

The European Union: A Leader on Climate Change?

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SAM LANGTREE, MAR 24 2012

Following the Earth Summit in Rio, the issue of climate change entered the realm of high politics (Dessai, 2001), and subsequently became the focus of international attention. As a result, multi-lateral agreements were pursued by developed and developing nations, in order to combat the growing threat of climate change. The EU, establishing itself as a normative actor, envisioned itself as a leader in formulating international agreements and inciting the international community into cohesion. This essay will, by chronologically assessing the development of climate change agreements, with respect to the influence and role of the EU in these agreements, seek to determine to what extent the EU has fulfilled its leadership pretensions.

This essay will focus exclusively on international agreements on climate change, as it is in periods of negotiation and disagreement that the identity of a leader can be ascertained. However, it will further acknowledge both the role of domestic EU agreements on its claims and capacity for leadership. The time period selected is from the Rio Summit through to the period immediately following the ratification of the Kyoto protocol. This has been selected as Rio indicated the first international attempt at combating climate change on a global scale, and the Kyoto ratification culminated the EU's development into a world leader in directing climate change policy, following the withdrawal of the United States.

With respect to 'leadership', this essay will accept the three definitions of leadership provided by Gupta and Grubb (2000), those being: Structural leadership, Instrumental leadership and Directional leadership. Structural leadership, taking Gupta and Grabb's definition, is how a leader is seen to exercise power that is derived from political strength, essentially leadership is determined by how assertively an agent utilises its derivative power in the structured arena. The EU should, according to Gupta and Grabb, wield substantial power due to the collective enmity of its economic, technical and diplomatic resources. However, this is a dominance that can only be maintained and exerted if it can develop close international alliances and invoke domestic stakeholders.

Instrumental leadership, the second type defined by Gupta and Grabb, relates to the capacity of an agent to secure the instrumental design of a regime, one that will encompass a variety of needs from different parties. With respect to climate change, instruments and regulations need to accommodate the diverse considerations of industrialised and developing states; developing states may require needs to be met before they can participate in regulation. Gupta and Grabb, however, note that the EU, due to being a multi-state institution itself, and the structure of that institutional make up, renders its instrumental leadership weak, as it must accommodate both the needs of its member states and those submitting to the international regime.

The third definition of leadership is Directional leadership, that being the internal actions of states or agents that provide a quasi-blueprint for others to follow, and thus engenders a pursuit and development of new ideas. The two components of directional leadership are: leadership by example, whereby the agent develops tangible conceptions and solutions; and the dissemination of these conceptions and resolutions, a process mediated by international regimes. Thus, with respect to the EU, directional leadership can be adjudged with respect to its capacity both to formulate cohesive and concrete regulations amongst its member states, and then how successfully it can project these ideas onto the international arena, measured by non-EU state emulation or replication of these initiatives.

Having acknowledged the three types of leadership, it is also significant to acknowledge counter-positions to

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leadership, essentially what determines a 'non-leader'. Andresen and Agrawal (2002) provide such a definition, their theory of 'pusher' being a necessary consideration when assessing to what extent the EU provides a leadership role. They assert that pushers often masquerade under a leadership role, however provide rhetorical symbolism, rather than policy and action of weight and substance, a point further asserted by Vogler and Stephan (2007). It will thus be necessary to what extent EU assertions of leadership, in 1988 the European Council stated its leadership pretensions; the ambition is 'to play a leading role in the action needed to protect the world's environment... particularly to such problems as... the greenhouse effect' (EC, 1988), have been matched with tangible policy and regulatory successes. (Brommann, 2009)

By tackling this essay chronologically, assessing key international accords or periods of stagnancy with respect to the EU's role as a leader, this essay can assess periods of both leadership and international stagnancy. By determining the contextual factors during these periods, it can in turn provide an analysis of both the extent to which the EU has acted as a leading actor, and what factors have restricted its capacity to fulfil its pretensions to leadership.

The UN Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC), agreed at the Rio summit, marks the first cohesive international attempt to establish an international framework for tackling climate change. These attempts were characterised by the quandary of international desires to establish a conventional and normative framework on climate change, hindered by passivity of the United States and Japan. Subsequently, note Lightfoot and Burchell (2004), there was a power vacuum, one that the EU sought to fill. Wynne (1993) and Ringius (1999) note that these desires led to the adoption of a pan-EU target for the stabilisation of emissions at 1990 levels by 2000. However, despite collectively arguing for a Convention with binding targets, many states, specifically the US, rejected the inclusion of any binding commitments. The 'US Government rejected the EU's new proposal of a 15% cut in greenhouse gas emissions by 2010 and refused to commit itself to binding targets and timetables. As a result of this opposition, the Convention merely contained a call for industrialised countries to undertake a stabilisation of their emissions. (Andresen and Agrawal, 2002; Yamin, 2000). From this it can be drawn that the EU was attempting to assert directional leadership, by forming a collective stance which it took to the international stage it demonstrated the feasibility of multilateral agreements. However, the United States structural leadership was overwhelming, and its focussed enmity rendered the efforts of the European Union to be characterised under the pusher definition; whilst it called for legal regulation, it was unable to achieve international coalescence on the matter.

Furthermore, whilst there was pan-EU consensus on the ideal of legally binding targets, there was divergence on the specificities of the policy (Brommann, 2009). Hovi (2003) notes that the disagreement over, specifically, the implementation of a carbon/energy tax, weakened the EU's claim to instrumental leadership. Whilst it prevented a symbolically united front on the ideal of legal recriminations for target flouters, there were no cohesive policy proposals for the EU to throw its collective weight behind. The final compromise on the legally binding nature of the proposal, in so much as that it wouldn't be, is, according to Ringius (1999), a result of the UK, instead of allying with the EU paradigm, negotiating a deal with the US, the key player to get on board considering its status as the largest CO₂ emitter (Brommann, 2009). The EU primarily saw its role as a mediator, to bridge the gap between the developing nations and the powers of Japan and the USA, a role in which it ultimately failed. As a result, the EU instead had to give in to the United States. With respect to the Rio conference, then, it is perhaps most apt to characterise the EU as ideologically and symbolically displaying signs of leadership, however lacking the requisite potency or diplomatic cohesion to translate these ideas into concrete, restrictive policy.

The second notable advancement in the international climate change to be assessed is the build up, and final outcome, of the 1997 Kyoto protocol. Brommann (2009) notes that in the build up, the intention of the international community was to strengthen the commitments in the UNFCCC into a binding protocol. The EU, then, displayed its potential for instrumental leadership in the creation of the 'Berlin mandate' at COP1 in Berlin, which set in motion the process toward binding protocol. Yamin (2000) notes that the EU effectively combined structural and instrumental leadership, as it was able to form a green coalition with the developing countries by utilising its political weight and diplomatic ties. This coalition outnumbered those opposing the motion toward negotiating (Ringius, 1999).

However, the 1996 COP would expose the susceptibility of the EU to domestic disputes disrupting its capacity to present a cohesive approach and thus its structural and directional leadership. Yamin (2000) notes that the EU had

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failed to find agreement on additional policy measures to underpin any position on targets. Andresen and Agrawala (2002) further comment that the subsequently adopted Geneva Protocol, which specified that any protocol would have to contain legally mandated and quantified objectives with specified timeframes was due to the change of position of the United States, which, according to Yamin (2000), changed the leadership game, as America's sudden stance of pro-action was rendering the EU impotent as a leader, and it was rather reduced to an ideological proclaimer, a pusher rather than a leader.

With the US threatening dominion on leadership over the future of climate change, the EU reacted internally, coalescing on a burden-sharing agreement that would allow the EU to be the first party to propose a 15% flat reduction target for all industrialised countries (Brommann, 2009). Yamin (2000) asserts this as a clear demonstration of an attempt at directional leadership, as it subsequently pressured other parties to follow suit. The end result was a differentiation of binding reduction targets between industrialised countries, a result that Sjostedt (1998), along with Schreurs and Tiberghien (2007) note can be considered due to the EU's continued persistence, and thus an example, perhaps, of its Directional leadership.

However, whilst it was successful in lobbying for implementation of binding targets, the final design of the protocol was dictated almost exclusively by the American proposal; for example the flexible mechanisms for emissions trading which were included were initially opposed by the EU, as they feared it would effectively lead the US to trade with Russia, giving it an unfair advantage (Yamin 2000). Furthermore, whilst the EU sought cuts of 10-15% from 1990 levels, and indeed was successful in that the developed nations signed up to any binding cuts at all, the US only committed to 7%, and the EU just 8%. (Liverman, 2008).

This essay will now examine the role of the EU following the creation of the Kyoto protocol. Ott and Oberthur (2001) note that this period was characterised, initially, by stalemate and attempted retreat from the confirmed agreements. At COP 4, for example, Tangen (1999) notes that the EU, whilst arguing for the necessity of a cap on the use of emissions trading, failed to present a proposal as an actor of itself, largely due, it is argued, to the difficulty the EU faced in balancing the respective desires of its member states. Thus, whilst it rhetorically argued for a cap, it failed in the realm of instrumental leadership, as it failed to unite its member states. Similarly, the EU was lacking directional leadership, as member states began to realise the initial stance of opposing limitless emissions trading could be self detrimental, and indeed trading could be an efficient and cost effective tool to reduce emissions and meet the Kyoto mandates (Cass, 2005).

The 2000 launch of the European Climate Change Program re-enhanced the EU's credentials as an international leader before the significant COP6. The Program identified, and attempted to develop, all necessary elements of an EU strategy to implement the Kyoto protocol. However, the subsequent COP6, broke down, and Ott (2001) notes that the EU was weak in its instrumental leadership in this period, once again domestic disputes dictated an inability to act cohesively on the international stage. Furthermore, as Dessai (2001) notes, the EU and US found themselves diametrically opposed on the issue of emission trading regulation, and the focussed enmity of the United States had previously overwhelmed EU attempts at leadership. However, in the case of the COP6, despite the UK once again negotiating a compromise with the US, the EU as a group denied this compromise, because, as Grubb and Yamin (2001) state, the compromise was not ambitious enough. Dessai (2001) asserts that the EU had been adamant in its desire to cap emissions trading scheme, due to its attempts to ensure that domestic action remained the primary way to achieve reduction. Ott (2001) consequently believes that the EU's defiance of the US can, in fact, be seen as an example of its growing structural leadership, as it was powerful enough to defy the United States.

Following the COP6 negotiations, the United States withdrew from the Kyoto protocol, thus providing the EU with another opportunity to demonstrate its capacity for leadership, as the only actor with enough political, economic, and diplomatic clout to enact change (Bang et al, 2005). Dessai (2001) asserts that the EU subsequently pursued a sequence of 'missions' to ensure ratification, as it was believed with an assertive leader the protocol would die. The key issues facing ratification were the concerns of the supposed Gang of Four: Russia, Japan, Canada and Australia. Having seen the United States withdrawal, these four were inclined to similarly withdraw, rather than face the economic tribulations of stringent green demands. The EU, then, at COP6Bis, performed impressive feats of diplomacy, reasserting its instrumental leadership (Brommann, 2009). The EU acknowledged the economic concerns

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of the four, and thus the protocol would sacrifice, to an extent, environmental effectiveness for economic flexibility. This strong instrumental leadership allowed for the COP7 implementation of the lighter version of the protocol, rather than its, arguably inevitable, death.

Pursuant to the conclusion of negotiations, the EU sought swift ratification, which, according to Schreurs and Tiberghen (2007) was emblematic of a surge of directional power in the period, as the EU sought to lead by example. Furthermore, it was able to demonstrate its structural power by hastening, and ensuring, Russian ratification. Vogler and Bretherton (2000) note that the EU's trade power enabled it to persuade the Russians to ratify protocol in exchange for supporting Russian accession to the World Trade Organisation. Ott et al (2005) summarise the final ratification of the Kyoto protocol as a major soft power and leadership achievement for the EU.

Finally, then, the domestic EU policies following the Kyoto ratification provide a further basis assessing the directional leadership of the EU. It was enhanced by the European Council in 2007 committing unilaterally to a 20% reduction target by 2020, and 30% if other developed countries would commit to comparable reduction targets (European Council, 2007). As Schreurs et al (2009) note, at the COP13 and subsequent sessions, the EU pushed for more ambitious reduction targets. The launch of the European emissions trading system in 2005, alongside the Second European Climate Change Programme considerably strengthened the directional leadership of the EU (Brommann, 2009). The measures that followed the programme provide a firm basis for the strengthening of EU climate and energy policy, and thus further enhance its claims for leadership.

To conclude, then, by providing a chronological framework the capacity of the EU to undertake a role of international leadership can be seen to have fluctuated during the mentioned period. At times, it has had strong structural, directional and instrumental leadership, and at others it has been overwhelmed by either domestic disagreement or the power of the United States. In the current context, the EU has arguably made strides towards being considered the pre-eminent green leader in the international environment, due to a combination of member states combined enthusiasm and agreement, and the apathy of the United States. The EU, it can be concluded, is the world's leading actor to a strong extent, due to the reluctance of others to assume the mantle, and its power as a homogenous actor.

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