples with driving action to tackle rising temperatures just weeks after US President Donald Trump called climate change a "con job". [...]

Last year's talks ended on a sour note, with India highly critical of a \$300bn a year deal for climate finance they argued was stage managed and fell far short of the \$500bn that developing nations had sought.

Experts say this year's talks look set to be even tougher. "It is a difficult COP because of the geopolitics," says Christiana Figueres, former head of the UN's climate arm and an architect of the 2015 Paris agreement, where countries agreed to limit the global temperature rise to well below 2C and ideally 1.5C above the pre-industrial level. [...]

With tensions running high, many non-profits and climate veterans are hoping COP30 will demonstrate that the world remains serious about tackling climate change, despite the pressure from the Trump administration. Since returning to the White House, Trump has pulled the US from the Paris agreement for the second time, cut climate jobs and finance and pushed other countries to backtrack on their climate efforts. No senior US officials are expected to be at the talks in Belém. [...]

Brazil has heavily courted developing countries throughout the year, with officials making repeated trips to countries such as India and China to discuss climate issues. COP veterans say they will closely watch China in Belém, hoping for a sign that Beijing is stepping up on climate action. [...]

Tina Stege, climate envoy for the Marshall Islands, says this year's COP "will fail without a strong political commitment to respond with urgency to close the gap" between the latest climate plans and the target set a decade ago. This effort to close the gap should be "supported by an implementation road map for the transition away from fossil fuels, an adaptation support package and a clear way forward" on climate finance, she says. [...]

A key issue is so-called adaptation. Countries are expected to agree on a new set of indicators aimed at tracking progress on shoring up economies against climate change during the opening

days of COP30. The more contentious matter of how to finance adaptation — the actions and changes needed to prevent, minimise, withstand and recover from the ravages of climate change — is expected to follow.

COP30 “must deliver a fundamental paradigm shift: it must make adaptation bankable”, says Gilberto Pichetto Fratin, Italy’s minister of the environment and energy security. “For too long, adaptation has been treated as a form of aid, holding back investment. The key is to integrate adaptation into the core drivers of economic development: infrastructure and trade.” [...]

More than 30 years after Rio de Janeiro hosted the Earth Summit in 1992, the event that created the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change, Brazil is hoping this year’s climate talks will be transformative.

But Corrêa do Lago warns the results may not be immediately visible. “We are not thinking of COP30 as an event that has to have an immediate impact,” he says.

“Climate change is urgent and we are trying to build arguments that may bring back the priority that [climate action] has kept for many years.”

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Joel Pett, USA Today, July 9th 2012