



A U-Turn as Minimum Requirement: A European Perspective on Future US Climate Policy

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Judging from the past, high hopes for radical change of U.S. climate policies as a result of a change of the U.S. administration are a recipe for frustration. Despite high hopes for the Clinton-Gore administration, progress on domestic climate policies remained dismal after 1992, and the United States also remained a recalcitrant player in international climate policy. In fact, the Clinton-Gore administration negotiated as a “lame duck” for most of the aftermath of the Byrd-Hagel resolution which had been adopted by the U.S. Senate in 1997. While the coming into office of President Bush junior certainly did not raise high expectations for change to the good, hopes that he would at least not make things worse did not survive the reality check. Thus, it may be wise for Europe to be modest in its hopes and expectations towards the new US government.

The limits of presidential power

Presidential support is a necessary but not a sufficient condition for effective U.S. climate policy. After all, Clinton and Gore were supportive of action on climate change but did not manage to surmount domestic political opposition. Yet President Bush junior did manage to block climate policy progress at a time when national and international conditions for action had improved significantly. Whereas societal trends would seem to lend increased support for action on climate change (pending a more precise assessment of the impacts of the current financial and economic crisis), the future positioning of the U.S. Congress is not yet apparent. From this perspective, the importance of the elections for both houses of the Congress which are held concurrently with the presidential elections, have to be acknowledged – and their outcomes deserve close attention and analysis.

To be fair, even modesty leads us to expect a U-turn of presidential leadership on climate policy. Both John McCain and Barack Obama have declared their intention to fully reengage the United States in international climate negotiations under the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change. Both candidates have promised also to push forward pro-active domestic climate policies. What exactly this will mean, however, remains unclear.

European hopes

Many Europeans hope that it will mean that the new U.S. President would, together with Congress, engage in the development of a full-fledged U.S. climate programme. The U.S. executive and legislature should start by analyzing and defining a national emission target for 2020 and beyond that feeds into and compatible with a long-term vision for preventing dangerous climate change. Concurrently, the work on domestic policies to implement such a target would have to begin. Viable components may include a national emissions trading system, improved car efficiency standards, a comprehensive strategy for the deployment of renewable energies, and efficiency standards for energy-consuming products.

These domestic efforts should build the basis for parallel negotiations of a quantitative U.S. emission commitment at the international level. Pursuing its “enlightened” national interests means that such constructive reengagement in international negotiations will require the United States to reach out for partnership. After the apparent failure of U.S. leadership in several policy areas over the past years (e.g., the Iraq war or the regulation of financial markets), many Europeans hope that the new U.S. government will understand that it cannot determine the outcome of negotiations among partners unilaterally – or even dictate them for others. In this respect, I would also hope that the new political U.S. leadership will catch up with the international learning process which over the past years has led to the acknowledgment that the contributions of developing countries to climate protection have to follow quantitatively and qualitatively different routes than those of the developed world – for reasons of both fairness and effectiveness. Last but not least, Europeans hope that such a re-positioning of U.S. climate policy could occur within a timeframe that allows an international climate agreement to be reached by the end of 2009, as scheduled by the United Nations negotiation process.

Unrealistic but without alternative

As unrealistic as such a swift turn of U.S. climate policy may seem at first sight, it is indeed without an alternative if we want to avoid dangerous climate change. After all, a revision of the course of U.S. climate policy is a must in order to move towards more than halving global greenhouse gas emissions within the next few decades. In this perspective of global environmental needs, the aforementioned hopes and expectations may even seem too modest and minimalist. A revolution rather than a U-turn of U.S. climate policy might be required in order to implement the measures needed for immediate drastic emission cuts that would clearly put the U.S. on a path towards reducing greenhouse gas emissions by around 90 percent from today’s levels by 2050. In sticking to my resolution to be modest, I do not expect a revolution but hope that action will be forthcoming that enables the United States and the world to move towards more stringent action that lives up to the climate challenge step by step.

Challenges for the new U.S. President

One of the major challenges the new U.S. administration will face is the necessity to realign domestic perceptions and expectations regarding climate policy with those of its international partners. Part of this “two-level game” is that external U.S. climate policy at the international level will have to – and indeed should – be developed in tandem with policies at home. Although international commitments cannot, and do not need to, merely reflect existing domestic U.S. policies (as some suggest), they need to be implementable under conditions of “Realpolitik”. I hope that the new U.S. President and his administration will have the skills and the political will to engage in an open dialogue with international partners, while concurrently investing a serious effort in improving domestic “Realpolitik” conditions by working hard with Congress and relevant stakeholders. To this end, he will have to invest substantial political capital to achieve significant progress both domestically and with international partners.

Living up to even modest expectations of change in U.S. climate policy may seem a tough call at times of turmoil on the financial markets and economic crisis. However, the failure of policy makers to take timely action to prevent the financial crisis cannot serve as an excuse for missing the moral obligation to contain the climate crisis. To the contrary, the current economic and financial crises is one more reason to design and implement a programme for action that unleashes the power of climate policy for a sustainable reinvention and renewal of the economy – in the U.S. and elsewhere.

The promises of a renewed transatlantic partnership

In a renewed transatlantic partnership, Europe can be helpful in addressing the aforementioned challenges. Europe may facilitate progress in U.S. climate policy by discussing and exploring international realities with U.S. opinion-makers, while examining with other international partners the options for how to take into account evolving U.S. realities. In particular, a rapprochement of the United States and many developing countries may need to be brokered that puts to rest past years of alienation if a global deal on climate change is to be reached.

Europe is also a promising partner in the search for a climate action programme that responds to the current demand for stimulating the economy and takes full advantage of the opportunities smart climate policies offer in this respect. Transatlantic cooperation holds obvious promises in this respect and may build on the newly emerging resolve on both sides of the Atlantic to explore the potential and need for coordinated action and even international regulation in response to the turmoil on the financial markets.

The financial and economic crisis may actually have further positive fallout by contributing to the increasing realization that the United States cannot “go it alone”. The new U.S. government will have to rebuild and develop international partnerships in

order to address a number of major global challenges. Climate change fits into this bigger picture of international politics: a shift of U.S. climate policy is of important strategic value for the country if it wants to regain international leadership. Perhaps this expectation goes beyond my initial resolution to be modest. But the seriousness and urgency of the challenge of climate change requires all of us – Americans and Europeans, Presidents and analysts – to work towards making the necessary possible and to make it happen.

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