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What do you mean: 'Common Time Frame'?

by Benito Müller

This blog post looks at the issue of whether it is in the mandate of the Art. 4.10 negotiations to seek a single common time frame for NDCs. Based on a comparative analysis of the six official UN language texts, the post concludes not only that this is indeed the case, but also that the outcome of these negotiations ought to include the adoption of common end-years for NDCs.



The concept of 'Common Time Frame' appears only once in the the Paris Agreement (PA), namely in the Article 4.10 stipulation that "common time frames for nationally determined contributions" (NDCs) shall be considered at the first session of the governing body of the PA. In December 2018, at this first session in Katowice, common time frames were accordingly considered and it was decided that "Parties *shall* apply common time frames" to their NDCs to be implemented from 2031 onward ([Decision 6/CMA.1](#)), but without any fur-

ther clarification as to what they might be, indeed without any clarification as to what the key 'time frame' concept refers to in this context.

Notwithstanding this ambiguity, or maybe because of it, there has been a heated debate about the mandate of the negotiations under this Article with regard to whether it would be permissible to negotiate a **single** common time frame, given the article in the English language text refers to 'time frames' in the plural.

The aim of this blog post is to try and understand better what Parties actually had in mind in Paris in this context. For this, it is useful to have a closer look at the official six UN language texts of the Paris Agreement (and its implementing [Decision 1/CP.21](#)), not only because it stands to reason that Parties would have insisted on changes if they disagreed with the language in their official language texts, but also because these six texts are all to be considered "equally authentic"[Art. 29,PA].

The French Art. 4.10 text, for one, refers to "*calendriers communs*" (*common calendars/schedules/timetables*), while the Spanish and Russian texts invoke *common deadlines* ("*los plazos comunes*" and "*obshchikh srokakh*" *общих сроках*, respectively), which obviously can jointly make up one or several *calendries communs*.

The Arabic and Chinese texts use direct translations of the two nouns that make up the English compound 'time frame', with the Arabic using the plural form "*alatir alzamaniya*" *الاطر الزمنية* (*time frames*).

The Chinese text allows for both a singular and a plural reading of "*kuàngjià*" *框架* (*frame*), although the juxtaposition with "*gòngtóng*" *共同* (*common*) makes the singular reading the more natural one. In any case, the important thing here is that the Chinese text clearly allows both for **common time frames** and for **a common time frame** to be considered under the Article.

One therefore clearly needs to be cautious with basing substantive claims on grammatical form alone: There was evidently no agreement among Parties in Paris that a single common time frame for NDCs should not be an option. Accordingly it has to be accepted that it is as much part of the mandate of the Art. 4.10 negotiations to develop a single common time frame as it is to adopt a plurality thereof.

The different language texts of the PA also re-confirm two different basic interpretations of the key Art. 4.10 concept, namely a 'material' and a 'procedural' one: "The material interpretation is about time intervals associated with the NDCs – to be precise, about target periods and implementation periods. The procedural interpretation is about timetables for the processes of communicating and updating NDCs." [Benito Müller, '[Common Time Frames](#)': What & Why? A Contribution to the Debate on Article 4.10 of the Paris Agreement, 2018]

The English compound noun 'time-frame' admits both readings (Box 1), while the French, Spanish and Russian texts are anchored in the procedural interpretation.

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time frame, *n.*

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Pronunciation: [?] Brit. /ˈtaɪm freɪm/, U.S. /ˈtaɪm ˌfreɪm/
Frequency (in current use): ●●●●●○●○
Origin: Formed within English, by compounding. **Etymons:** [TIME *n.*](#),
Etymology: < [TIME *n.*](#) + [FRAME *n.*](#)

1. A conceptual framework or frame of reference within which the time-related aspects of something may be considered.

1893—2004 (

2. A limited and established period of time during which an event, sequence of events, etc., took place, is planned to take place, or is thought to have taken place; a schedule.

1946—2010 (

Box 1. OED Definition

The only substantive use of the concept in the Paris outcome is in paragraphs 23 and 24 of Decision 1/CP.21, where it is used to identify Parties with particular types of intended nationally determined contributions (INDC), namely those whose INDC pursuant to decision 1/CP.20 **contains a time frame up to** 2025 (or 2030 respectively).

As such, the content of Decision 1/CP.21 would have been exactly the same if paragraphs 23 and 24 had instead referred to Parties whose INDC pursuant to decision 1/CP.20 **ends in** 2025 (resp. 2030).

What about the (only) other two occurrences of the concept in the Paris outcome, i.e. in paragraph 27 and Article 4.10? Could they have been equally re-expressed by reference to end-years without a change of content?

Consider the Spanish text, where the key concept can be read as being expressed in terms of 'deadlines':

- Para 23 [24]: requests those Parties whose INDC pursuant to decision 1/CP.20 **include a deadline up to** ("comprenda un plazo hasta") 2025 [2030].
- Para 27: Agrees that the information to be provided by Parties ... may include ... the **deadlines** ("los plazos") and/or periods for implementation ...
- Art. 4.10: shall consider **common deadlines** for NDCs ("los plazos comunes para las contribuciones determinadas a nivel nacional").

A simple substitution with a reference to 'NDC end-years' would obviously not conserve the meaning of this language, as there are other deadlines associated with NDCs than just their end-years. However, in light of paragraphs 23 and 24, the end-year of NDCs clearly must be one of the deadlines to be considered under Art. 4.10. Given [Decision 6/CMA.1](#), this in turn implies that:

- Parties *shall (inter alia)* apply common end-years to their NDCs to be implemented from 2031 onward.

It may well be that not all of the six language texts of the Paris outcome lend themselves to arrive at the same conclusion, but as long as none of the others explicitly contradict it, it can be argued that common NDC end years need to be considered as a legitimate outcome of the Art. 4.10 negotiations.

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Appendix: Decision 1/CP.21. Time Frames

23. Requests those Parties whose intended nationally determined contribution pursuant to decision 1/CP.20 **contains a time frame up to 2025** to communicate by 2020 a new nationally determined contribution and to do so every five years thereafter pursuant to Article 4, paragraph 9, of the Agreement;

24. Also requests those Parties whose intended nationally determined contribution pursuant to decision 1/CP.20 **contains a time frame up to 2030** to communicate or update by 2020 these contributions and to do so every five years thereafter pursuant to Article 4, paragraph 9, of the Agreement;

27. Agrees that the information to be provided by Parties communicating their nationally determined contributions, in order to facilitate clarity, transparency and understanding, may include, as appropriate, *inter alia*, quantifiable information on the reference point (including, as appropriate, a base year), **time frames** and/or periods for implementation, scope and coverage, planning processes, assumptions and methodological approaches including those for estimating and accounting for anthropogenic greenhouse gas emissions and, as appropriate, removals, and how the Party considers that its nationally determined contribution is fair and ambitious, in the light of its national circumstances, and how it contributes towards achieving the objective of the Convention as set out in its Article 2;

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