



The US is considering a funnel of substantive elements of the Doha Climate Summit away from the UN framework and into the Major Economies Forum (MEF), a platform of the world's largest CO2 emitters, EurActiv has learned.

Since 1992, the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) has provided an umbrella for talks to curb global greenhouse gas emissions, and on 26 November, will host the COP18 Climate Summit in Qatar.

But it has been confirmed to EurActiv that Washington is increasingly looking to shift policy action to the MEF whose members account for some 85% of global emissions, and which the US views as a more comfortable venue for agreeing climate goals.

If the idea gains traction, it could demote the UNFCCC to a forum for discussing the monitoring, reporting and verification of emissions reductions projects, sources say.

Michael Starbæk Christensen, the deputy head of cabinet for EU Climate Commissioner Connie Hedegaard, said he expected the US to convene another MEF forum soon which could be fruitful for discussing raised climate ambitions.

"We need to broaden the group to work together on this and whether it is inside or outside the UNFCCC, by all means do it outside," he told a Green Party conference in the European Parliament on 15 November.

"Ideally we would like to see as much happening inside the UNFCCC as possible," he continued, "but if we can engage with the US in other forums, it is the action that counts".

Brussels sees the MEF as a complement - rather than an alternative - to the UNFCCC, and is mindful of giving the newly-elected President Obama time to finesse his climate agenda.

It would be considered a "provocation" if the US was to unilaterally leave the UNFCCC process itself, sources say, and could potentially split the world into rival climate blocks led by Washington and Beijing.

The MEF is a successor to the Major Economies Meetings set up by President Bush, and criticised by several governments for undermining the UN process.

Its participants include: Australia, Brazil, Canada, China, the European Union, France, Germany, India, Indonesia, Italy, Japan, Korea, Mexico, Russia, South Africa, the United Kingdom, and the United States.

Uncompromising talk

Asked by EurActiv about the consequences of moving climate processes to the MEF, Christiana Figueres, the UNFCCC's secretary-general, was uncompromising.

MEF forums provided a helpful and informal space in which new ideas put forward within the UNFCCC could be candidly aired and clarified, she said.

But "the one and only place where formal negotiations and, above all, decisions take place and where treaties are negotiated is the UNFCCC," she stressed.

"Should governments change that, that's of course the purview of government, but I don't see any government - including the government of the US - currently with the intent of changing that," she said.

EurActiv understands that Washington would prefer to reach a domestically saleable agreement within the UNFCCC framework but is prepared to ink a framework agreement in Doha with MEF members alone.

This could be used as a stick to pressure developing world countries to sign up to an agreement that falls short of expectations on Common But Differentiated Responsibilities (CBDR), a core UNFCCC principle, centred on the concept of equity between poor and rich nations.

Common but different

Article 3 of the UNFCCC says that "parties should protect the climate system for the benefit of future and present generations of humankind on the basis of equity and in accordance with their common but differentiated responsibility and respective capabilities. Accordingly, developed countries should take the lead in combating climate change and the adverse effects thereof".

However this principle was slightly morphed at the UNFCCC's last Durban Climate Summit with a platform agreement obliging all nations to commit to future emissions reductions, within a framework taking CBDR into account.

Despite the richer North's historic responsibility for atmospheric CO₂ concentrations, China recently overtook the US as the world's largest carbon dioxide emitter yet has no CO₂ reductions obligations.

Beijing counters that such figures do not reflect its emissions per capita, which are well below the US's, but fast approaching the European average. A consensus holds that if the planet is to keep within the IPCC's target 2 degrees target for global warming, they will need to fall.

"Climate change requires all countries to act, but the central question of who should do how much can't be sidestepped by shifting the discussion outside the UN," said Lies Craeynest, a senior advisor for Oxfam.

Only a fair deal agreed at the UN could achieve this, she said. "The US should stop seeing the pursuit of equity as an obstacle, and start seeing it as an opportunity to ensure all countries take on greater efforts," Craeynest added.