

Leading by Example, Revisited

Can the EU still serve as a model to lead global climate policy?

OLIVER GEDEN

The Copenhagen summit has been disastrous for the European Union, the most ambitious player and self-proclaimed leader in international climate policy. Not only did the outcome fall far short of Europe's high expectations, but the European Union also failed to play any major role in determining the course of negotiations. During the final stages of the summit, the United States and China almost completely sidelined the Europeans. Nevertheless, Europe's commitment remains crucial for the establishment of an efficient global climate regime. To play a more constructive role in the near future, the European Union will have to revisit its strategy of "leadership by example."

In early 2007, the European Union unilaterally committed itself to a 20 percent reduction in greenhouse gas emissions by 2020 (compared with the base year 1990), combined with an offer to step up emission cuts to 30 percent if other major emitters were also willing to make ambitious pledges. In Copenhagen, however, neither the United States nor China was interested in the European Union's increasing emissions reductions; they simply wanted to be left alone.

Two things about the "leadership by example" approach became clear at the Copenhagen summit. First, it is not a strategy for success in the short run. Second, it is not an approach that will work within a UN framework. Contrary to what the idealistic Europeans have assumed, negotiations at the UN level are never only about individual policy issues; they are always about global power politics. In this particular case, they are not only about the relationship between industrialized and developing countries but also more importantly about the shifting balance between established and emerging powers. To achieve significant progress in UN climate negotiations, you have to be able to put other proposals unrelated to climate on the table. But this is a difficult task for the European Union, where the 27 member states still play a strong role in foreign policy and where a great deal of internal coordination is needed to speak with one voice

OLIVER GEDEN is a Senior Research Fellow at the German Institute for International and Security Affairs (SWP). He has written extensively about European energy and climate policy, including a book on the European Union's energy policies in 2008.

on the international level.

Since Copenhagen, the European Union has been gripped by debates over how to enhance its diplomatic capabilities in order to forge a new international climate treaty within the next two years. But instead of regarding such an agreement as an end in itself, Europeans should ask themselves if a legally binding treaty under the auspices of the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) is really the ultimate goal. Limiting the global temperature increase to two degrees Celsius is not just a question of putting together a treaty that looks nice on paper. It is above all a question of practical action on the ground. Even assuming that the 194 nations involved do manage to reach consensus by 2011, the treaty will probably still either lack a credible compliance mechanism or be very limited in scope. Furthermore, such a treaty will still have to be ratified—a crucial aspect that previous discussions have completely underestimated. Recall that it took seven years to ratify the Kyoto Protocol. In the United States, for example, getting the 67 Senate votes needed to pass a treaty that is binding under international law would be quite a task indeed. Having no UNFCCC treaty at all would be preferable to having a weak one. At least then the public would not mistakenly believe that the world is heading in the right direction.

For the European Union, there is ultimately just one way to convince global powers like the United States or China to reduce their emissions drastically: show that "de-carbonization" actually works. Contrary to assumptions, the European Union cannot prove this simply by issuing ambitious targets or passing legislation. Instead, Europe will have to demonstrate that "greening" its economy—the largest single market in the world—is both technically feasible and economically profitable. This process entails, among other things, boosting energy efficiency and the share of renewable resources, developing smart grids, and providing solutions for electricity storage. Of course, the transformation into a low-carbon economy is a bet on the future, and even medium-term success is by no means guaranteed. The transformation may take as long as 15 years to prove successful. But in the end, such an approach will strengthen Europe's energy security and increase its global competitiveness. If the European Union de-carbonizes its economy successfully, then other large emitters will follow suit, whether there is a legally binding treaty in place or not. ■