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**The role of the European Union
in the international climate change regime**

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The role of the European Union in the international climate change regime

Xin Li¹

“Make men work together to show them that beyond their differences and geographical boundaries there lies a common interest.” -Jean Monnet, 1979

Abstract

The issue of climate change has been widely acknowledged as one of the biggest challenges for humankind in the 21st century. The European Union, as one of the world’s major policy players, has established its international leadership position on climate change since the second half of the 1980s. During the past few decades, the EU has combatted climate change both through the implementation of its domestic climate policies and through promoting policy processes at the international level. Although the EU has made a huge effort on the climate issue, its leadership efforts are frequently restricted by internal and external factors, and the United States policies. However, after the Copenhagen summit, the EU leadership in the global climate regime has increased. Since this summit, the EU is on its way to increase its leadership position and close the credibility gap. However, the EU may face many challenges in climate change affairs in the future due to a range of changes within international affairs. This article evaluates the role of the European Union in the global climate change regime and discusses potential development of environmental policies in the future.

Keywords: Climate Change, Environmental Policy, European Union leadership, International Affairs

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The “Soft Power Leader” on the International Stage

The EU began to engage with the international regime for climate change in the late 1980s and has taken action to limit emissions from the burning of fossil fuels (Hill 2011, p.350). “Since the negotiations on the Climate Change Convention began in 1991, the EU has provided leadership in international climate policy by pushing for stringent international commitments” (Oberthür 2008). In the 21st century, under the adoption of the Kyoto Protocol in 1997 and the Marrakech Accords in 2001, the EU enhances their climate policy, fulfills their obligations, and maintains the credibility of the Union’s position. However, in the long period of history, the EU continuously plays a “soft power leader” on the international climate issue, which relies on its general political and economic weight. The EU usually emphasizes the “leadership by example” which means the EU leads through the effect of domestic action taken to solve the climate issue and persuade and argue other countries through diplomacy. According to the European Commission and the European Environment Agency, the EU has overachieved its reduction commitment under the first period of the Kyoto emissions target by 2013 (“EU over-achieved,” 2013). The EU also raised the standards of emission restrictions and proposed the target of CO₂ limitations for the world.

However, the influence of such soft leadership is limited by many factors. First, the EU pursues the directional leadership strategy, which means it cannot use its political and economic power to force other non-EU countries to combat climate change. Second, due to the EU’s nature consisting of multiple actors, it must accommodate both the needs of its member states and those submitting to the international regime (Langtree, 2012). Under this structure, EU external policy on climate change usually takes significant time and effort to coordinate the member states and the European Commission before the international conference and negotiation, which largely limits the EU’s capacities for international outreach. Moreover, because the coherence on international affairs is still weak, it is difficult to reach a consensus when it comes to sensitive issues. For instance, in 1995 the proposal of the European Commission for combined European energy tax failed due to some member states disagreeing. Finally, despite the EU’s efforts in disseminating the perceptions and solutions, the EU external policy is still influenced by the United States and even in some cases, the EU had to give in to the United States. For example, on the Kyoto Protocol of 1997, although the EU took the lead in proposing the emission reduction targets, the final design of the protocol was almost determined by the American proposal. Furthermore, at the Rio summit in 1992, the United States government rejected the EU’s new proposal of a 15% cut in greenhouse gas emission by 2010 and refused to commit itself to binding targets and timetables (Langtree, 2012). Therefore, although the EU tries to play a major leadership role on the international stage, the United States leadership has overwhelming power and is frequently unable to achieve consensus with the EU.

While the EU is striving to play an active and influential leadership in the global climate regime and has a high ambition to protect the environment, it thus far has not fully utilized this potential. Because many internal and external factors have been restricting the EU’s capacities for international outreach and policies, the EU passively plays the role of a “soft power leader”. On the one hand, the EU took the lead in promoting emission cuts, advocating environmental protection, and over-achieving its reduction commitment as a global example. On the other hand, because of the United States’ superpower and the fragile coherence between member states on foreign affairs, the EU has gradually declined its leadership position on the international stage.

However, because many countries are reluctant to take responsibility to account for emission reduction, the EU still plays a global leading actor in a large part.

The Failure of the Copenhagen Accord: Credibility Gap

In the past decade, The EU played a significant role in the Kyoto targets. Without the EU, the Protocol would not have been ratified and the targets would not have been so ambitious (Afionis 2011). However, there still exists a good number of instances where the EU has failed to achieve its climate change objectives (Afionis 2011). The 2009 Copenhagen climate summit marked a big transition for EU's leadership on the global climate change regime. Before the Copenhagen summit, the EU was often portrayed as the spearhead of world efforts for the development of an effective and comprehensive regime on climate change (Bäckstrand 2013). In the 2009 Copenhagen climate summit, the European Commission first released a position paper about low-carbon development and adaptation and planned to build an effective global carbon target. However, the 2009 Copenhagen climate summit failed after all, because the United States and China responded negatively. The primary reason for this failure is because the EU's strategy was too ambitious and problematic to achieve in reality. The EU overestimated the level of emission reductions that it can achieve. While European pressure was the main reason for the strict targets adopted in Kyoto, the Union "had no idea how it would achieve the 15 percent target it proposed" (Victor 2001, p. 115).

However, the main reason why the EU keeps an ambitious target on the climate issue due to showing its leadership on the international stage, focusing "toward the development and reinforcement of an EU foreign" (Afionis 2011). As a result of intra-European tensions, the EU has lagged behind other entities such as the US in the ozone regime-building process, and the European Community had failed to agree on a common line in 1991 during the Yugoslav crisis and had found itself progressively marginalized by the intervention of other international actors, primarily the UN (Afionis 2011, Bretherton and Vogler 2006, p. 5). After that, the EU tried to find a way to reverse this unfavorable situation. Therefore, climate change as a new political area has been seen as a low-cost stage to show the EU leadership's power and influence. The nature of the EU towards the climate global goal is not to concern the environmental problem, but the EU has seen the climate issue "as the stepping stone to stand forth as a strong and unified block on the world scene" (Andresen and Agrawala 2002, p. 45). Therefore, the EU climate proposal was based on self-interest and lacked moral motivation. Setting an example as a directional leader, this measure and motivation are hard to convince other countries to follow. The most important consequence is that the EU lost its credibility on the international stage. Therefore, the EU's real purpose was revealed in the Copenhagen summit and was opposed by other third world countries such as China, India, Brazil, and South Africa. According to Skodvin and Andresen, "in the 1990s it soon became clear that the basis for the EU's relatively ambitious climate policy was 'fortunate circumstances' unrelated to climate policies. Thus, the economic cost of an ambitious policy was

[deemed to be] rather low while the potential political gain was quite high,” (Skodvin and Andresen 2006, p. 22). Another reason is that the US was unwilling to start the negotiation with the EU. The EU’s strategy was to pursue the directional leader, but the fundamental limitation of this leadership was that no one was interested in following.

Overall, the failure of Copenhagen was alarming for the EU to face the strategy’s weakness and address the credibility gap. “The traditional EU strategy that was primarily based on leading by example and persuasion had, it seemed, come to a dead end” (Bäckstrand 2013). With this major setback, the EU understood the need to build a new type of leadership and a strategic coalition to deal with the change of the distribution of power in climate change negotiation (Bäckstrand 2013).

Addressing the Credibility Gap

After the Copenhagen summit, the EU realized that its motivation for climate change is limited and self-interest based, which ultimately declines its leadership on the international plane and harms its external credibility. Therefore, the EU is trying to close the credibility gap between the external target and internal implementation. In March 2007, the European Commission adopted several environmental measures, which attempt to eliminate the credibility gap and increase international leadership on climate change. However, because of the 2009 economic recession, some member states, such as Germany who were unwilling to raise the Union’s ambition level by adopting the 30 percent reduction target, undermined the EU’s climate leadership and credibility again (Afionis 2011).

Future Changes and Crisis: Coronavirus Recession

In 2020, under the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic, the world and Europe will face a great economic crisis. The economic recession accompanying the coronavirus pandemic will lead to large spikes in unemployment and a large decline in income, especially among those countries who are already in precarious positions (Bozorgmehr 2020). Since 2007 the EU has been buffeted by a range of crises, not least the economic and financial crisis (Burns 2020). During the economic recession, the environmental policy slipped down the agenda with long term consequences for environmental quality (Burns 2020). Although the European Commission has launched a high ambitious 2020 strategy target, until now there is a less positive effect. The main reason is because the economic crisis has led to deeper divisions between EU Member State governments, shifting the way in which climate policy is framed and discussed away from environmental goals to purely economic ones (Burns 2020; Skovgaard 2014). The common response of governments faced with the economic crisis is to cut the expenditure and unnecessary funding. However, because the environmental policy emphasizes the long-term benefit, it’s easily attacked in order to achieve the

short goal of recovery. The climate change policy may not be the first priority of the EU in the immediate future, but the EU's green deal proposals can likewise support the general economic recovery (Elkerbout 2020). "The European Commission rightly rebutted the notion that the public health crisis should lead to the EU Climate Law proposal being scrapped" (Elkerbout 2020).

However, in the long term, the COVID-19 pandemic pushes the world into reverse globalization, which limits the cooperation and communication between countries, especially within environmental problems. Although COVID-19 has created unprecedented circumstances, the EU may try to take back the position of the leader of climate change after COVID-19, due to the United States withdrawing from the 2017 Paris Agreement. The United States as a superpower remains as a potential risk for the EU in a primary role with its global leadership. However, after the Brexit dilemma, the EU has faced internal and external integration problems with environmental policy. Due to the challenges presented by COVID-19 and Brexit, the future of EU's climate change foreign affairs seems to have challenges that outweigh opportunities.

Conclusion

In the past decade, the EU has played a traditional soft leader in hopes of becoming a global example to influence other countries. However, after the failure of Copenhagen, the EU realized that the soft leadership strategy had numerous weaknesses and thus pursued building a new type of leadership and strategic coalition in order to address the credibility gap. After 2007, the European Commission eliminated the credibility gap overall by adopting a lot of environmental measures, although the credibility still loses in many cases. However, under the coronavirus recession and a series of changes in international affairs, in the future, the EU will face many challenges in the international climate change regime. These factors may put the EU into a challenging leadership position, but the EU will try to keep its global leadership on the climate issues over the long term. Overall, the EU as a global leader still has a long way to go in fighting climate change.

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