

Opinion – How Trump Undermines Europe's Climate Ambitions

Written by Tiago Torrin Itoh Viergever

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TIAGO TORRIN ITOH VIERGEVER, MAR 8 2025

Ever since his electoral victory last year, Donald Trump's second presidency has already managed to stir an unprecedented uproar, both domestically and internationally. Domestically, Trump's Department of Government Efficiency (DOGE) has had a field day with the federal budget. Under the leadership of Elon Musk, DOGE has slashed funding for the Department of Education, the US Agency for International Development (USAID), and the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) among others. This has resulted in the termination of multiple government workers and thrown American bureaucracy into a tailspin. Internationally, however, Trump's track record is more complicated.

On the one hand, it is possible to measure the impact of Donald Trump's second coming in a relatively straightforward way. President Trump has managed to alienate the United States from some of its most avid supporters. His declarations, including his threats to annex Greenland, and promises to impose tariffs on European exports, have done little to acclimate him to his EU counterparts. Moreover, concerns regarding Mr. Trump's apparent proximity to Moscow, have further undermined international confidence in the President's commitment to his NATO allies. A heated exchange with Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy has left many questioning whether Trump will continue supporting the country through its third year of Russian invasion.

On the other hand, the economic impacts of a second Trump presidency have yet to fully take shape. A long-standing advocate of using import tariffs as tools for negotiation, President Trump's first term had already offered a glimpse of what was to come. His trade-war against China, and tariffs on iron and steel imports paved the way to what can only be seen as wholesale abuse of his partners' goodwill. Having campaigned on a steep increase to already existing tariffs, Mr. Trump further proposed new levies on imports from some among his country's closest economic partners, including, Mexico, Canada, and the European Union.

To hear Trump tell it, these tariffs are largely "retaliatory", they have been tied down to different foreign policy stances where non-compliance is met with swift reprieve. Proposed tariffs on Mexico and Canada, for example, were initially rolled out starting March 4th. Both countries stand accused by the president of not playing their part in curbing illegal border crossings and narcotics smuggling. Threats have also been directed at Europe and the BRICS countries for different reasons. Tariffs on Europe would supposedly cover the trade deficit between the two partners, whereas threats directed at the BRICS countries would be retribution for an eventual decision by the bloc to replace the US dollar as a reserve currency.

Whatever the reason, Trump's trade wars have left his country's begrudging partners scrambling to find proper responses. While tit-for-tat tariff tactics have been announced, or at least threatened, by numerous countries, many have been forced to adapt further to this new reality. In the European Union, fears of a stagnant economy have pushed lawmakers to reassess what they deemed to be an over-bloated European bureaucracy. Meanwhile, Brazilian President Luis Inacio Lula da Silva, has hinted at escalating tensions towards international trade regulatory bodies. These measures, however, are not without their drawbacks. Particularly, the European effort to adapt to this new wave of market uncertainty has come at the cost of an unlikely victim: The European Green Deal.

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While the European Green Deal is not factually dead, new legislative developments in the EU have set its future in a verifiable state of limbo. Concerns regarding competitiveness between European and non-European firms have prompted European Commission president Ursula von der Leyen to introduce the Omnibus I package. The proposal outlines alterations targeting current EU sustainability-related legislation, namely, the Corporate Sustainability Reporting Directive (CSRD), the Corporate Sustainability Due Diligence Directive (CSDDD or CS3D), and the EU taxonomy for sustainable activities (EU Taxonomy). Announced on the 26th of February, the proposed Omnibus would significantly reduce sustainability reporting thresholds and requirements for companies acting within the European Union, as well as limit due diligence requirements for companies regarding their supply chains. Whilst this measure was originally proposed as a measure to cut sustainability-related red tape for European firms, many have denounced it as a massive step-back on EU sustainability goals.

It is simplistic to attribute full blame for the EU's recent rollback of sustainability regulations to Trump's influence. Yet it would be equally shortsighted to dismiss the potential repercussions of a second Trump term on European sustainability discourse. As the EU's Omnibus legislation on sustainability reveals, Europe's green policy frameworks remain fragile. CSRD and CSDDD requirements, painted as nothing but "bureaucratic red tape", were very quickly discarded, leaving European sustainability professionals confused, but regrettably unsurprised. As Trump's trade war antics escalate, Europe is being forced to reckon with a new reality: its prolonged dependence on the US has left it all too vulnerable without it. Now, scrambling to find new partnerships, the EU is forced to ease up on its prior sustainability commitments. Other legislation, such as the EU's Deforestation Regulation, might soon find itself on the chopping block.

The erosion of Europe's sustainability ambitions underscores a sobering truth: global interdependence cuts both ways. While Trump's policies cannot be deemed the sole catalyst for the EU's regulatory rollbacks, the transactional chaos of his trade wars has undeniably accelerated a crisis of confidence in Europe's ability to balance competitiveness with long-term sustainability goals. The gutting of the CSRD and CSDDD—cornerstones of the Green Deal—exposes the vulnerability of sustainability frameworks in an era dominated by zero-sum economics. European officials, scrambling to shield industries from Trumpian tariffs are quietly sidelining climate commitments in favour of competitiveness. As Brussels eyes further rollbacks, the dilemma deepens and the question must be asked of whether Europe can maintain its status as a sustainability leader while hogtied by its aspirations of short-term economic revival?

About the author:

Tiago Torrin Itoh Viergever is a Brazilian/Dutch Political Scientist specialized in international Development. He holds a Master's degree in International Development Studies from the University of Amsterdam.