



POLICY BRIEF

Can G20 South Africa shift the global climate action agenda?

Dhesigen Naidoo and Manisha Gulati

The 2025 G20 Summit is the first held in Africa. Hosted by South Africa, it is the fourth consecutive Global South G20 presidency, taking place alongside Brazil's hosting of the 30th United Nations Climate Change Conference (COP30). Could this combination of a minilateral (G20) and multilateral (COP30) hosted by global south countries re-energise the climate action agenda and unlock climate finance for Africa and the developing world?

Key findings

- ▶ In an increasingly challenged multilateral system, minilaterals are being looked at to carry pivotal global agendas.
- ▶ The G20, arguably the most powerful of the current minilaterals in terms of population and share of the global economy, could be a primary vehicle for the global climate action agenda.
- ▶ G20 2025 is special for numerous reasons. It is the first African G20, with the African Union as a full participant. It is also the last of four in a unique leadership run by global south countries, following Brazil, India and Indonesia.
- ▶ The United States, which takes up the G20 presidency in 2026, has been vocal on its anti-climate action agenda. This means the G20's climate focus will likely be diluted before the United Kingdom presidency in 2027.

Recommendations

- ▶ The G20 must continue to be pursued as a primary platform for Africa's climate ambition. This will facilitate global partnerships for climate adaptation and disaster risk reduction, green energy partnerships, assistance with climate-related disaster management, and loss and damage.
- ▶ The G20 remains an influential platform to both improve access to climate finance and engage on reform of the global financial architecture in a way that improves the lot of the developing world in general and Africa in particular.
- ▶ The power balance in the G20 is shifting. Some G7 members are finding more commonality with BRICS and developing countries on pivotal issues. The chances of a more equalised G20 platform are looking better and offer African players important opportunities.
- ▶ The United Nations platform for climate change is declining, and the G20 has among its members the highest emitters of greenhouse gases, and also some of the quickest movers to low-carbon and green-energy solutions. The G20, together with its other partnership platforms in the form of the B20 and C20, could become a premier platform for climate action decisions and partnerships.
- ▶ A longer-term programme for climate action should be embedded in the G20 to prevent potential rollercoaster rides determined by different presidencies.

Introduction

With current pressures on multilateralism in general and the United Nations (UN) system in particular, minilaterals are becoming increasingly prominent. These are different from plurilaterals, which are smaller groupings in a larger membership, like the G77+China in the UN. Minilaterals are generally small and issue-driven, and not part of larger groupings. Larger versions are emerging as key determinants of global change. Among prominent minilaterals are the G7, BRICS, Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) and G20.

The G20 accounts for 80%–85% of global gross domestic product (GDP) and accounted for almost 80% of global GDP growth in the past decade, according to World Economics.¹ It also has a total population close to two-thirds of the global population and accounts for around 80% of global greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions.

2025 is a significant year, marking the conclusion of the Global South G20 presidency cycle

For the G20, 2025 is a significant year. It marks the conclusion of the Global South G20 presidency cycle, which started with Indonesia in 2022, continued through India in 2023 and Brazil in 2024, and is now with South Africa. This sequence of presidencies has fostered expectations for better representation in the G20 process of the needs and challenges faced by developing countries, and for advancing global climate action that reflects these priorities. This is especially pertinent given the existing lack of confidence among developing countries regarding UN processes on climate change.

In addition to consolidating the climate agenda established by previous Global South G20 presidencies, South Africa is expected to champion African priorities in the G20. Climate change disproportionately affects African countries, threatening food security, biodiversity, poverty reduction, economic growth and human health.² At the same time, challenges such as debt distress, high capital costs and unsuitable international institutions hinder Africa's ability to effectively manage the impacts of climate change.

This year is also a critical one for climate action.

All countries who are parties to the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC), including G20 members, are required to submit updated nationally determined contributions (NDCs) under the Paris Agreement. The timeline for this submission was February 2025. By May, only 20 countries had submitted their updated NDCs, including four G20 countries: Japan, Canada, the United Kingdom (UK) and Brazil.³ The first global stocktake under the Paris Agreement has revealed that current trajectories are not aligned with the 1.5°C target.

With Brazil hosting the 30th Conference of the Parties to the UNFCCC, or UN Climate Change Conference (COP30), and South Africa presiding over the G20, there is an opportunity to forge an ambitious agreement to address climate change. This opportunity however needs to contend with escalating geopolitical tensions, declining multilateralism and increasing minilateralism. This policy brief considers whether the South African presidency can drive progress on climate action in the G20.

Changing global landscape defining the G20

A fragmented geopolitical landscape, deadly conflicts, waning multilateralism, erosion of trust in international institutions, and growing minilateralism characterise the current global context. There is a growing shift away from norms- and rules-based international order and multilateralism towards interest-based engagement.

This has taken two forms. The first is an inward-focused 'my nation first' approach, with the world's issues transnational in nature. This perspective can affect the management of global issues such as stagflation, slowing economic growth, food insecurity, climate change and conflict, particularly with the growing gap in responses to these problems. This approach leans more towards protectionist policies, tariff barriers for trade and intellectual property regimes to balance domestic and foreign interests.

This development is noteworthy as the G20 presidency is set to begin a new cycle in 2026⁴ with the United States (US) at the helm. The US has expressed scepticism about multilateral institutions, criticised nearly all systems of global governance, and shown signs of moving away from the rules-based international order.

While other developed G20 members, and countries represented through the European Union (EU), continue to engage with the global agenda, they are also placing higher priority on national security. The UK, Germany, France, the Netherlands and Belgium have significantly reduced their foreign aid budgets in favour of national security priorities and increased defence spending following the war in Ukraine.

Furthermore, funding from European countries is increasingly shifting from grant-based programmes to investment-focused projects that provide direct benefits to European nations and financial institutions.⁵

Minilateralism enables flexibility, speed and innovative approaches to diplomacy on global issues

The second form of interest-based engagement is minilateralism. This involves flexible issue-based collaboration on shared interests without having to align on everything within the framework of a larger, diverse and possibly less cohesive group. This is evident in the expanding array of minilateral partnerships in recent years across multiple issue areas, from defence to energy to technology.

Minilateralism has its risks. It can exacerbate power imbalances by sidelining non-members and prioritising short-term group interests. It can also further fragment the international order since overlapping and conflicting alliances can undermine coordinated global responses to transnational problems. And it can undermine established global institutions.⁶

More importantly, it can handicap large parts of the Global South that lack global cooperation due to limited resources and historical imbalances, yet are willing to develop more sophisticated positions and engage with global challenges through multilateral diplomacy.

These risks are real, but minilateralism enables flexibility, speed and innovative approaches to diplomacy in dealing with global issues like climate change, healthcare and food security.⁷

The limitations, paralysis and inefficiency of the current multilateral system, and the slow pace of

reform of outdated international institutions with weak accountability to developing countries, has further spurred the rise of minilaterals.

Minilateralism in tackling climate change

The UNFCCC has achieved major milestones since its first COP in 1995, including the Kyoto Protocol, the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) and the Paris Agreement. Focus on climate finance has also grown with initiatives like the Glasgow Financial Alliance for Net Zero (GFANZ),⁸ Bridgetown Initiative, and 2023 Summit for a New Global Financing Pact, to respond to the dual urgency of climate change and global inequalities.⁹

Despite these efforts though, financing targets still fall short. Developing countries and civil society call for US\$1.3 trillion in grant-based annual finance, but the New Collective Quantified Goal on Climate Finance (NCQG) set at COP29 is only US\$300 billion a year by 2035.¹⁰

Unlike the US\$100 billion goal set at COP15, which had a specific mandate for developed countries, the NCQG merely asks developed countries to lead. Moreover, when adjusted for inflation and new definitions, tripling the US\$100 billion target may not require significant fiscal effort.¹¹ This is especially true considering that developed countries' fossil fuel subsidies were 3.6% of their GDP in 2022, and the target of US\$300 billion represents only 0.46% of their GDP.¹²

Apart from finance, ambitious mitigation action is needed from the world's largest emitters to break the cycle of climate change impacts, and the resultant environmental degradation, insecurity and instability. However, mitigation commitments for 2030 – as stated in all countries' NDCs as of October 2024 – suggest that global temperatures will reach 2.6°C by the end of this century.¹³

Minilateral platforms are becoming increasingly important for climate agenda progress. These platforms provide essential forums for high-level political dialogue, and building trust and momentum that can feed into broader UNFCCC negotiations. Examples of minilaterals that can be powerful forums to this end include G7, BRICS, the G20 and more recently the SCO.

The G7 originated as the Group of Six in 1975, formed by the US, UK, France, West Germany, Japan and

Italy in response to the Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries oil embargo and global economic instability. Canada joined the next year, creating the G7, while the European Union began participating as an active member in 1977.

Russia's entry in 1998 expanded the bloc to the G8, but its membership was suspended in 2014 following the annexation of Crimea. The group's founding amid an energy and financial crisis continues to shape its identity and priorities. Although the G7's approach to climate policy has been inconsistent, European members have spearheaded global climate initiatives.

BRICS was conceived in the early 1990s with five countries and now comprises 10 members: Brazil, Russia, India, China, South Africa, Iran, Egypt, Ethiopia, Indonesia and the United Arab Emirates. While the bloc includes major fossil fuel producers, several members are driving energy transitions.

China generates 59% of its electricity from renewables and leads globally in solar, wind, hydrogen and battery technology. From January to May 2025 alone, it added 198 GW of solar and 46 GW of wind capacity. COP30 host Brazil derives 89% of its energy from renewable sources, while South Africa and Indonesia are advancing Just Energy Transition partnerships to phase out coal and oil dependence.

Economic weighting of minilaterals has changed radically – by 2023, BRICS members accounted for 32.1% of global GDP, overtaking the G7's 29.9%

The SCO originated as a Eurasian intergovernmental body in 2001, with China, Russia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan its founding members, and has expanded over time to include India, Pakistan, Iran and Belarus as full members. Its 2025 Tianjin Declaration outlined key policy objectives, with particular focus on development, energy and climate issues.

The declaration announced two SCO climate summits to support these goals: a high-level SCO-Latin America and the Caribbean meeting on climate change and sustainable energy (which took place in October 2025), and a Regional Climate Summit in Kazakhstan in 2026.¹⁴ These events underscore the SCO's increasing emphasis on climate diplomacy, particularly in forging connections beyond Eurasia.¹⁵

The change in economic weighting of the G7 group in the G20 vs. BRICS has changed radically over time.

Since its beginnings in 1975, the G7 members have been the dominant force globally – economically and regarding development status. Since 1995, the countries that founded BRICS in 2006 had contributed just short of 17% of global GDP compared to the G7 at almost 45%.¹⁶ By 2023 the original BRICS

G20 MEMBERS ACCOUNT
FOR ABOUT

80%

OF GLOBAL GREENHOUSE
GAS EMISSIONS

bloc had overtaken the G7. This has implications for the future of the G20, as the primary economic rivals are within this minilateral.

As mentioned previously, the G20 economies account for 80% of GHG emissions,¹⁷ and play a major role in shaping climate policy.¹⁸ Their diversity enables the bloc to pursue climate action under the principle of common but differentiated responsibilities within the UNFCCC. As a minilateral platform, the G20 can set examples and evaluate how its policies impact global efforts to tackle climate change.¹⁹

Since 2008, all G20 Leaders' Summit declarations have referenced climate change, with 152 related commitments made on climate issues since 2009

The G20 has consistently addressed climate change, establishing dedicated working groups in both the Sherpa and Finance tracks. Since 2008, all G20 Leaders' Summit declarations have referenced climate change, with 152 related commitments made since the first summit on this issue in 2009.²⁰ The group frames climate change as a global challenge requiring cooperation between countries. G20 discussions have evolved from a basic recognition of the issue to treating climate change as a systemic problem.

In fact, the climate agenda's prominence in the G20 reflects the relevance of minilateral diplomacy for advancing the climate agenda,²¹ as multilateral efforts have struggled to deliver emissions and finance targets.

Minilateral G20 discussions have also bolstered progress in broader international negotiations. Italy's 2021 G20 presidency, for example, helped secure pledges that contributed to the Glasgow Climate Pact at COP26,²² including Net Zero commitments by 2050, phasing down coal, and removing inefficient fossil fuel subsidies.

Effect of global landscape on G20-led climate change progress

The G20 includes all G7 members, five BRICS countries, the EU and AU. As such it provides a platform for like-minded G7 and BRICS members as well as the EU and AU to cooperate on shared challenges while prioritising national interests. The G20 could therefore be an influential forum to advance the climate agenda at a time when multilateral platforms on climate are not delivering as expected.

With Brazil hosting COP30 and South Africa presiding over the G20, there is opportunity to foster an ambitious agreement to tackle climate change. However, the changing international landscape could pose challenges for G20-led progress on the global climate agenda.

US\$300 BILLION CLIMATE
FINANCE TARGET IS ONLY

0.46%

OF DEVELOPED
COUNTRIES' GDP

First, the growing shift away from multilateral agreements towards a landscape dominated by bilateral agreements prioritising national interests could weaken or even hinder cooperation to tackle climate change. The G20 has served as a forum wherein the key competitors engage in a wider setup including other major powers.²³ The group has been together through geopolitical tensions and Russia's war in Ukraine,²⁴ and the global south G20 presidencies of Indonesia, India and Brazil have succeeded in enhancing cooperation, maintaining agenda continuity and prioritising development.

However, G20 members are increasingly having to manage the complexities inherent in balancing both bilateral and multilateral relationships.²⁵ While divisions over major issues of international governance have always existed, current state alignments are marked by a notable lack of consistency compared to previous eras.²⁶

Evidence suggests that divisions in the group have already led to some G20 climate initiatives being paused

Second, the evolving geopolitical landscape and economic priorities are likely to influence the G20's climate strategies. Evidence suggests that divisions in the group have already led to some G20 climate initiatives being paused. For example, the Financial Stability Board, which serves as the G20's financial watchdog, has paused integrating any further climate change policy initiatives into its supervisory and regulatory work.²⁷

In particular, the competition and mistrust, particularly among major players like the US, China and the EU, complicate collective climate diplomacy. While climate remains a critical geopolitical priority, these rivalries risk sidelining climate commitments amid other pressing foreign policy issues.²⁸

Third, there is a risk that the shifting landscape drives the G20 to a 'beauty pageant', where countries compete primarily to represent and prioritise their own national interests instead of advancing collective global goals like climate action.^{29, 30} In recent years, G20 summits have been a marker of national prestige, rather than an exercise in problem-solving. As a result, summit

declarations that reflect negotiated compromises and reach collective statements – even non-binding ones – have become harder to achieve.³¹

Fourth, the rise and expansion of other minilaterals like BRICS may split the G20 into rival factions, where members might prioritise intra-bloc negotiations over broader cross-G20 cooperation, reducing the G20's ability to drive cohesive climate action at a time when tackling climate change has become more urgent.³²

Fifth, the G20 changes shape every year. Without a permanent G20 secretariat, it is up to the rotating presidency to ensure the consistency and coherence of priorities, and lead coordinated action.³³ With the US withdrawing from the Paris Agreement for the second time, committing to expanding exploration of oil and gas reserves, and abandoning multilateralism in favour of a nationalist foreign policy, the focus on collective international action to deal with climate change remains uncertain.

Finally, G20 presidencies typically operate as a troika, where the acting presidency coordinates closely with both the previous and upcoming presidency. The US has already drastically reduced its participation in G20 2025. This coupled with currently compromised US-South Africa relations risks stalling progress on the climate agenda for the G20. Whether relations are collaborative, confrontational, or disengaged will influence whether the G20 remains a viable forum for global cooperation in the short to mid-term, or fractures along geopolitical lines.

Potential for climate agenda progress at G20 2025

What are the prospective successes and outcomes of the G20 2025 Summit under South Africa's presidency? Will the summit reinforce prevailing nationalistic tendencies, or be a catalyst for renewed multilateralism and solidarity, in which member states prioritise collective interests and foster enhanced cooperation?

South Africa faces a global context of heightened tensions, trade wars and rising neo-mercantilism. Hostilities at the political level remain, but the Sherpa Track continues to move forward. The mid-term meeting of G20 finance ministers and central bankers also delivered positive results. They agreed on a joint statement committing the parties to strengthening

multilateral institutions and addressing debt vulnerabilities faced by low-income countries.³⁴

Regarding climate change: South Africa's G20 and Brazil's COP30 presidencies can together work towards a new global governance for climate change. At the 2024 G20 Summit in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil's President Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva proposed creating a UN Climate Change Council. This council could be established as a nimble coordinating body to support climate action and facilitate implementation.

Compared to the COP process, which involves significant resources and complexity, and the UN Charter review process, which may require an extended timeline, the council could provide an alternative, more efficient approach to address fragmented climate governance and promote implementation.³⁵

Conclusion

Against an increasingly fragmented geopolitical backdrop, the G20 – even with the most limited US participation – could help draw together diverse

countries to collectively work towards addressing urgent global problems. Collective action is critical to economic and social progress that has increasingly become coupled with public goods such as environmental integrity and climate change action that are global in nature and have spillover effects.

SA's G20 and Brazil's COP30 presidencies can together forge a new global governance for climate change

South Africa could use its presidency to rally the G20 towards greater climate action and to work with Brazil to secure G20 commitments for COP30. Even with the G20 providing yet another forum for the fight for global superiority, it can still be an effective platform to gear up climate action.

Whether it can capitalise on this opportunity remains to be seen. The South African presidency in 2025 and the US presidency in 2026 will be pivotal indicators.

Notes

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POLICY BRIEF

Forging Africa's path to COP30 and beyond

Kgaugelo Mkumbeni

Africa's path to the 30th Conference of the Parties to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (COP30) faces persistent climate finance and governance challenges. The COP29 decision to mobilise US\$300 billion annually by 2035 to help developing countries deal with climate change impacts covers less than 4.3% of global needs. Africa must be a co-creator at COP30, fostering innovation and shaping a more just, equitable climate finance architecture.



POLICY BRIEF

Planning for climate change in Africa's maritime transport sector

Judy Beaumont, Shannon Hampton and David Willima

A two-pronged, adaptive and proactive approach to addressing climate change in Africa's maritime transport and ports sector is needed. By reducing emissions and building climate resilience in the maritime sector, Africa can aim to future-proof the sector by both mitigating its environmental impact and strengthening its capacity to withstand climate-related disruptions, while supporting the sustainable development of its blue economy.



POLICY BRIEF

Are Africa's priorities and vision being heard at COP?

Dhesigen Naidoo and Kgaugelo Mkumbeni

Africa's participation in the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change Conference of the Parties (COP) has evolved significantly since the first meeting in 1995. The continent currently plays a crucial role in initiatives like the Loss and Damage Fund and is launching important voluntary agreements and climate risk assessments. This policy brief makes recommendations on how to advance Africa's climate agenda and secure positive outcomes for the continent.



POLICY BRIEF

Towards a climate resilient Agenda 2063

Ihlan Dahir, Manisha Gulati and Dhesigen Naidoo

As climate change escalates, impacting human security, economic growth and development, Agenda 2063 faces new challenges and opportunities. This policy brief underscores the need to update Africa's transformative continental framework to address climate risks and the transition to low-carbon pathways. The recommendations include integrating climate risk management, climate-resilient agriculture and renewable energy transition into national policies. Regional and continental efforts should focus on transboundary collaboration, climate-resilient trade and climate diplomacy in order to navigate the climate challenge while safeguarding Africa's future prosperity and unity.

About the authors

Dhesigen Naidoo is Senior Research Associate in the Climate Risk and Human Security project at the Institute for Security Studies.

Manisha Gulati is an Independent Adviser on a portfolio of themes around climate change and sustainable development, and supports the Climate Risk and Human Security project at the ISS.

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