

Climate change: an important foreign policy issue

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It does not often happen that the Deputy Prime Minister of the UK storms out of a conference room with a face like thunder, exclaiming 'I'm gutted!' to the expectant throng of journalists. It did happen, however, last November in The Hague, after the breakdown of negotiations at the Sixth Conference of the Parties (COP-6) to the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change (FCCC).¹ The failure of this conference revealed, among other things, some strong underlying tensions in the transatlantic relationship, with the chief US negotiator accusing 'green fundamentalists' in the European delegation of having obstructed a deal. Raw nerves were exposed inside the EU as well: the British head of delegation accused the French negotiator of having been unable to follow the negotiations properly during the final night, to which the French minister replied by calling him 'macho'—and other European colleagues came to her rescue. Unusually, all these rather undiplomatic exchanges were made publicly, via the press.

In view of this tumult, it is perhaps not surprising that climate change can be expected to remain a highly fascinating policy area. However, it is the sheer scale of the implications of the problem, not its entertainment value, that will ensure its continued presence high on the political agenda in the new century. The leading scientific body on this issue, the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC),² has recently concluded that the potential impact of unrestricted 'global warming' might be worse than it judged in its last assessment of 1995. According to the scenarios of the Third Assessment Report,

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¹ For documents and other material on that conference, see the website of the Secretariat at <<http://www.unfccc.de>>. The Conference of the Parties constitutes the highest decision-making body under the FCCC and meets once a year; the first meeting took place in 1995 in Berlin.

² The IPCC is jointly organized by the World Meteorological Organization (WMO) and the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP). On its history and operation see John Lanchbery and David Victor, 'The role of science in the global climate negotiations', in Helge Ole Bergesen and Georg Parman, eds, *Green globe yearbook of international cooperation on environment and development* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), pp. 29–59.