COP30: Europe Under Pressure Without the US

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COP30: Europe Under Pressure in the Absence of the US

The 30th edition of the UN Conference of Parties took place in Belem, Brazil, at a moment in time when one absence became apparent to me almost immediately as I moved through the conference halls. Not in the sense of empty seats or closed meeting rooms, but in the quieter way conversations unfolded. In side events I attended, bilateral meetings I participated in, and informal exchanges I had with European delegations, the United States was rarely referenced as a source of inspiration, but rather as a strategic anchor or counterweight. Its absence was felt less as a loss of leadership and

more as a constraint on the negotiation space itself, shaping expectations and implicitly limiting how far discussions were willing to go. Ultimately leaving Europe to shoulder a disproportionate share of responsibility for steering the climate agenda, including discussions on the energy transition.

Europe under the spotlight

At the same time, this absence placed Europe firmly in the spotlight. With one of the world's largest economies no longer acting as a consistent point of reference, all eyes were on the European Union. This was evident not only at the level of heads of state, but also in interactions with civil society and youth representatives. European delegations were cautious yet attentive, aware that every commitment or hesitation on issues like fossil fuel dependence, renewable energy rollout, and the energy transition could ripple far beyond the climate agenda into global security dynamics. In many conversations, we discussed not just securing enough critical minerals to continue the energy transition, but also where these minerals come from. Concentrated supply chains in a few countries create dependency and leverage, introducing both geopolitical risk and strategic vulnerability. Strengthening Europe's strategic autonomy and resilience means considering both sides of the coin.

Youth shaping the debate

For many European youth delegates, myself included, this created both responsibility and opportunity. European youth were visible, organised, and able to engage directly with their delegations. In meetings and informal conversations I took part in, we spoke not only about climate finance but also about the security implications of the energy transition, how Europe can maintain access to critical minerals, reduce dependency on volatile supply chains, and ensure that geopolitical dynamics do not compromise its strategic resilience. Our positions were coherent and taken seriously. In one brief but meaningful moment, I handed EU Climate Commissioner Wopke Hoekstra a youth position paper on climate financing for future generations. Small as it was, it showed how youth perspectives were becoming a more critical part of European climate decisions.

Energy, influence and strategic stakes

A clear illustration of Europe's new responsibilities came at the joint press conference held by the Netherlands and Colombia, announcing the first international conference on phasing out fossil fuels. This initiative is more than a symbolic climate gesture; in a context where major global players are absent or hesitant, Europe was expected to step forward, signalling both climate ambition and strategic positioning in global energy networks. Phasing out fossil fuels is not only about reducing emissions, but it also directly affects global energy dependencies, the leverage certain states hold

over energy supply, and the stability of geopolitical relationships. Climate, energy and security policy intersect here; phasing out fossil fuels reshapes who holds power, who depends on whom, and how states can use energy as a tool or a weapon.

When ambition meets its limits

Nevertheless, strong youth engagement and European visibility could not prevent leadership from faltering at decisive moments. In bilateral discussions, it was clear that ambitious positions had not been sufficiently negotiated in advance. Unlike Paris, where extensive preparatory diplomacy and coalition-building laid the groundwork, COP30 exposed the fragility of even widely supported European positions. Visibility alone was not enough. Without strategic sequencing, policy coherence, and negotiation groundwork, ambition could not translate into action.

And yet, it is precisely in this context that COP30 matters even more than one could picture. From a security perspective, these negotiations are not separate from geopolitical strategy, they are a theatre of it. Decisions about the energy transition, fossil fuel phase-out, mineral security, and strategic autonomy carry consequences for global power balances, regional stability, and the ability of states to project influence. COP30 reminded me that climate ambition requires the same meticulous planning and long-term diplomacy as any other core security priority. Visibility, moral authority, or strong youth input are insufficient without the political architecture to make them effective.