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Petrostate Climate Diplomacy at COP28

By Margareth Sembiring

SYNOPSIS

The United Arab Emirates' (UAE) COP28 presidency this year was marked by a different approach in global climate discussions. Despite the many differences and controversies encountered, petrostate climate diplomacy continues to be relevant in a world that is far from ready to let go of fossil fuels.

COMMENTARY

The United Arab Emirates' (UAE) COP28 presidency this year spoke volumes about the state and development of climate diplomacy. Fossil fuels, and by extension the oil producers, have long been identified as the main culprits behind rising greenhouse gas emissions and climate change.

In an environment that has become increasingly hostile towards fossil fuels since the setting of the 1.5C target at the Paris COP21 in 2015, the appointment of a Gulf petrostate to lead a global climate conference symbolised an acknowledgment of the need to get the fossil fuel sector onboard the climate fight. It signified a more inclusive approach in climate discussions while at the same time presenting an opportunity for the fossil fuel producers to demonstrate that they too can be part of the solution.

The UAE's Climate Diplomacy Challenges

In a world where the use of fossil fuels cannot be totally eliminated yet, however urgent it may be from the climate change perspective, ostracising the fossil fuel sector is doing more harm than good. Unfortunately, this new inclusive approach was not very well received by those who deemed the UAE's COP28 presidency replete with conflicts of interests.

Most controversial of these was the role of Sultan Al-Jaber, chief executive of the Abu Dhabi National Oil Company (ADNOC), as COP28 president. Suspicions over his country's intentions and its effectiveness in leading the global climate processes were felt on multiple fronts. Former United States' Vice President [Al Gore](#) saw the UAE's COP presidency as "an abuse of public trust".

A document suggesting that the UAE would use its position to broker oil and gas deals was [leaked](#) a few days before the start of the conference. A comment by Sultan Al-Jaber that "there is [no science](#) indicating that a phase-out of fossil fuels is what is going to achieve 1.5C", which he made at a live online event ten days before the conference, was reported by the media at the time of the conference itself. The timing seemed too convenient to be coincidental. The media report raised a storm of fury and criticisms, which Sultan Al-Jaber rejected as an attempt to [undermine](#) the UAE's COP28 work.

To complicate matters, considering that the first global [stocktake](#) was scheduled to conclude at the conference, and against the backdrop of a preceding synthesis [report](#) that tells the world it is currently off track to reach the 1.5C goal, it would seem that the UAE's presidency was ill-timed.

Over the years, the increasingly alarming analyses and warnings, and the accompanying fear and panic, have led to one conclusion: phase out fossil fuels urgently, not phase them down. This universal clarion call was, in essence, the crux of the COP28 negotiations.

The demand to phase-out fossil fuels had largely overshadowed the UAE's success in bringing 50 oil and gas companies responsible for 40 per cent of global oil production to be part of the first ever Oil and Gas Decarbonisation [Charter](#). A joint initiative with Saudi Arabia, the charter [commits](#) signatories to achieve net-zero operations by 2050, zero-out methane emissions and eliminate routine flaring by 2030, and to adopt industry best practices in reducing emissions.

The push for a fossil fuel phase-out also rendered Sultan Al-Jaber's [comments](#) about "ADNOC having the lowest carbon intensity and being the only company that has been decarbonising the oil and gas resources" to be largely ignored by the media. The UAE's climate diplomacy, although earnestly and energetically pursued, had proven to be very challenging.

Low-Carbon Energy Transition and Fossil Fuels Dilemma

The world has made some progress in transitioning towards low-carbon energy sources. In the last two decades, the [share](#) of renewable energy sources in global primary energy has continued to rise. Conversely, the share of oil has been on the decline. In [2022](#), the growth of solar and wind capacities reached a record increase of 266 GW, with solar making up 72 per cent of the capacity additions.

While renewable energy facilities are expanding, it is also evident that the world's energy system is not able to wean itself of fossil fuels yet. In [2019](#), global fossil fuel consumption stood at about 15.5 billion tonnes. Turning off fossil fuels when renewable energy alternatives are not yet fully ready to replace them is tantamount to

jeopardising energy security. Are we prepared to see airplanes grounded, transportation halted, and homes, schools, and hospitals without electricity?

The process of transiting to low-carbon energy admittedly poses a difficult dilemma. In September 2023, the US' Biden administration approved three [offshore](#) oil and gas lease sales – the smallest number in US history – despite President Joe Biden pledging no offshore drilling in his 2020 [campaign](#). Similarly, regardless of its vigorous stance on climate action, the [UK](#) government announced in early November 2023 its intention to introduce legislation regarding new North Sea oil and gas licenses to protect jobs and to ensure the country's energy security. These recent developments conform more to phase-down, although both countries were [among](#) those that [backed](#) fossil fuel phase-out at COP28.

Domestic Contexts Still Important in Climate Diplomacy

No one will say “no” to the 1.5C target. Even if a fossil fuel phase-out is the more appropriate route for the world to get there, countries are sure to consider their domestic contexts in the implementation stage. For example, the [ASEAN](#) Joint Statement to COP28 expressed that while climate actions and regional cooperation need to be enhanced, national circumstances and development priorities are to be taken into account as and when appropriate.

Depending on the different contexts that countries find themselves, the transition away from fossil fuels will continue to progress with varying speeds. Decarbonised and abated fossil fuels are probably the most practical options to rely on until such time when clean energy alternatives can completely replace them. Against this backdrop, petrostate climate diplomacy is likely to hold enduring relevance in the foreseeable future despite a challenging start at this year's COP conference.

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