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Why the EU should stop relying on a global climate treaty

By Oliver Geden

The European Union's decarbonization policies are closely linked to progress in international climate negotiations. But despite the results of last year's world climate summit in Durban, there will not be a comprehensive and ambitious global treaty by the end of 2015. Waiting for summits to produce "grand solutions" will eventually derail EU's domestic climate policies. Therefore, a new sense of pragmatism is needed. Europeans will have to prove that a low carbon strategy is technologically and economically feasible even under present-day conditions.

Two decades after its inception, international climate policy remains an unfulfilled promise. Since the adoption of the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change in 1992, global greenhouse gas emissions have risen by one-third. In light of this sobering statistic, it is astonishing to find that European climate policy today is still based on the hope for a global climate treaty.

Last year at the climate summit in Durban, 194 states once again agreed to make everything better in the future. As part of a major diplomatic effort, the European Union succeeded in pushing through a schedule for negotiations intended ultimately to produce a comprehensive and ambitious global climate treaty by the end of 2015 and its entry into force in 2020. Such an agreement was to include binding reduction targets even for reluctant countries like India, China, and the USA, and a 2 degree Celsius limit on the global temperature increase. Now, just a few weeks before the start of the next climate summit in Doha, Qatar, it is already clear that the chances for the success of this undertaking are modest at best.

The negotiation schedule adopted in Durban is marked by numerous potentially fatal weaknesses. One of the most serious of these is its dependence on US domestic politics. If Mitt Romney wins the presidential election, international climate negotiations will remain at a standstill for years to come. And even if Barack Obama is re-elected, he is likely to maintain his previous position: that the USA will only be able to commit to emissions reductions in the UN context after the level of these commitments has been set down in national climate protection legislation. In 2010, an attempt to pass such legislation failed despite a comfortable Democratic majority in both chambers of Congress. At the present moment, it is almost inconceivable that a renewed legislative effort could achieve a successful outcome. And even if the US government should, contrary to all expectations, agree to a comprehensive global treaty in 2015, the world would still be faced with a ratification marathon that would last much longer than five years. And at that point, if a two-thirds majority cannot be reached to ratify the agreement in the US Senate, all the waiting will have been in vain.

Even under the optimistic assumptions that a world climate agreement can be concluded and ratified by 2020 and that the signatory states will feel bound to comply with it, a central objective of international climate policy is still destined to fail. Limiting the global temperature increase to a maximum of 2 degrees Celsius relative to pre-industrial levels would already require decreasing global greenhouse gas emissions significantly over the next eight years, before having to implement even more drastic reductions in 2020 and adhere to them consistently for decades.

The current trend in global emissions points in the opposite direction. The roadmap for negotiations agreed upon in Durban will not succeed in creating incentives for emissions reductions. Quite to the contrary: the political focus will likely shift towards the climate summit in late 2015. While waiting for the summit to produce a “grand solution”, many states and industrial sectors that are already reluctant to reduce emissions will use the absence of a global agreement as a convenient excuse to justify their lack of ambition. If the world climate conference in 2015 fails—like the Copenhagen summit did in 2009—the political consequences will be extremely far-reaching. Willingness to pursue global cooperation will decline drastically, even within the European Union. And given the dismal predictions of prominent climate researchers, a sense of political fatalism could well result. In this situation, merely adapting to the inevitable could become the dominant strategy. Furthermore, many governments would probably turn their energies toward methods of technical climate manipulation, the approach of geoengineering.

Many EU member states have played a pioneering role in climate policy up to now, particularly Germany, Denmark and the UK. Therefore, they cannot have any interest in this outcome, since it would mean losing their edge in the development of low-emissions technologies. It would therefore be very risky indeed to tie European countries’ recent progress on the path towards low-emissions economies to dubious hopes of an epochal breakthrough in international climate negotiations.

If the expectations were to fade that all developed and newly industrialized countries will embark on an ambitious decarbonization path in the future and thereby open up new market opportunities worldwide, pursuing a pioneering role for Europe would only make limited economic sense. In that situation, it would not only be the ambitious intention of the EU to reduce greenhouse gas emissions by 80 to 95 per cent by 2050 that many member states as well as industry associations would question critically. Even more important: the European Council would be particularly reluctant to determine binding domestic energy and climate targets for 2030.

Therefore, a new sense of pragmatism in climate policy is needed. The European Union is faced, first and foremost, with the practical task of demonstrating that a decarbonization strategy is indeed technologically and economically feasible under present-day conditions and that this can be beneficial not only for climate protection but for energy security as well. Second, they will have to focus their efforts internationally on designing a much more flexible climate policy architecture. Where global agreements cannot be achieved,

European countries should aspire to “coalitions of the willing” and sector-specific agreements with as many participants, incentives, and sanctions as needed to achieve concrete gains.

An argument often made against pragmatic approaches in climate policy is that they are inadequate to address the severe future consequences of climate change, that they lack in vision, and that they fail to acknowledge the United Nation’s central role. All these arguments are ultimately rooted in the narrow pursuit of an “optimal” solution to the problem. After two decades of largely unsuccessful climate negotiations, it is time to think about alternative paths. In limiting climate change, it is not the conceptual elegance of the political approach that will be decisive: the focus must be on achieving measurable progress in the reduction of greenhouse gas emissions.

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