The International Order Isn't Ready for the Climate Crisis

The Case for a New Planetary Politics

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The planet is in the throes of an environmental emergency. Humanity's continued addiction to fossil fuels and its voracious appetite for natural resources have led to runaway climate change, degraded vital ecosystems, and ushered in the slow death of the world's oceans. Earth's biosphere is breaking down. Our depredation of the planet has jeopardized our own survival.

Given these risks, it is shocking that the multilateral system has failed to respond more forcefully and has instead merely tinkered at the margins. Although the United States and the European Union have adopted measures to slow the pace of global warming—by setting more aggressive greenhouse gas reduction targets, for example—nothing guarantees that they will adhere to those pledges, and such steps do little to encourage decarbonization in China, India, and other major emitters. These efforts also fail to address other facets of the looming catastrophe, not least collapsing biodiversity.

The natural world obeys no sovereign boundaries, and neither does the worsening ecological crisis. It is time to take bold steps to overcome the disconnect between an international system divided into 195 independent countries, each operating according to its own imperatives, and a global calamity that cannot be resolved in a piecemeal fashion. It is time to govern the world as if the earth mattered. What the world needs is a paradigm shift in U.S. foreign policy and international relations—a shift that is rooted in ecological realism and that

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moves cooperation on shared environmental threats to center stage. Call this new worldview "planetary politics." All governments, starting with Washington, must designate the survival of the biosphere as a core national interest and a central objective of national and international security—and organize and invest accordingly.

A shift to planetary politics will require a new, shared understanding of the duties of sovereign states, serious commitments to sustainable development and investment, and innovative international institutions. World leaders will need to adopt a new ethic of environmental stewardship and expand their conceptions of sovereign obligations to include a responsibility to protect the global commons. Governments, businesses, and communities will need to value and account for the earth's natural capital rather than taking it for granted and exploiting it to depletion. Finally, national governments will need to overhaul and strengthen the institutional and legal foundations for international environmental cooperation. The United States is in a position to lead this charge—indeed, any such effort will fall short unless Washington is in the vanguard.

IN OUR BEST INTEREST

The devastating environmental impact of human activity is hardly a secret. A parade of recent reports from groups such as the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change and the World Wide Fund for Nature document the scope of our assault on the planet and portend a future of searing heat, raging wildfires, acidifying oceans, violent storms, rising seas, and mass migration. Meanwhile, human activity has imperiled biodiversity as people despoil lands and waters, introduce invasive species, and harvest natural resources unsustainably. The figures are sobering: since 1970, wild vertebrate populations have declined by over 60 percent, and insect populations have declined by 45 percent. And the damage is not confined to fauna alone. Extractive industries, such as agriculture, ranching, logging, and mining, have scarred the surface of the planet, in some places irreparably. Every year, the world loses an area of tropical forest the size of Costa Rica. Today, some one million plant and animal species face near-term extinction.

Our own species is suffering, too. Hundreds of millions of people around the world face mounting food insecurity and a lack of reliable water supplies. And as humans and domesticated animals increasingly encroach on and disrupt biodiverse ecosystems and encounter once iso-

lated species, we are exposed to dangerous new viruses: in recent decades, scientists have documented more than 200 zoonotic pathogens that have leaped from wild animals to people, including the Ebola virus, the virus that causes SARS, and likely the virus that causes COVID-19.

Things are poised to get worse. Despite a declining fertility rate, the human population will not plateau until at least 2060, and the rise of aspiring middle classes around the world will add to the ecological strains. As we plunder the planet, we risk rendering it uninhabitable—a crisis that cries out for global solidarity and collective action. Yet most countries continue to treat ecological challenges as second-tier foreign policy priorities distinct from presumably weightier matters, such as geopolitical competition, arms control, and international trade. The results are predictable: what passes for global environmental governance is a patchwork of weak, sector-specific agreements overseen by underpowered bodies that are unable to enforce compliance. The fate of the planet largely depends on a hodgepodge of uncoordinated national pledges driven by short-term domestic political and economic considerations.

The global environmental crisis requires a new statecraft built around the proposition that every other state concern—from national security to economic growth—depends on a healthy, stable biosphere. This revitalized framework would not jettison the core concept of national interest but broaden it to include environmental security and conservation. Foreign policy traditionalists may recoil at such a reframing, worried about distracting diplomats and defense officials from the threats that have directly affected the survival of states throughout most of history. But the ecological crisis has changed the nature of those threats.

U.S. President Joe Biden seems to grasp this truth. In a historic executive order issued one week after his inauguration, Biden declared climate change to be a top-tier threat to the United States and directed U.S. federal agencies to lead an unprecedented, whole-of-government response to reduce greenhouse gas emissions and adapt to global warming. Three months later, Avril Haines, the U.S. director of national intelligence, told world leaders assembled at a virtual climate conference that climate change "must be at the center of a country's national security and foreign policy."

Rhetoric is easy, of course. The Biden administration must now inculcate this new approach across the entire executive branch and work with Congress to revise a gargantuan U.S. national security

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We did start the fire: fighting the Caldor blaze, Grizzly Flats, California, August 2021

budget that is still overwhelmingly oriented toward countering traditional geopolitical and military threats. It must simultaneously collaborate with foreign partners on a multilateral response to slow and reverse environmental collapse.

WHAT'S MINE IS YOURS

If the United States is serious about spearheading the global response to the planet's ecological emergency, it should start by working with other countries to remold traditional concepts of sovereignty. Washington can begin this process by explicitly endorsing the idea that countries have a responsibility to protect the earth, obliging them to refrain from any activity that might fundamentally alter or damage environmental systems.

No such consensus exists today, as demonstrated by the row that erupted between Brazilian President Jair Bolsonaro and French President Emmanuel Macron in 2019, as tens of thousands of fires engulfed the Amazon rainforest. Macron accused Bolsonaro of "ecocide": by allowing the world's largest forest to be exploited by rapacious loggers, ranchers, farmers, and miners, Macron argued, Bolsonaro was committing a crime against the planet. The enraged

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Brazilian leader blasted his French counterpart and charged him with treating Brazil as if it were "a colony or a no man's land."

Two rival conceptions of sovereignty underpinned this clash. According to Bolsonaro, Brazil has an absolute right to develop the Amazon as it sees fit. "Our sovereignty is nonnegotiable," his spokesperson declared. Macron retorted that all of humanity has a stake in the rainforest's survival. The world is a stakeholder, not a bystander, and cannot remain silent as Brazil despoils this indispensable carbon sink, irreplaceable oxygen source, and precious repository of plant and animal life. The core debate, as Richard Haass, the president of the Council on Foreign Relations, has pointed out, is whether Brazil should be considered the rainforest's "owner" or merely its "custodian." More leaders and societies must come to accept Macron's view and reject that of Bolsonaro. Territorial sovereignty should not constitute a blank check to plunder collective resources.

WHAT IS THE EARTH WORTH?

Such a shift in thinking is entirely conceivable. Understandings of sovereignty have never been fixed or absolute: they are continually being contested, negotiated, and adapted, and the belief that sovereignty entails obligations as well as privileges is now widely accepted. As all the member states of the United Nations agreed at the World Summit in 2005, for instance, governments have a responsibility to protect their inhabitants from mass atrocities. If they fail to do so, they may forfeit the right to avoid foreign intervention.

The twin crises of climate change and collapsing biodiversity warrant a similar adjustment. Under an existing international principle known as "the no-harm rule," sovereign states already have a general obligation not to damage the environment in areas beyond their jurisdiction. But this law has proved difficult to enforce: there is little consensus on what exactly constitutes transnational environmental damage, what state obligations should look like, or when they should kick in. These questions are becoming trickier as potential sources of damage become more complex. As the planet's ecological emergency deepens, countries must expand the definition of the global commons—shared resources managed as part of humanity's common heritage—to include all critical ecosystems and natural cycles. They must agree to forswear all activities that threaten the integrity of the biosphere, open themselves up to external scrutiny,

allow others to monitor and verify their compliance, and face sanctions and other penalties should they violate this commitment.

Protecting this expanded commons will require putting a price on nature. For too long, humans have readily invested in produced capital (buildings, roads, machines, software) and human capital (education, health care) while running down the natural capital that sustains life and provides the foundation for all prosperity. We have taken the natural world for granted and assumed that technological innovation and market incentives would free us from the resource constraints of a finite planet. Such attitudes are no longer tenable. According to the UN Environment Program, the planet's total stock of natural capital has declined by 40 percent on a per capita basis since 1992. Reversing this trend will require reworking the current understanding of wealth to include the value of the world's natural assets and the myriad benefits they provide. In January 2020, the World Economic Forum estimated that over half of global output—$44 trillion per year—is highly or moderately dependent on benefits from nature that are increasingly in jeopardy. Another study, published in 2014, has placed the total annual value of the planet's ecosystem services—water filtration, nutrient cycling, pollination, carbon sequestration, and so on—at between $125 trillion and $145 trillion.

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Most environmentalists, however, resist placing a monetary value on nature, citing its intrinsic worth. But failing to do so encourages firms and individuals to take ecosystem services for granted and to exploit them to exhaustion. The result is market failure in the form of environmental costs borne not by the participants in any specific exchange but by society as a whole (what economists call "negative externalities").

A related problem is the fact that GDP, the conventional measure of wealth and progress, does not account for natural capital, making it a poor indicator of well-being and long-term productive capacity. The international community must work to develop metrics that can account for environmental assets. Approximately 89 countries, including all the members of the EU, have released natural capital accounts to keep track of such assets and to promote transparency regarding their use. The United States should do the same.

Governments must also adopt regulations and create incentives for firms to assume the ecological costs of their market behavior, rather than passing them along to society. The economist Partha Dasgupta has estimated that the annual global cost of all environmentally damaging subsidies (including for agriculture, fisheries, fuel, and water) is somewhere between $4 trillion and $6 trillion. By contrast, governments devote only $68 billion annually to global conservation and sustainability—about what their citizens spend every year on ice cream. National authorities can also use taxes and fees to ensure that the prices of goods and services accurately capture the social value of the natural assets involved in their production, and they can employ sector-specific market mechanisms to encourage environmental conservation. For example, measures such as catch share schemes, whereby communities have a secure right to harvest a capped number of fish in a specific area, can effectively combat overfishing.

A robust framework for natural capital accounting could also help justify compensating developing countries that are rich in biodiversity, such as Bolivia and Indonesia, to protect or restore local ecosystems and their services. There are small-scale precedents for this kind of investment—when authorities pay landowners to preserve watersheds or give tax breaks to farmers who plant carbon-sequestering cover crops. But more significant international efforts are underway: the Biden administration, for instance, is working to negotiate a multibillion-dollar deal with Brazil to preserve a portion of the Amazon rainforest.

The global financial system must also play a bigger role in environmental stewardship. Some national financial regulators, including the U.S. Securities and Exchange Commission, are moving toward mandating corporate disclosures of exposure to climate risks so that investors are aware of the vulnerability of firms to the environmental shocks of a warming planet. International financial institutions such as the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank now encourage partner governments to inventory their natural capital assets and adopt policies and laws to protect them. A sea change is also underway in the private sector: BlackRock, Goldman Sachs, and other major players have pledged to integrate sustainability into their investment decisions. The practical challenge, of course, is to distinguish between credible corporate responses and greenwashing campaigns, which are merely intended to burnish a company's public image. Environmental advocacy organizations, such as Greenpeace

and the Natural Resources Defense Council, can help hold companies accountable by exposing hollow commitments and raising the specter of consumer boycotts and other forms of civic activism to persuade them that harming nature is a threat to their bottom lines.

THE PATH FORWARD

Planetary politics cannot succeed without multilateral institutions and global governance that can foster the unprecedented international cooperation demanded by the intertwined climate and biodiversity crises. The most pressing near-term priority is to close the yawning gap between the desultory negotiating process hosted by the UN and the stark reality outlined by the organization's own Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, which envisions catastrophic warming unless the world takes immediate, dramatic steps to reduce greenhouse gas emissions. There is no conceivable way for the world to meet the emission targets established by the UN's 2015 Paris climate accord, however, without massive investments in terrestrial and marine ecosystems capable of serving as carbon storehouses. Accordingly, governments should make expanding such carbon sinks a centerpiece of their contributions to the Paris goals.

Trade is another area in which global governance must adapt. One path forward would be to reform global trade rules to allow countries committed to decarbonization to discriminate against countries that insist on conducting business as usual, without running afoul of the World Trade Organization. The most effective solution would be for WTO members to adopt a blanket climate waiver that permits so-called border adjustments for carbon in the form of taxes on imports and rebates on exports. This would permit EU countries, for instance, to penalize imports of carbon-intensive cement from Russia and Turkey and reward other trading partners that use greener production methods. Such an arrangement would encourage the formation of "climate clubs," made up of countries committed to reducing emissions and thus eligible for nondiscriminatory treatment.

Development models will also need to shift. Poor countries need the backing of international partners to come up with policies and incentive structures that will encourage private actors and communities to conserve nature. Extractive industries, such as timber and mining, often damage the ecosystems of developing nations that rely on the export of primary goods and have weak environmental regulations.

The harm is usually suffered by the local inhabitants rather than by the companies or consumers. The World Bank and other donors can provide technical assistance to give governments in developing countries an accurate picture of the full costs of such environmental degradation so that they can begin to hold corporate perpetrators to account and force them to shoulder the burden of these costs. Finally, the United States and other rich countries can encourage nature-friendly development by devoting a greater share of bilateral and multilateral aid to global conservation efforts and, more generally, conditioning their assistance on sustainable environmental policies—much as the U.S. Millennium Challenge Corporation makes access to its financial resources contingent on good governance.

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Simultaneously, countries should strengthen the international legal framework for biodiversity conservation, particularly the Convention on Biological Diversity. Although that treaty has failed to slow the loss of ecosystems and species, some hope is on the horizon. In late 2020, Costa Rica and France established an intergovernmental group known as the High Ambition Coalition for Nature and People, which seeks to permanently protect 30 percent of the planet's terrestrial and marine surface by 2030. Scores of governments have since committed to the so-called 30x30 target, which is slated for approval at the CBD's conference in the spring of 2022. The Biden administration has already embraced 30x30 as a domestic goal; there is no reason why it should not join the global campaign. It should also end the United States' outlier status as the only country in the world that has refused to ratify the CBD by submitting it to the U.S. Senate for its advice and consent.

The Biden administration should also work to engineer the successful conclusion of a UN high seas biodiversity convention, which is currently in the final stages of negotiation. The agreement would establish a framework to conserve and sustainably manage the living marine resources and ecosystems lying beyond national jurisdictions—a vast global commons that accounts for 43 percent of the planet's surface. The high seas are a remarkable source of biodiversity and protect humanity from the worst effects of climate change by absorbing enormous amounts of heat and carbon dioxide. But their health is declining

dramatically, as new technologies permit their unprecedented exploitation and a patchwork of regulations fail to protect them. The prolonged negotiations and lingering disputes over the details of this convention highlight the challenges of international collaboration. But Washington is well placed to broker agreements on new rules to govern marine protected areas, environmental impact assessments, and the sharing of benefits from marine genetic resources.

Finally, the United States should throw its support behind the Global Pact for the Environment, which has been the subject of UN discussions since 2018 and would help bring coherence to the fragmented legal order of environmental protections. In contrast to the global trading system, which grants the WTO pride of place as a rule setter and adjudicator, there is no overarching international legal framework or organization governing global environmental matters. Instead, hundreds of overlapping and conflicting multilateral treaties promote cooperation on specific issues, such as endangered species and hazardous waste, as if environmental concerns could be effectively tackled one at a time. The Global Pact would codify a sovereign obligation to ensure that state and private actions do not harm other countries or the global commons and establish a fundamental human right to a clean and healthy environment. The pact would elevate prevention and provide a measure of restorative justice by endorsing the principle that polluters should pay for environmental degradation. To hold governments accountable, the convention would include provisions for periodic reporting, establish rules for liability, and provide mechanisms for the peaceful resolution of transboundary environmental disputes.

Despite overwhelming international support, multilateral negotiations on the pact collapsed in the spring of 2019, thanks in part to opposition from the Trump administration. The Biden administration should explicitly disavow its predecessor's position and join ongoing efforts within the UN Environment Assembly to negotiate a nonbinding political declaration on the global environment as a prelude to an eventual global pact. The example of the 1948 UN Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which inspired a dozen-odd treaties, shows that even informal declarations can lay important groundwork for more formal international conventions.

One should have no illusions, of course, about the enormous legislative obstacles standing in the way of U.S. ratification of the CBD, a high seas convention, or the Global Pact. The United States has often opted

out of treaties—even those it spearheaded and drafted—and today's intense partisan ideological divisions may encourage this tendency. Nevertheless, the experience of the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea, which the United States championed and now mostly treats as customary international law (despite never having ratified it), suggests that the Biden administration should seize this moment to help shape the evolving legal framework of international environmental cooperation.

BRIDGING THE GAP

The global ecological emergency is the greatest collective-action challenge we have ever faced. Bringing humanity back into balance with the biosphere will require a fundamental shift in how the politics and purposes of foreign policy are conceived. It will require reimagining our place on the earth.

Consider the atlases we use to depict our planet. They usually open with two distinct maps. The first map, a geophysical one, captures the world in its natural state, revealing a startling array of biomes and ecosystems—rainforests and savannas, steppes and taigas, mountains and glaciers, river valleys and deserts, icecaps and tundras, remote atolls and barrier reefs, continental shelves and deep-sea trenches—shading into and overlapping with one another. The second map, a geopolitical one, depicts the earth's terrestrial surface carved into independent territorial units indicated by precise lines, each colored distinctly from its neighbors.

The first map is an accurate representation of the planet. The second map, with its artificially imposed borders, is akin to a work of fiction—and yet people tend to treat it as more important. The crisis of the biosphere has forced a collision of those two maps, exposing the tension between an integrated natural world and a divided global polity and demanding that we reconcile the two.

National sovereignty is not going anywhere, but a new international approach could help close the distance between the political and the natural world. If a crisis of this magnitude cannot reshape how countries formulate their national interests, definitions of international security, or approaches to the global economy, perhaps nothing will. But this predicament does not call for resignation. It cries out, instead, for a commitment to our role as stewards of the only planet we have. It cries out for planetary politics.