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Does the EU live up to its name as a Global Climate Leader? A case study of the Paris Climate Accord

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Introduction

There has been increasing concern about the state of the environment beginning in the second half of the 20th century, but the modern environmental movement really started in the 1980's, with the release of the Brundtland Report. This report highlighted the fact that human actions are negatively impacting the environment, and collective human action is required in order to develop the world in a way that ensures future generations are able to meet their own needs as well (Report of the world commission on environment and development: Our common future, 1987). This concept is known as sustainable development, and this idea has spawned a great number of international conferences and summits all dealing with the threat of climate change. The European Union (EU) has been actively involved in these negotiations, and for the last 25 years it has pursued and embraced the role of global climate leader, and has become known around the world as a leader in international climate negotiations (Vezirgiannidou, 2015, Yamin, 2000, Gupta and Ringius, 2001, Oberthür, 2017). Throughout this paper the validity of that claim will be explored. The question of whether or not the EU is a global leader/strong negotiating player in international climate negotiations will answered using the EU involvement in the Paris Climate Agreement as a case study. It will be argued that the EU is a strong negotiating player, and has used its resources and position in the international negotiating arena to effectively generate robust environmental policy. First a brief background of EU climate policy will be presented, followed by a recent history of EU involvement in international climate negotiations. Then a background of the Paris Climate Agreement will presented along with EU involvement in the agreement. Given this information, a brief discussion of whether or not the EU is in fact a leader in international climate negotiations will be conducted. Following this a statement will be made with evidence to back up the claim that the EU does live up to its name as a global climate leader.

Background: European Union Climate Policy

The EU is a self-proclaimed leader in global climate negotiations, and its climate and environmental policies have been regarded as a model system and it is closely monitored by countries and regions around the world (Vezirgiannidou, 2015). The EU has agreed, along with the international community, that global warming must not rise more than 2 degrees Celsius from pre-industrial levels if the dangerous impacts of climate change are to be avoided. The EU is currently working to cut the emissions of its member states, encourage other nations to cut their own emissions, and adapt to the inevitable impacts of climate change (European Union, 2016). The three main strategies of EU climate policy are encouraging green growth, emissions trading, and adaptation. The EU has set binding targets for 2020 of a 20% decrease in greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions, a 20% increase in the share of energy consumption from renewable sources, and a 20% decrease in energy consumed through increased energy efficiency. These targets will increase to 40%, 27% and 27% respectively by 2030 (European Union, 2016). Long term, the EU has committed to a reduction in GHG emissions of between 85-90% from 1990 levels by 2050 (European Union, 2016).

The emissions trading scheme is set up under a cap and trade system, where a "cap" on the total amount of certain GHG's that can be emitted is established. This cap is reduced over time to ensure a net decrease in emissions. Emission allowances are then either awarded or bought by companies. These allowances are used to ensure companies stay within the emissions cap. If a company emits more than allowed under the emissions cap, they must surrender emission allowances (or buy more from other companies if they run out) to stay within the emission cap. Companies that emit below the emissions cap can either keep their allowances or sell them to other companies. This system of pricing GHG's encourages emission reduction where it is cheapest to do so, and it also stimulates investment in low-carbon technologies (EU emissions trading system, 2016). The EU

emissions trading system was introduced alongside the European Climate Change Programme (ECCP), which deals with energy security, increasing air quality, reducing GHG emissions, and protecting employment and economic competitiveness (Oztig, 2017).

Climate Change adaptation policies of the EU include modifying building regulations to accommodate future climatic conditions, building flood protection infrastructure and developing drought tolerant crops (European Union, 2016). Additional measures include managing scarce water resources efficiently, choosing forestry practices less vulnerable to storms and fires, and creating wildlife corridors to help with species migration (Adaptation to climate change, 2016).

European Union Role in International Climate Negotiations

The EU is known to be an international leader in climate change negotiations (Vezirgiannidou, 2015, Yamin, 2000, Gupta and Ringius, 2001, Oberthür, 2017). However, the EU has been more influential in some areas of climate negotiation than others. The EU is more effective in influencing policies at the negotiation table than changing the outcome of the final deal. This is exemplified in the fact that the EU was viewed as a leader in negotiations more at UNFCCC conferences in Durban and Bali, and less at the climate summit in Copenhagen (COP15) where a deal was closed (Parker, Karlsson & Hjerpe, 2017). Between the Copenhagen summit in 2009 and the Durban platform in 2011 the EU shifted its stance from that of a unilateral leader to a mixture of a leader and a mediator (a “leadiator”), working hard to engage with developing countries such as China and India and big polluters such as the United States. The EU also worked to bridge the Global North-South divide and foster greater communication and collaboration efforts internationally to come to meaningful agreements on climate issues (Oberthür, 2017). This shift to a "leadiator" role was in response to the relative failure of the EU in the Copenhagen negotiations to reach a

meaningful agreement, and the EU was much more successful in the Paris negotiations as a result. The EU recently has been very active diplomatically in international climate negotiations and other settings, including G7 and G20 conferences, bilateral agreements within and outside the EU, and economic and energy forums (Oberthür, 2017). The EU also focuses a lot of its attention on coalition building with other nations in order to enhance the weight of its demands (Oberthür, 2017). The EU, being a middle-sized player at the international negotiating table, needs to build coalitions with other nations in order to compete with negotiating heavyweights such as China and the United States.

Background: Paris Climate Agreement

The Paris Agreement, signed at the COP21 in Paris in 2015, was a global agreement with the goal of keeping global temperature rise well below 2 degrees Celsius, and to pursue efforts to limit warming to 1.5 degrees Celsius (The Paris Agreement, n.d.). Strengthening countries' capacity to deal with the impacts of climate change (adaptation) is a large part of the agreement as well. Developing and underdeveloped countries will be encouraged to do their part, according to their nationally determined contributions (The Paris Agreement, n.d.). This means that all parties to the agreement need to create their own emission reduction strategies, and regularly report on their emissions and emission reduction implementation strategies (The Paris Agreement, n.d.). Parties are encouraged to communicate their needs with respect to their emissions reduction strategies (Oztig, 2017). Every five years the parties will meet to assess the progress made toward the goals agreed upon in the Paris Agreement (The Paris Agreement, n.d.). Another important part of the Paris Agreement, which is expected to enter into force in 2020, is that parties to the agreement are encouraged to achieve zero carbon emissions by the second half of the 21st century (Oztig, 2017). Starting in 2018, the parties will present their climate pledges and their plans to achieve zero-carbon emissions in the future (Oztig, 2017). Complying with the policies of the Paris Agreement will

require a complete restructuring of the energy sector (Oztig, 2017). This will begin the process of paving the way for decarbonization of the global economy. One of the most important aspect of the Paris Agreement, and a big difference from the Copenhagen Accord, is that it is legally binding, which makes the agreement much more powerful (Oztig, 2017).

European Union Role in Agreement

Member states of the EU will not be the most affected by climate change, but there will still be considerable impacts (ex. Increased frequency and severity of droughts) (Oztig, 2017). Therefore, the EU had an incentive to come to an ambitious climate action plan at the COP21 in Paris. During the Paris Agreement, the EU was successful in assertively speaking with one voice on the issue of climate change, because the impacts of climate change cross national borders in the EU and around the world. This unified voice on climate change is in stark contrast to some other international/foreign policy issues the EU deals with such as conflict in the Middle East and the migrant crisis (Parker, Karlsson & Hjerpe, 2017). As a result, the EU was known as a global leader during the negotiations in Paris, with 42% of respondents recognizing the EU as such (Parker, Karlsson & Hjerpe, 2017). The Paris Accord was an ambitious agreement and the final agreement included most of the EU's demands. This speaks to the ability of the EU to gather support for its goals from other international actors and to come to an agreement on climate issues (Parker, Karlsson & Hjerpe, 2017).

The EU pursued four main objectives in Paris. First, it advocated an international treaty legally binding all parties to it. Second, it required fair, ambitious, and quantifiable emissions reduction targets by all parties. Third, the treaty needed to contain a review process that allows an increase in emissions reduction targets every 5 years. Fourth, there must be rules to ensure transparency and accountability for mitigation actions by the parties. The EU also wanted a long

term global mitigation goal in line with the 2 degree warming target (Oberthür, 2017). The EU pledged a 40% GHG emissions reduction by 2030 from 1990 levels (Oberthür, 2017). This was ambitious, but still not enough to keep warming levels within 2 degrees Celsius of pre-industrial levels (Oberthür, 2017). This is why the EU advocated for the review process clause in the treaty, so increased reduction targets would be made in the future that would meet the 2 degree warming limit. In general, many of the goals of the EU coming into Paris were realized in the agreement, meaning the EU's involvement in the agreement was a success. (Oberthür, 2017)

EU: Climate Leader or Laggard?

As mentioned earlier, many view the EU as a leader in international climate negotiations (Vezirgiannidou, 2015, Yamin, 2000, Gupta and Ringius, 2001, Oberthür, 2017). The outcome of the Paris Climate Agreement was also viewed as a success by the EU, as many of the policies it was pushing for were incorporated into the final agreement (Oberthür, 2017). The EU has done an excellent job of using its status as a middle-sized player to consolidate other players into coalitions and lead these coalitions into negotiations to push for strong climate policy implementation (Oberthür, 2017). At COP15 in Copenhagen the EU pushed for hardline emissions reduction from all parties. This led to conflicts with many developing countries and large emitters, resulting in the EU being alienated from the conference near the end, and therefore it accomplished very little at the conference (Bäckstrand & Elgström, 2013). At the Durban conference two years later, the EU shifted its strategy to being more pragmatic and flexible. It focused on coalition building, deal-making and compromising with veto players such as the USA and China. This method led to the USA and China making concessions that may lead to a legally binding agreement in the future, as well as an extension of the Kyoto Protocol (Bäckstrand & Elgström, 2013). A legally binding agreement was reached a few years later at the COP21 in Paris. The EU shifted its strategy from a

unilateral leader in Copenhagen to an actor combining leadership with conflict resolution/mediation between opposing parties in Durban and Paris. The EU assumed a "leadiator" role and was able to generate successful outcomes in negotiations as a result (Bäckstrand & Elgström, 2013).

However, the EU has its challenges in climate policy, as oil is still the largest energy source for the EU (EU Energy in figures: Statistical pocketbook 2017, 2017). There are significant challenges for the EU in the upcoming decades that must be addressed to transition to a zero-carbon economy. At the COP15 in Copenhagen, the EU produced documents viewed by many to be watered-down policies because of pressure from energy-demanding industries (Kilian & Elgström, 2010). Some countries criticized the EU of not acting according to its publicly declared commitments. This doesn't necessarily mean the EU is a laggard on climate action, but it certainly put its climate leadership role that it has had since the 1990's into serious question (Kilian & Elgström, 2010). However, the EU was able to repair its image and solidify its role as a leader (or at least a "leadiator") in climate negotiations at the Durban and Paris conferences, which yielded positive results for the EU and the world (Parker, Karlsson & Hjerpe, 2017).

EU: A strong advocate for policy change

The EU has always pushed for strong action on climate change. The methodology has just shifted over the years. The experience and relative failure of the EU's negotiating efforts at Copenhagen in COP15 meant that the EU could not be a unilateral leader in climate change and convince other countries to reduce their emissions simply by leading by example. Instead, the EU shifted their methods and focused more on compromise, bridge building and resolving conflict among parties so a meaningful agreement could be reached. This led to an extension of the Kyoto Protocol at the climate conference in Durban (Bäckstrand & Elgström, 2013). The EU pushed for policy changes and the development of binding international treaties throughout the UNFCCC

negotiations. It has assumed the leadership role left vacant by the United States in the early part of the 1990's (Kilian & Elgström, 2010). The 1990 Dublin Declaration was the clearest expression of the EU's role to be a leader in international climate negotiations (Kilian & Elgström, 2010). The EU has cultivated this leadership image by bringing all EU bodies and institutions together under a single position on the climate issue. The EU Council, Commission, and Parliament all share a common view on the climate issue. This coherence and decisiveness on the issue portrays a sense of confidence and leadership on climate action on the international stage (Kilian & Elgström, 2010). The EU has been able to maintain its leadership image by ensuring credibility of its claims and delivering on its promises. An example of this is meeting its commitments to the Kyoto Protocol (Kilian & Elgström, 2010). In 2007, the EU announced that it would cut its GHG emissions by 20% compared to 1990 levels. This showed that the EU was ready and wiling to push the climate agenda forward while others were not even prepared to enter into the discussion (Kilian & Elgström, 2010). This evidence suggests that the EU follows a directional leadership model and sets an example for other nations to follow (Kilian & Elgström, 2010). Their leadership doesn't stop there, however, as the EU also does an excellent job of mediating conflict, compromising, and working with parties that have vastly different priorities to come to common agreements. This moves climate policy incrementally in the direction of a low/zero carbon economy.

Conclusion:

The European Union has a reputation for being an international leader in climate negotiations (Vezirgiannidou, 2015, Yamin, 2000, Gupta and Ringius, 2001, Oberthür, 2017). It declared its desire to be an international leader on climate negotiations with the Dublin Declaration in 1990 (Kilian & Elgström, 2010). Ever since then the EU has pursued strong environmental policy domestically, and has persuaded other nations to do the same. At the COP15 in Copenhagen the EU pursued a strategy of unilateral leadership and pushed for hard emission reductions by all parties

present. This created conflict and the parties were unable to create an effective agreement as a result (Bäckstrand & Elgström, 2013). The EU shifted its strategy from unilateral leader to leader-mediator ("leadiator") in subsequent climate negotiations, and they were able to facilitate successful negotiations in Durban and come to an ambitious binding agreement in Paris as a result (Bäckstrand & Elgström, 2013). This shows how the EU was and continues to be an international leader (or "leadiator") in climate negotiations. It has shifted its strategy from idealism to pragmatism/practicality to maintain its influence and leadership status given its position as middle-sized negotiating player on the international stage (Oberthür, 2017). The EU currently retains it position as global climate leader, but the future remains uncertain. Major societal changes will be needed to move the world towards a low/zero-carbon economy. The EU is still quite dependent on fossil fuels for energy, and whether or not the EU leads the world towards decarbonization in the future remains to be seen.

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