

COP30 in Belém: Leadership between two worlds

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Professor Richard Beardsworth continues his analysis of expectations for COP30 in Belém, as he navigates leadership between two realms, one rules-based and co-operative, the other nationalist-populist and centrifugal

Two worlds

We enter [COP30](#) living, paradoxically, in two worlds – one rules-based and co-operative, the other nationalist- populist and centrifugal, treating obligations as optional.

The first descends from the post-war multilateral order that organised collective security and prosperity; climate co-operation since Rio (1992) and Paris (2015) is that order applied the atmosphere. In it, states across the North and South aim for co-operative agreements both to keep [1.5°C credible](#) and to embed [climate justice as a measurable goal](#). This world depends on rules, transparency and reciprocity: for example, national mitigation goals (NDCs) that shape domestic policy; international finance that is predictable and grant-based; adaptation indicators that match support to need.

The second resists international constraint and weaponises climate policy, recasting it as a threat to sovereignty, competitiveness and identity. It fragments co-operation, erodes trust, and normalises unilateral opt-outs. COP30 will unfold in the overlap of these two political worlds. Its outcome will hinge on whether leaders can hold the co-operation line while addressing the political-economy anxieties that a voracious counter-order exploits.

What leadership requires

The [Presidency's task](#) at COP30 is leadership, not choreography. Belém needs a disciplined package that turns headline ambition into executable policy and funded implementation:

1. Paris-compatible NDCs – especially from the G20 – closing [the 2030 ambition gap](#) through near-term measures in power, industry, transport, agriculture, forestry and land use (AFOLU), and methane abatement;
2. A finance decision delivering [grant-based and front-loaded flows of capital](#) through 2030, with simplified direct access and debt-sensitive terms for the most climate-vulnerable;
3. Operational adaptation through a concise [Global Goal on Adaptation \(GGA\)](#) indicator set tied to finance, tracking and delivery; and

4. A justice pillar that embeds [Indigenous Peoples' leadership](#), forest protection/restoration, and enforceable safeguards (including [the 'free, prior and informed consent' \(FPIC\) of Indigenous Peoples](#)) across Article 6, dedicated funding channels, and the cover decision. This pillar will partner with COP30's [Global Mutirão initiative](#) to rally collective action and reshape climate governance.

Brazil: Climate leadership and domestic headwinds

Brazil itself straddles the two worlds above. The COP Presidency is pushing mitigation signals, adaptation indicators, Indigenous leadership, and forests – but the government is itself split between a diplomatic wing that wants Belém to succeed and an economic wing focused on profits, jobs, and exports. Alongside foreign affairs, environment and indigenous-minded ministries that back a justice-centred COP, economic portfolios (Mines, Energy and Agriculture) are pressing for agribusiness expansion and [new offshore oil along the Equatorial Margin](#). This split is not only a result of socio-political and market pressures; it is an institutional contradiction inside the state.

The credibility test of COP30 leadership is whether the Presidency can coordinate the meeting in such a way as to insulate COP deliverables from domestic approvals that would undercut them: align the forest-justice narrative with enforceable safeguards; tenure finance and FPIC; and acknowledge that new extraction approvals would inevitably undermine the integrity and credibility of Belém's outcomes.

Four tests of success

This leadership will consequently be judged on four fronts:

1. Ambition:

Whether G20 NDCs arrive aligned with 1.5°C and backed by credible sectoral policies rather than distant promises.

2. Money:

Whether the finance outcome provides a year-by-year schedule of public and grant targets – clearly tagged for adaptation and [loss and damage](#), with direct access for vulnerable states and a pathway to scale by 2035.

3. Resilience:

Whether adaptation moves from aspiration to operation through an indicator set that channels resources to frontline communities and climate-sensitive systems: health, water, food and nature.

4. Inclusion with integrity:

Whether [Article 6](#) launches with corresponding adjustments, transparency and grievance mechanisms; and whether Indigenous leadership and forest guardianship receive accessible finance so that communities become effective rights-holders, not COP photo backdrops, helping to steer the Mutirão initiative.

Law as a lever

One lever of leadership in this struggle is the International Court of Justice's (ICJ) recent [advisory opinion](#). By affirming states' duties of prevention, due diligence and co-operation – and treating 1.5°C as the operative yardstick – the ICJ reframes ambition as a matter of legal responsibility, not only political choice and will. That matters in Belém. It lets the Presidency argue that a grant-based and front-loaded finance decision is part of the international duty to co-operate with those “specially affected”; that adaptation indicators must be tied to means of implementation to satisfy due diligence; and that an Article 6 launch without corresponding adjustments, transparency, FPIC and grievance could court legal and reputational risk.

By grounding duties in customary international law, the opinion helps fill the U.S. federal vacuum: SIDS, Africa, Latin America, the European Union, and engaged U.S. subnational actors can now align around a legal baseline even if Washington is absent. Framed constructively, this is not a threat of litigation but a form of legally grounded risk management that finance ministries should understand: stronger rules reduce exposure to lawsuits, stranded assets and market-access barriers. In Belém, international law can help narrow the space for nationalist exceptionalism and widen the path for a rules-based, justice-centred settlement.

Why Belém matters

For these reasons, COP30 is not just another climate summit; it is the bellwether of our times. With the hegemon of the post-war order stepping back from multilateral leadership, Belém will test whether a coalition of Southern and middle-power states, working with European and subnational partners, can sustain collective climate governance.

The South is not a single voice; it bears the contradictions of development demands, sovereign debt distress and domestic politics; and Brazil exemplifies those tensions. Yet leadership is not the absence of contradiction; it is the capacity to hold competing imperatives together and move forward from them.

If COP30 delivers Paris-compatible G20 NDCs, a finance decision that restores trust, an operational adaptation framework, and a justice-centred forest package – anchored in the ICJ's articulation of states' duties – it will show that the rules-based, multilateral world can still organise action amid political fragmentation. If not, it will signal that the counter-order – comprising grievances, economic nationalism, authoritarianism, and sphere-of-influence geopolitics – is tightening its grip on climate governance. The outcome in Belém will be historic.

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