

Anglo-French tensions overshadow opening of COP26

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Outside of the stage-managed proceedings of the conference chamber, the global COP26 climate summit has been dominated by the breakdown of Anglo-French relations.

Amid the talk of “international unity” and “global solutions”, Britain, the summit’s host, and France have been unable to put to bed a dispute over a few dozen fishing licenses in the English Channel.

The fishing industry as a whole represents no more than 0.1 percent of each country’s annual GDP.

Far from defusing the issue, the governments of Boris Johnson and Emmanuel Macron escalated the conflict to the point of issuing threats of “force”, trade wars and international legal action.

For several months, France has accused Britain of maliciously refusing to grant fishing licenses to some of its trawlers. Last Wednesday, French authorities detained a British vessel, the *Cornelis Gert Jan*, in Le Havre port, claiming it “was not on the list of fishing licenses granted to the United Kingdom” by French and European Union (EU) authorities.

French ministers then threatened a series of intensified checks on goods heading from France to Britain, and on British vessels in French waters, if licenses were not granted to all French ships by November 2, amounting to a semi-blockade. Other threats were made to shut off French electricity supplies to the island of Jersey, a British crown dependency.

Fisheries Minister Annick Girardin declared, “Now we must speak the language of force because I believe unfortunately that this British government understands nothing else.” This May, both Britain and France sent gunboats to the waters around Jersey during a protest of roughly 60 French vessels outside its capital, St Helier’s port.

As COP26 delegates began to arrive in the UK

Saturday, Britain’s Brexit minister Lord Frost threatened to invoke Article 16 of the UK’s withdrawal agreement with the EU, unilaterally suspending elements of the deal.

President Macron and Prime Minister Johnson held a half-hour one-on-one discussion on Sunday but emerged bellicose. Macron insisted, “The ball is in Britain’s court. If the British make no movement, the measures of 2 November will have to be put in place.”

Johnson accused France of trying to “punish” the UK for Brexit, adding, “It will be for the French to decide if they want to step away from the threats they have made in recent days about breaching the Brexit agreement... Our position has not changed.”

With COP26 underway, UK Foreign Secretary Liz Truss set a deadline of 48 hours for France to withdraw its proposed additional checks on UK goods and fishing ships before initiating legal action. Truss accused France of making “completely unreasonable threats” and behaving “unfairly”.

Commentators began to issue dismayed statements that this affair was upstaging an international gathering of the world’s governments, supposedly meant to coordinate a response to the existential threat of climate change.

The *Observer*’s front page on Sunday warned, “France and UK told: End dispute or you’ll wreck Cop26 summit”. It quoted Chris Venables, head of politics at environmental charity Green Alliance, saying, “It’s quite frankly ridiculous that this row could destabilise the start of Cop26.”

Ian Dunt, a columnist for the *i* newspaper, wrote, “COP26 is being undermined by nationalist jingoism”. He concluded, “here we are, squabbling like children, while the world burns around us.”

At the eleventh hour, Macron told reporters Monday

evening that France had suspended its planned measures against Britain. He explained, “Since this afternoon, discussions have resumed on the basis of a proposal I made to prime minister Johnson. The talks need to continue.”

Frost will meet France’s minister for European Union (EU) affairs Clément Beaune in Paris Thursday.

Whether or not Britain and France manage to keep up appearances for the duration of COP26, the fundamental tensions between the two will remain unresolved. The fact that the first days of the summit were overshadowed by such a fierce dispute over so miniscule an economic issue points to the major geopolitical interests at work under the surface.

Britain continues to pursue membership of an inner circle of a US-led political and military alliance, directed primarily against China, which it hopes will help sideline the EU. Crossed swords with France are an opportunity to put pressure on European fault lines.

France is seeking to stop these plans in their tracks and build the EU into a bloc capable of striking agreements with America on its own terms, especially as regards differing agendas for conflict with Russia and China. It hopes to make the UK an example of the fact that, in the words of French Prime Minister Jean Castex writing to President of the European Commission Ursula von der Leyen last week, “leaving the Union is more damaging than remaining in it.”

Both Johnson and Macron are also playing to their right-wing constituencies—Johnson over asserting post-Brexit sovereignty and Macron on the question of French fishing, which has a symbolic status with the far-right whose candidates are hotly contesting him for the presidency in next year’s election.

The concern expressed by political commentators over this Anglo-French conflict is motivated less by its impact on potential climate agreements—except to the degree that it threatened to shatter the fraud of serious international action—but its implications for the stability and predatory ambitions of world imperialism.

Financial Times columnist Gideon Richman was most explicit, writing on Monday, “UK-French rivalry puts the west at risk”. He warned, “The western alliance cannot afford that. The poison between the UK and France is liable to spread and infect Nato, the G7 and international negotiations on everything from climate change to trade.

“UK-French frictions will also make it harder to form common western positions in disputes with China and Russia. Thomas Wright of the Brookings Institution worries that Britain and France risk turning into ‘the Japan and South Korea of Europe’—two close American allies that are also bitter rivals.”

Rachman’s proposed solution only emphasises how deep the inter-imperialist crisis goes. “To use the language of counselling,” he writes, “the Americans need to ‘stage an intervention’.” But he is forced to acknowledge, “America’s ability to play the role of honest broker is complicated by Aukus [the agreement on nuclear military technology between the US, UK and Australia which overwrote a prior agreement between Australia and France].”

“Complicated” is an understatement. The other diplomatic fiasco vying for top billing at COP26 is the feud between Macron and Australian Prime Minister Scott Morrison.

On Sunday, Macron accused Morrison of lying about his intentions to renege on the original submarine deal with France. Morrison accused Macron of levelling “slurs” and “sledging off Australia”. He responded on Tuesday by leaking a private text sent to him by the French president ahead of the AUKUS announcement, a move denounced by French officials.

Macron’s hostility to Morrison is a none-too-veiled expression of frustration and distrust with the chief architect of the AUKUS deal, the United States, which President Joe Biden’s admission of “clumsy” diplomacy will do nothing to placate.

Although technically playing out on the sidelines of COP26, these conflicts present a far more accurate picture of international relations and capitalism’s response to climate change than the main event. The imperialist interests and tensions on show exclude any measures which impinge on the profit motives of each state’s major corporations and vital national industries. They make impossible any genuine global collaboration on any of the crises confronting humanity.



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