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Corresponding author:
Peter Dauvergne;
Email: peter.dauvergne@ubc.ca

The petrochemical historical bloc: Exposing the extent and depth of opposition to a high-ambition plastics treaty

Peter Dauvergne[1], Rob Ralston[2], Jennifer Clapp[3] and Jack Taggart[4]

[1]Department of Political Science, University of British Columbia, Vancouver, BC, Canada; [2]School of Social and Political Science, University of Edinburgh, Edinburgh, UK; [3]School of Environment, Resources and Sustainability, University of Waterloo, Waterloo, ON, Canada and [4]School of History, Anthropology, Philosophy and Politics, Queen's University Belfast, Belfast, UK

Abstract

Support for a high-ambition plastics treaty is gaining strength, particularly within global civil society and among lower-income developing countries. Still, opposition to binding measures – such as obligations to regulate petrochemicals or reduce global plastics production – remains intense and widespread. We propose the concept of a "petrochemical historical bloc" to help reveal the depth and extent of the forces opposing strong global governance of plastics. At the bloc's core are petrostates and industry, especially producers of oil and gas feedstock, petrochemicals and plastics. Extending its influence are broader social forces – including certain political and economic institutions, consultancy firms and nongovernmental organizations – that reinforce and legitimize the discourses and tactics thwarting a high-ambition treaty. This bloc is driving up plastics production, externalizing the costs of pollution, distorting scientific knowledge and lobbying to derail negotiations. Yet the petrochemical historical bloc is neither monolithic nor all-powerful. Investigating differing interests and evolving politics within this bloc, we contend, can expose disingenuous rhetoric, weaken low-ambition alliances and reveal opportunities to overcome resistance to ambitious governance. In light of this, and toward highlighting fractures and potential counter-alliances and strategies, we call for a global research inquiry to map the full scope and nature of the petrochemical historical bloc.

Impact statement

This letter introduces the concept of a "petrochemical historical bloc" to help expose the deep-rooted resistance to a high-ambition plastics treaty. Industry and petrostates form the bloc's core, with aligned political institutions and social forces amplifying its influence. This bloc is obstructing treaty negotiations, disseminating misinformation and intensifying plastic pollution. Yet scientific evidence of harm is mounting, and counter-alliances demanding action are growing stronger. A deeper understanding of the bloc's interests, fractures and political dynamics, we contend, can reveal strategic openings for counterforces to advance treaty ambition. This letter calls for a global research agenda to investigate the petrochemical historical bloc – its actors, influence and vulnerabilities – to help pave the way for binding commitments to eliminate hazardous petrochemicals, rein in plastics production and finance just transitions to low-plastic economies.

Over half of state delegations called for a high-ambition plastics treaty during negotiations in Busan, South Korea, in 2024. Differences exist in what this means in precise terms. But broadly, these states support legally binding targets, commitments and timelines across the full life cycle of plastics, from raw material extraction to waste management. They want measures to reduce global plastics production and regulate chemicals in plastics. And they are calling for financing sufficient to enable just transitions to low-plastic economies in developing countries.

Opposition to these demands is fierce. Understanding why, we argue, requires going beyond just accounting for the power of petrostates or conducting firm-level or sectoral analyses. The concept of a "petrochemical historical bloc," we propose, offers valuable insights into the extent and depth of opposition to a high-ambition treaty. This bloc comprises more than just the petrostates, corporations and business alliances with a common interest in expanding plastics production, but also includes international and national institutions, certain large nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), consultancy firms and broader social forces of consent that legitimize the profit-making of the global plastics industry.

Extraordinarily powerful material, ideological and political forces within this petrochemical historical bloc, we further argue, are driving up plastics production and thwarting a high-ambition plastics treaty. Critically, however, we are not suggesting that this bloc is uniform or

monolithic. Every historical bloc, as the Italian political theorist Antonio Gramsci (1971, p. 391) reminds us, is a "relation of forces in dynamic motion" comprising diverse sets of alliances of varying strength and longevity. Countervailing forces, moreover, can overpower a historical bloc. This potential is vital to keep in mind, especially as counterforces to the petrochemical historical bloc appear to be strengthening as demands to tackle plastic pollution intensify, including from vulnerable developing countries, Indigenous people, independent scientists and "surging biojustice environmentalism from below" (Dauvergne and Clapp, 2023).

Negotiating a high-ambition plastics treaty will not be easy. The reach and influence of the petrochemical historical bloc have been steadily rising over the past half-century. Moreover, the geopolitical and market turbulence unleashed by the Trump administration in 2025 has further empowered this bloc, not only because of a rollback of environmental regulations in the United States but also because of the general destabilization of multilateral governance. In this new geopolitical era, economic and trade competition for resources is intensifying worldwide, including for petrochemicals, where investment has been soaring in recent years as fossil fuel firms look to expand beyond energy markets (Research and Markets, 2025).

Opposition to treaty obligations to reduce plastics production is especially intense. Rising production of plastics, of which 98% derive from petrochemicals, is a core source of the power of the petrochemical historical bloc. Global plastics production doubled from 2000 to 2020 and now exceeds 450 Mt per year. Even more production is on the way: set to triple by 2060 (from 2019 levels), if trends continue (OECD, 2022, p. 62). There is equally strong opposition to demands to regulate petrochemical processing. This resistance is hardly surprising, as the externalization of the ecological costs of this processing – from greenhouse gas emissions to chemical contamination to plastic pollution – is what holds down costs and enables high profits for the petrochemical historical bloc.

The bloc's structural dependency on expanding production and externalizing costs helps explain why petrostates like Russia, Iran and Saudi Arabia have drawn red lines through any measure to reduce plastics production, and why these states are arguing that the regulation of petrochemical processing is beyond the treaty's scope. This also helps explain why so many governments, corporations and industry allies frame plastic pollution as a problem of "waste mismanagement," and support downstream measures, such as educating consumers, collecting more waste and increasing recycling.

This structural dependency further helps explain why plastic pollution is escalating, and why poorer communities and fragile ecosystems are especially vulnerable to its harms. More than 360 Mt of plastic waste is now being generated each year, with single-use packaging and short-life products comprising two-thirds. Nearly a quarter of this 360 Mt of waste is openly burned or ends up in uncontrolled dumps or in the environment, with pollution especially severe in developing countries (OECD, 2024, p. 45). This disproportionate and acute pollution of marginalized communities reflects the broader systemic injustices of waste colonialism, whereby powerful groups offload the costs of their waste onto those with less power (Liboiron, 2021; Manglou et al., 2022; Peryman et al., 2024).

Delegates and observers seeking a high-ambition treaty to end this pollution have tended to spotlight the roles and responsibilities of global brands (e.g., Coca-Cola), transnational oil and gas companies (e.g., ExxonMobil) and – to a lesser extent – international chemical producers (e.g., Dow). For sure, these firms are key sources of plastic pollution. Yet this focus on well-known companies must not allow others within the petrochemical historical bloc to slip off the radar of negotiators. Others include state-owned oil and gas corporations, consultancy firms backing preferred industry solutions and small- and medium-sized companies producing and selling unbranded plastic products (de Groot and MacNeil, 2025).

Treaty negotiators have tended as well to focus on measures to reduce macroplastic pollution, such as plastic bags, bottles, containers and fishing gear. Microplastics and nanoplastics entering the environment directly during the use of consumer products, however, pose highly concerning health and ecological risks for people and the planet (Gonçalves et al., 2024; Villarrubia-Gómez et al., 2024). Macroplastic litter does eventually break down, and mechanical recycling is itself a significant cause of microplastic pollution (Cusworth et al., 2024). Yet, at least so far, the major industries producing consumer products causing direct-entry microplastic pollution – such as agricultural inputs (plastic-encased fertilizers and polymer-coated seeds), tires and synthetic clothing – have been able to keep a relatively low profile in the treaty talks (Dauvergne, 2024). Securing a high-ambition treaty is going to require doing far more to hold these low-visibility, high-impact actors within the petrochemical historical bloc accountable for escalating microplastic and nanoplastic pollution.

A high-ambition treaty is also going to necessitate broad geographic coverage of the petrochemical historical bloc. It is especially vital to include Asia, particularly China, where plastics production has been rising quickly in recent years. In 2023, Asia accounted for well over half of global plastics production, while North America produced 17.1%, Europe 12.3%, the Middle East and Africa 8.5%, Central and South America 3.8% and others 2.5% (Plastics Europe, 2024). In that year, China alone supplied one-third of the world's plastics. China's share of global production is set to increase even more, as its installed petrochemical capacity rose from around 140 Mt in 2020 to over 200 Mt in 2025 (Bajpai, 2024).

Achieving a high-ambition treaty will further require negotiators to be very wary of the discourses and proposed "solutions" of the petrochemical historical bloc. The technological fixes touted by this bloc, such as chemical recycling, involve substantial downsides (Bell and Gitlitz, 2023). These fixes form part of broader calls for "extended producer responsibility" and plastics "circularity." Here, industry actors and their allies are presenting gilded projections of trillion-dollar opportunities from investing in plastic waste (Laird, 2022). Yet these projections rely on environmentally risky and commercially untested technologies. The fixes of the petrochemical historical bloc, moreover, do little to internalize environmental costs, but instead are designed primarily to delay, deflect and distract efforts to reduce plastics production (Mah, 2021, 2022, 2023).

This bloc includes an array of competing, differing and shifting interests. Petrostates, oil and gas corporations and petrochemical producers are leading the charge against upstream regulation of global plastics supply chains. Midstream and downstream consumer goods companies with global brands, meanwhile, are taking a different tack. Increasingly, they are "hedging" risks and forming "pro-regulatory" coalitions to diffuse criticism and lobby for a treaty advantageous to these firms, such as rules raising market-entry costs and hurdles for new firms (Ralston and Taggart, 2025). Corporate-friendly NGOs are backing and participating in these coalitions, such as the Business Coalition for a Global Plastics Treaty, which the WWF and Ellen MacArthur Foundation

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co-convene, and includes companies such as Nestlé, Unilever, Coca-Cola and PepsiCo.

Such hedging, high-ambition negotiators should keep in mind, partly reflects a strategy to shift conversations and compromises into "multistakeholder partnerships," where industry dominates agendas, metrics and outcomes, but takes little responsibility for implementing solutions. This hedging further reflects a strategy by brand manufacturers and retailers to delay action, minimize business costs, sabotage binding measures, ease regulatory pressures and advocate for voluntary corporate self-governance as "efficient," "pragmatic" and "effective" pathways forward (Vandenberg, 2024).

Still, at least to a limited extent, a more nuanced understanding of the shifting and oscillating strategies of pro-regulatory coalitions within the petrochemical historical bloc may open up opportunities to enhance treaty ambition. The Business Coalition for a Global Plastics Treaty, for instance, has undergone two distinct phases since its founding in 2022. In the first phase from early 2022 to the end of 2023, the Business Coalition presented a vision of a "circular economy for plastics" for the plastics treaty. While the Business Coalition pitched circularity as a transformative alternative to current practices, proposed solutions were imbued with ambiguity. For example, the Business Coalition's policy recommendations emphasized the "recyclability" of short-lived and single-use plastics, steering conversations toward prioritizing mechanical recycling and away from economically disruptive reuse models. Some industry associations (e.g., Plastics Europe and the American Plastics Council) and petrochemical companies (e.g., Chevron-Phillips, Dow, and ExxonMobil) did take more confrontational approaches during this first phase, such as openly challenging the need to reduce plastics production. Still, companies in the Business Coalition were largely aligned in a discourse of "reluctant accommodation."

A second phase of the Business Coalition took hold in 2024 as consumer goods companies with global brands began to differentiate themselves more clearly from the petrochemical sector. In the buildup to INC-4 in Ottawa in 2024, the WWF lead for the Business Coalition told the *Financial Times* that the oil and gas sector's view that expanding plastics production is "the next opportunity for industry" is "really problematic for the rest of us" (Chu et al., 2024). This strategy of differentiation became more pronounced at INC-5 in Busan, with representatives of the Business Coalition applauding a statement by the High Ambition Coalition calling for a reduction in global plastics production (participant observations during INC-5, 2024).

Since early 2024, the Business Coalition has also shifted from more technical policy recommendations for enhancing circularity and recycling to the simplified message that "business needs global rules." Although still emphasizing the value of recyclability and product design, the desirability of global rules on Extended Producer Responsibility (EPR) has become the clear priority for consumer goods companies, with transnational food corporations among the most vocal supporters. Intriguingly, while the respective alliances of petrochemical and consumer goods industries have continued to differentiate their positions, some degree of coordination has occurred across the upstream and downstream of the global plastics industry, with a consensus forming around EPR as a compromise position. The malleability of EPR as a regulatory tool helps explain this alignment within the petrochemical historical bloc, with different interpretations and mechanisms of corporate responsibility being advanced as part of this coordination strategy.

For corporate interests and broader social forces within this bloc, EPR holds out the possibility of a market-based mechanism that avoids destabilizing existing social and economic systems. For transnational brand companies, EPR has the advantage of shifting regulatory interventions away from production and toward waste management, with the potential for corporate actors to exert control through industry-managed schemes. For other actors within the bloc, such as consultants, financial institutions and certain NGOs, EPR provides an opportunity to integrate "plastic credits" (modeled on carbon credits) as an "innovative" financing mechanism to offset plastic waste generation (Moon et al., 2025).

Since the start of 2024, then, global brands have been differentiating themselves discursively from petrochemical firms to appear accommodating and project an image of corporate social responsibility to their customers. Yet, looking more closely, companies within the petrochemical historical bloc are still broadly aligned in advocating for a "waste management treaty" relying primarily on voluntary, market mechanisms to "regulate" industries. This alignment poses a significant risk to a high-ambition treaty as EPR systems favored by industry are set to entrench plastics lock-in, failing to address the huge volumes of multi-material and multi-layer consumer packaging that is exceedingly difficult (if not impossible) to recycle.

Culpepper (2011, p. 17) usefully distinguishes between "quiet" and "noisy" politics, arguing that "business power goes down as political salience goes up." For advocates of a high-ambition treaty, the good news is that the political salience of plastic pollution is rising. Public awareness of the risks and dangers of plastic pollution is growing. Voices demanding action to end plastic pollution are growing louder, especially across the global South. To enthusiastic applause at the closing plenary of the Busan talks, Rwanda (on behalf of 84 countries) and Mexico (on behalf of 94 countries) demanded binding obligations to decrease plastics production, regulate petrochemicals and govern the full life cycle of plastics to protect human health and the global environment.

Hundreds of industry lobbyists will be working the hallways and backrooms of the treaty talks in Geneva in August 2025. Some will be part of state delegations, wielding great influence in closed-door sessions. Many state delegates, meanwhile, will act as agents of corporate interests – as will some NGO observers – some knowingly and intentionally, others unwittingly consenting to the ills of capitalism. Achieving even modest ambition is going to require a concerted, determined and noisy effort to challenge the obstructionist tactics, false claims and deeply rooted power of the petrochemical historical bloc.

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