Setbacks in climate change negotiations may signal dire straits for ‘normative power Europe’

blogs.lse.ac.uk/europpblog/2013/10/03/setbacks-in-climate-change-negotiations-may-signal-dire-straits-for-normative-power-europe/

03/10/2013

The European Union has often been portrayed as a ‘normative power’ on the international stage, in the sense that it exerts influence using ‘softer’ mechanisms such as leading by example. **Alexander Ruser** *writes that this conception of EU power has increasingly come under strain due to deadlock over global climate change negotiations – an issue which has been central to the EU’s normative strategy. With the Eurozone crisis also reducing Europe’s economic weight in the international arena, the EU’s normative power may be waning.*

Claiming environmental leadership has arguably been a cornerstone of the European self-image and highly important for the EU’s development as a relevant actor in international relations. Built on the ruins of the Second World War, the project of European Integration transformed a warlike continent into a peaceful multinational community. Intended to end inherited hostilities between major European nations, the European project has always been a normative venture. According to its founding idea and institutional design based on shared norms like ‘peace’, the rule of law, liberty and democracy, the EU was said to be a ‘normative power,’ seeking to diffuse and promote its normative basis, rather than a potential superpower in the making. Europe´s demonstrated ambition to take responsibility for environmental issues and become a leader in climate protection seems like a natural development of such ‘normative’ governance. But how capable is the EU as an actor in foreign relations?

What could be called Europe´s ‘actor capacity’ depends on the interplay of internal coherence, on the one hand, and the acceptance of foreign powers on the other. In order to exert its political weight, the European Union needs, first, ‘autonomy’, understood as the ability to act independent from its member states. In other words, the more likely that one or more of the member states will defect from European positions, the poorer the Unions performance on the global stage. Second, the European Union needs sufficient political ‘authority’. That means that negotiation partners understand and accept that they have to address the Union rather than individual states. Because of the supranational structure of the EU, the actor capacity of the Union varies between issue areas. Setbacks in key areas of European responsibility damage the overall actor capacity of the EU.

Protest in Copenhagen during the 2009 United Nations Climate Change Conference (Credit: Kris Krug, CC-BY-SA-3.0)

The Copenhagen summit of 2009 is considered to be such a setback. Despite the acceptance of climate change as ‘one of the greatest challenges of our time,’ neither binding targets nor climate protection regime were established. The European Union was effectively side-lined during the negotiations and had to accept the ‘Copenhagen Accord’ – a text agreed upon by the United States and the BRIC states (Brazil, Russia, India, and China). The accord can be read as an outright rejection of the European claim for environmental leadership. The Copenhagen summit thus seems to signal a development towards pragmatic, openly interest-driven environmental politics with economic and security interests limiting climate governance efforts. This development threatens to

diminish the political weight of the EU on the global stage.

A global race towards green growth? The case of China´s 'ecologic civilisation'

Sustainable development plans and green growth strategies have been developed within most of the G20 economies The United States emphasizes green job growth, the European Union portrays itself as a trailblazer of green recovery from the current economic crisis, and China aims at sustainable industrial development in both the 11th and 12th five year plans of the Communist Party. Nonetheless, despite double-digit growth rates over the past two decades, China needs to develop into something more elaborate than just the 'global workbench'. Environmental problems as well as the pressing issue of social inequality have convinced Chinese Party leaders to head towards a more comprehensive domestic solution and set China on the fast track to become an 'ecologic civilisation.' The political weight of the EU will depend on whether this process of green modernisation will lead to closer cooperation on environmental problems or to intensified global competition for cutting edge technologies.

Towards More Cooperation

On July 19th 2013, the European Commissioner for Environment Janez Potocnik and the Chinese Minster of Environment Protection Zhou Shengxian released a joint statement on 'enhanced Environmental Policy Dialogue and Cooperation on Green Growth'. The statement is remarkable since it expresses the will to promote 'cooperation on the flagship initiatives on environment developed respectively by China and the EU', thus linking the European 2020 strategy directly with the Chinese vision of an 'ecological civilisation'.

In fact, both political programmes look quite similar. In a keynote speech delivered at the 8 th Forum on Industrial International Competitiveness held in Shanghai on December 18th 2012, Chong Quan, Deputy Minister of Trade of the People´s Republic of China, emphasised that the 'ecological civilisation construction (…) is a priority in economic development' and an integral part of the process of 'industrial transformation and upgrading'. The 12th Five year plan, which runs from 2011-2015, devotes its attention to sustainable development, by 'promoting scientific development', 'striving to speed up the construction of an innovation country' and 'building a resource-saving and environmental-friendly society'. China seems to be carving out a growth path similar to that of the EU.

…or competition?

Related political visions do not necessarily lead to international cooperation. While the G20 economies have adopted national environmental goals, many have simultaneously withdrawn from the international environmental regime. *National* or regional green growth strategies (as in China, the United States or South Korea) prefigure intensified competition in green technologies. The vision of a common search for pathways to greener societies could be replaced by the race for green growth.

Incidents like Germany's (subsidised) solar industry charging Chinese rivals with price-dumping may mark the beginning of increasingly fierce competition. Recent success in German negotiations with China to ensure fair price competition in solar panel markets contradicts Europe's 'normative power' and may mark a shift in international relations from focusing on the normative to the economic aspects of environmental policies.

No country for normative powers?

What does this imply for Europe´s actor capacity on the world stage? The EU´s claim to environmental leadership – although never purely altruistic – was vital to the Union's approach to international relations. As a normative power, the European Union seemed primarily interested in diffusing its normative values. Economic advantages had always been welcomed, but were presented as by-products of responsible politics. The paradigmatic shift in governing global climate change looming in the Copenhagen Accord occurred at the most inopportune moment for the European Union. Struggling to overcome the European Crisis and maintain an acceptable level of social cohesion in the Eurozone, the EU´s claim to moral authority in environmental politics became contested.

Since then, internal divisions and the refusal of foreign powers to accept European leadership have limited Europe's actor capacity, damaging Europe's normative power. Conflicting economic interests can negatively affect the Unions *autonomy* to act in the international arena. At the same time a divided Union may also lose the *authority* to act, meaning that European institutions will be bypassed in international disputes and negotiations. The question is, therefore, will the Eurozone's loss of economic weight be accompanied by a loss of face for the European Union on the global stage?

CHANGING THE EUROPEAN DEBATE DAHRENDORF SYMPOSIUM

FOCUS ON CLIMATE CHANGE | 2013

This article is part of our series on the Dahrendorf Symposium, which will be held in Berlin on 14-15 November 2013

Please read our comments policy before commenting.

Note: This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of EUROPP – European Politics and Policy, nor of the London School of Economics.

Shortened URL for this post: **http://bit.ly/1bteKA2**

About the author

Alexander Ruser – *Hertie School of Governance*
Alexander Ruser is a Dahrendorf Postdoctoral Fellow at the Hertie School of Governance, Berlin.