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The European Union's international climate leadership: towards a grand climate strategy?

Sebastian Oberthür [a,b] and Claire Dupont [c]

aVrije Universiteit Brussel, Brussels, Belgium; bUniversity of Eastern Finland, Joensuu, Finland; cDepartment of Public Governance and Management, Ghent University, Ghent, Belgium

ABSTRACT
Advancing literature on EU international climate strategy, this article offers a fresh and comprehensive assessment of the EU's international leadership on climate change. Conceptually, it provides a framework for systematic analysis of different facets of exemplary and diplomatic leadership taking into account key framework conditions. Empirically, we trace the achievements and challenges of the EU's climate leadership since the early 1990s, with emphasis on contemporary developments. We find that the EU has successfully adapted its climate leadership to evolving challenges over time. However, intensified climate geopolitics has reinforced demand for the EU to enhance its capabilities for a proactive 'grand climate strategy'. Grand strategizing would require coordination of EU institutions and EU member states at highest political levels. In addition to facilitating the maintenance of the achievements so far, it could provide for a stronger integration of domestic and international climate policy and across other policy fields and fora.

Introduction

Ever since climate change rose in international politics in the early 1990s, the EU and its member states (hereafter: the EU) have pursued international leadership. From the 1992 UN Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) over the 1997 Kyoto Protocol to the 2015 Paris Agreement, the EU has been found to exert leadership, although with varying degrees of success (e.g., Bäckstrand & Elgström, 2013; Groen & Niemann, 2013; Oberthür & Groen, 2018; Oberthür & Roche Kelly, 2008; Parker & Karlsson, 2010). This leadership has persisted despite the growth of socio-political divisions, populism and Euroscepticism within the EU and notwithstanding significant shifts

in international politics (e.g., rise of emerging powers). Nevertheless, continued EU leadership cannot be taken for granted, and any potential for further improvement deserves to be pursued.

While the vast literature has significantly advanced our understanding of EU climate leadership, it lacks an up-to-date, systematic, and comprehensive assessment of related achievements and challenges in the face of evolving contemporary framework conditions. Scholarship has extensively investigated EU climate leadership during particular periods or events, such as the climate summits in Copenhagen in 2009 (e.g., Groen & Niemann, 2013; Oberthür, 2011; Parker & Karlsson, 2010; van Schaik & Schunz, 2012) and in Paris in 2015 (e.g., Oberthür & Groen, 2018; Parker et al., 2017; see also Bäckstrand & Elgström, 2013). Furthermore, contributions have shed light on underlying domestic policies and politics (e.g., Parker & Karlsson, 2010; Schreurs & Tiberghien, 2007; Wurzel et al., 2019) and the EU's international climate diplomacy and strategy, especially in the multilateral UN process (e.g., Bäckstrand & Elgström, 2013; Belis et al., 2018; Oberthür & Groen, 2018; Schunz, 2019; Torney, 2015; van Schaik & Schunz, 2012). However, existing literature does not provide an updated comprehensive assessment of EU climate leadership.

In this article, we aim to undertake such a fresh overall assessment of the past achievements and contemporary challenges of the EU's international climate leadership. Three features distinguish our approach from existing literature. First, we pay systematic attention to both the domestic and the external dimensions of EU leadership (exemplary and diplomatic leadership). Second, we systematically explore the evolving framework conditions as a basis for investigating the extent to which the EU has suitably adapted its leadership strategy. Third, rather than focusing on a particular event or period, we take stock of achievements and developments over time as a basis for identifying contemporary challenges. In so doing, we reflect on post-Paris developments, such as the European Green Deal launched in 2019. Overall, we aim to pinpoint to what extent the EU has (1) mobilized its climate leadership capabilities and (2) appropriately adapted its exemplary and diplomatic leadership to maximize impact. Even though other items on the climate policy agenda (especially adaptation and loss and damage) have gained in prominence, our focus is, in line with the existing literature and EU leadership aspirations, on mitigation of greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions as the core of the international cooperation problem.

Advancing thinking on the strategic qualities of EU international climate policy (Schunz, 2019), the article in particular argues that the major contemporary challenge to EU international climate leadership is to enhance its capacity for strategic action. While the EU successfully adapted its climate diplomacy to evolving challenges in the past, the

turbulent international context creates a demand for the EU to proactively augment its strategic capabilities across EU institutions and EU member states. Specifically, an EU 'grand climate strategy' could serve to fully establish climate objectives among the highest priorities, thereby advancing integration of exemplary and diplomatic leadership and increasing international impact.

We develop our argument in three steps. In the next section, we first introduce our assessment framework for appraising international EU leadership on climate change, including the distinction between exemplary and diplomatic leadership as well as important framework conditions. Next, we employ this assessment framework to analyse the EU's climate leadership since the early 1990s under strongly evolving framework conditions. Finally, we synthesize the main findings and reflect on the potential of the EU's international climate leadership moving forward, in light of the identified trends and the growing urgency of addressing climate change.

The EU's international climate leadership: assessment framework

EU leadership and its appraisal

We start from the proposition that an actor qualifies as a 'leader' in global climate governance if it is more ambitious than others in the pursuit of the common good. In much of the relevant literature and in policy, leadership has an implicitly or explicitly positive normative connotation. We argue that to deserve this positive appraisal, an actor should display outstanding ambition toward the multilaterally agreed and hence widely (if not universally) shared objectives of climate policy. Regarding climate mitigation, the UNFCCC's objective to prevent dangerous anthropogenic interference with the climate system and the Paris Agreement's long-term goals of keeping warming well below 2°C or even 1.5°C above preindustrial levels and eliminating net GHG emissions in the second half of this century constitute such globally recognized standards. They have been derived from and further specified by authoritative science synthesized by the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (e.g., IPCC, 2018). Therefore, actors such as the EU qualify for international climate leadership only if they pursue ambitious policy objectives (relative to other actors) toward the aforementioned multilaterally agreed goals as validated by the IPCC (see also Oberthür & Groen, 2015).

We follow Liefferink and Wurzel in distinguishing leadership as such from its effects/effectiveness. Speaking to the longstanding discussion on whether effectiveness should be a defining characteristic of leadership, these authors

have usefully distinguished leaders who *intend* to attract followers from 'pioneers' who go ahead without such an intention (Liefferink & Wurzel, 2017). The effects and effectiveness of leadership can then be considered an empirical question. Where the EU pursues ambitious climate policy objectives in exchange with international partners, the intentionality required for international leadership can be taken for granted.

To appraise the EU's international climate leadership, we consider that neither international policy outputs nor outcomes/impacts are by themselves useful/appropriate yardsticks. Such outputs, outcomes and impacts constitute the main reference points in assessments of the effectiveness of international climate policy. However, we cannot expect the EU, that lacks hegemonic power, to ensure the adoption of (international) decisions in line with the Paris Agreement's 1.5/2°C goal (policy output) or even the phase out of global GHG emissions so as to realize these objectives (policy outcome/impact). Furthermore, determining the EU's exact contribution to international outputs and outcomes would require disentangling complex causal pathways in which a variety of other factors intervene (such as the interests, perceptions and power of international partners, and varying national political, socio-economic and technological conditions) (see also Wurzel et al., 2019, p. 12). Importantly, it would not enable us to identify (under)exploited potentials of EU leadership – which suggests focusing on factors under the EU's control.

Goal achievement seems a similarly unsuitable yardstick. It has especially been used as a dependent variable in studies of the EU's effectiveness in international negotiations (e.g., Jørgensen et al., 2011; da Conceição-Heldt & Meunier, 2014), including in international climate policy (e.g., van Schaik, 2013; Oberthür & Groen, 2018). Again, other variables intervene between the EU's own actions and the outcome of the negotiations. As a result, EU goals may be achieved even without any EU influence or may be missed despite significant EU influence. In addition, the goals an actor sets itself are usually defined based on strategic and feasibility considerations. They thus also form part of an actor's policy, which we aim to assess. In short, analysing goal achievement tells us little about the exploitation of the EU's potential for influence.

Therefore, we focus our analytical effort on assessing the EU's leadership approach and actions. Rather than trying to specify the EU's impact on international policy outputs or outcomes, we concentrate on investigating/tracing (the adequacy of) the EU's own *input into and contribution to* international climate policy. Information on EU goal achievement and on international political outputs and outcomes can serve as useful contextual reference points. However, we turn our attention to investigating whether and to what extent the EU has (1) mobilized its climate leadership capabilities and (2), in doing so, appropriately adapted to external

conditions. To this end, it is important to identify the relevant framework conditions as well as the main arenas of EU leadership action, to which we turn next.

Framework conditions

For a fuller appraisal of EU leadership efforts, we suggest investigating key framework conditions. We focus on such contextual factors that can constitute challenges to the EU's international approach and may hence require adapting this approach for maximum international impact. These may, in particular, relate to institutional conditions and politics. However, we consider the investigation of EU domestic climate politics to be beyond the scope of this analysis since it drives 'exemplary leadership' (see below) but does not directly affect the EU's international approach.

First, the EU's legal-institutional set-up is likely to significantly shape and condition EU leadership. This relates, in particular, to the distribution of legal competences between the EU and the member states in the policy field in question, as well as to the applicable decision-making procedure. Significant member state competences may be expected to place higher demand on coordinating international policy than exclusive EU competences. Similarly, the applicability of the ordinary legislative procedure (including co-decision by the European Parliament and qualified majority voting in the Council of the European Union: hereafter 'the Council') may facilitate the adoption of legislation compared to a wide-ranging involvement of the European Council, which generally decides by unanimity, and to any unanimity requirement in the Council (e.g., Delreux & Happaerts, 2016).

Second, international leadership by definition operates in an international environment, including other actors and different fora and arenas. As the EU does not have hegemonic power, it has to blend into the international opportunity structure. The leader's impact will depend on the fit of its policies and strategies with the international context (that it co-shapes), including the international constellation of power and interests (politics) and the institutional landscape (polity) (Bretherton & Vogler, 2006; Schunz, 2019).

Exemplary and diplomatic leadership

We group the four leadership types widely distinguished in the literature into two broad categories for our purposes. Synthesizing more than three decades of discussion, Wurzel and colleagues have distinguished four ideal-typical forms of leadership, each based on particular resources. Structural leadership relies on material power resources. Cognitive

leadership is primarily based on the weight of knowledge and ideas. Entre-preneurial leadership relies on negotiating and diplomatic skills. Finally, exemplary leadership or 'leadership by example' derives from domestic policy action. The leadership types rarely appear separately in reality, and combinations are common (Liefferink & Wurzel, 2017; Wurzel et al., 2019). Keeping all the resources implied in view, we synthesize these lea-dership types into two main levels/arenas of the EU's international leader-ship on which our analysis can usefully focus.

First, under *exemplary leadership*, we focus – like much of the literature – on internal, domestic policy, including target-setting and related legislative frameworks (output) as well as resulting GHG emissions (outcome). Domestic climate policy generally provides three means of international influence. First, it underpins international credibility (e.g., Parker & Karlsson, 2010). Second, such climate action can also, irrespective of international credibility, inspire other actors to adopt similar policies through policy learning and diffusion (which relates to cognitive leadership and can be promoted through EU diplomatic leadership) (Jordan & Huitema, 2014). Finally, it can materially incentivise other actors to adapt as they seek market access through regulatory alignment (Damro, 2012; Goldthau & Sitter, 2015). This means therefore incorporates aspects of the ideal-typical structural leader-ship. Overall, these three means constitute the potential of effective exemp-lary leadership.

Second, we sum up the remaining elements of structural, cognitive and entrepreneurial leadership under externally focused *diplomatic leadership*. This combines climate diplomacy actions that aim to coerce, convince and cajole other parties into action. For the EU as a collective international actor, this is itself premised on, and shaped by, how well it coordinates for coherence and unity, including among its member states (van Schaik, 2013). Coherence and unity are in turn preconditioned by domestic policy development (e.g., Kelemen & Vogel, 2010). Influence eventually depends on how well the EU mobilizes its structural, cognitive and entrepreneurial capabilities (diplomatic contacts, outreach, finance, etc., but also exemplary leadership discussed above) within an evolving external opportunity struc-ture (see above on framework conditions). To appraise diplomatic leadership, we should therefore investigate to what extent the EU (1) has effectively coor-dinated for coherence/unity and (2) has deployed its capabilities in a way that fits the prevailing international context (see Bretherton & Vogler, 2006; Schunz, 2019).

Even though analytically distinguishable, exemplary and diplomatic lea-dership are interrelated and interact. Domestic policy can reinforce or under-mine climate diplomacy (e.g., credibility), provide a significant means of international influence (through market and regulatory power) and condition the EU's international unity. In turn, climate diplomacy can promote policy

diffusion and generally bring the means of exemplary leadership to bear. As we separately analyse exemplary and diplomatic leadership, we should therefore consider the extent to which the EU employed them in an integrated way so as to maximize influence.

The assessment framework in overview

In conclusion, we suggest focusing on five inter-related elements for the systematic assessment of the EU's international climate leadership, namely:

- the EU's international leadership ambitions, goal achievement (outputs) and outcomes (policies and emissions);
- key framework conditions of EU leadership;
- the EU's exemplary leadership as a means of international credibility, policy diffusion and influence;
- the EU's diplomatic leadership, including its coherence and fit with evolving international framework conditions; and
- the EU's integrated use of both exemplary and diplomatic leadership.

The EU's long quest for international climate leadership

The EU's international policy goals, goal achievement and resulting outcomes

The EU has consistently pursued the most ambitious science-based international climate policy objectives of the major economies. It advocated a binding obligation for industrialized countries to stabilize CO_2 emissions at 1990 levels by 2000 in the negotiations on the UNFCCC. It then pushed for a 15 per cent GHG emission reduction by these countries by 2010 in the discussions on the 1997 Kyoto Protocol. This was in line with scientific knowledge that highlighted that developed countries should take the lead in curbing emissions. For the 2009 Copenhagen climate summit, the EU called on developed countries to reduce GHG emissions by 25–40 per cent from 1990 levels by 2020 and on major developing countries to reach a 15–30 per cent deviation below business as usual. These objectives were directly taken from the IPCC fourth assessment report (van Schaik & Schunz, 2012, p. 175). Finally, the EU requested substantial mitigation commitments from all parties under the 2015 Paris Agreement and a strong mechanism to enhance ambition over time to align it with science – and has subsequently urged parties to upgrade their mitigation ambitions accordingly (see Table 1 for an overview of the EU's eventual targets, which at times diverged from its negotiation objectives) (European Council, 2020; Oberthür & Pallemaerts, 2010; Oberthür & Groen, 2018; Parker et al., 2017; Schreurs, 2016).

Table 1. EU GHG emission reduction targets.

Year adopted (related UN climate development)	GHG emission reduction target (base year 1990)	Status
1990 (1992 UNFCCC)	stabilisation by 2000 (CO_2 only)	achieved
1997/98 (1997 Kyoto Protocol)	8% by 2008–2012	achieved
2007 (2009 Copenhagen COP 15)	20% by 2020	24% in 2019
2009 (2009 Copenhagen COP 15)	80–95% by 2050	add. measures required
2014 (2015 Paris Agreement)	40% by 2030	add. measures required
2019 (2021 Glasgow COP 26)	climate neutrality by 2050	add. measures required
2020 (2021 Glasgow COP 26)	55% by 2030	add. measures required

Source: Authors' compilation and data from EEA, 2020.

The EU increasingly achieved its international leadership objectives from the 1990s, before crashing in Copenhagen in 2009 and recovering modestly in the 2010s. While binding mitigation obligations for developed countries did not make it into the UNFCCC, they did become the core of the Kyoto Protocol, although at a much lower level than the EU had promoted (with reduction targets of 8, 7 and 6 per cent for the EU, the US and Japan, respectively) (Oberthür & Roche Kelly, 2008). EU goal achievement collapsed in Copenhagen, which resulted in a non-binding pledge and review system (Groen & Niemann, 2013; van Schaik & Schunz, 2012). It recovered in the 2010s when the Paris Agreement did reflect the EU's main, moderated policy objectives (Oberthür & Groen, 2018; Parker et al., 2017).

The international outputs achieved may have contributed to the significant development of national climate policies especially in the twenty-first century, although so far with limited effect on global GHG emissions. While the US did not join the Kyoto Protocol, all Kyoto parties except Canada complied with their emission targets. Under the 2009 Copenhagen Accord and the 2010 Cancun Agreements, 73 countries made mitigation pledges toward 2020, including all developed countries and most emerging economies. Under the 2015 Paris Agreement, more than 190 countries submitted climate plans towards 2025/30. In parallel, national climate legislation has spread especially among larger emitters (Iacobuta et al., 2018). However, this policy progress has so far only resulted in tempering global emission growth rather than the urgently required steep emission reduction (Höhne et al., 2020; UNEP, 2020).

Framework conditions

We here address the institutional framework and the international context of EU external climate policy (see also above). Two of the five contemporary 'crisis trends', identified by von Homeyer et al. (2021) and underlying the EU polycrisis, come into focus. Most importantly, the international context captures core elements of the climate-related 'geopolitical shifts', whereas the domestic legal-institutional framework concerns the EU's 'governance constraints'.

The relevant legal-institutional framework puts particular demands on EU coordination for coherence and unity in EU external climate policy. First of all, climate and energy policy are areas of mixed competence so that both the EU institutions and its member states need to be aligned. This is further reinforced by the crosscutting nature of the climate challenge that requires climate policy integration in various other sectoral policies with varying EU and member state competences (e.g., agriculture, development, trade, etc.; see von Homeyer et al., 2021). While the application of the ordinary legislative procedure in principle enables majority decision-making in the core of climate policy, some aspects (e.g., taxation) require unanimity. Also, the European Council, that generally decides by unanimity, has increasingly become involved in climate decision-making (Dupont, 2019). Not least, since decision-making on external climate policy in the Council has generally required consensus, effective mechanisms for coordination of EU external climate policy are needed (e.g., Delreux & Happaerts, 2016).

Furthermore, three particular developments in international climate politics and its institutional framework have significantly transformed the international opportunity structure for EU climate leadership over the past decades. First, international climate governance in the twenty-first century has become 'polycentric'. Increasingly recognized as requiring integration into many other policy fields, climate change has become a prominent issue in a variety of international fora, including – to name just a few examples – the International Civil Aviation Organization (ICAO), the International Maritime Organization (IMO), the World Trade Organization, and the G7/G20. Furthermore, the limited capacity and progress of multilateral climate policy under the UNFCCC has driven the rise of a multitude of transnational climate initiatives involving private and subnational actors. Consequently, EU climate leadership requires engagement far beyond the multilateral UNFCCC process in a variety of intergovernmental and transnational fora and processes (Bulkeley et al., 2014; Jordan et al., 2018).

Second, the landscape of international climate politics has undergone tectonic changes. In particular, the rise of China and other emerging economies has changed the political balance. With industrialized country emissions in focus, the conflict line between the US and the EU as the two biggest industrialized players structured international climate politics in the 1990s and early 2000s. Since the Copenhagen conference, international climate politics has become increasingly multipolar, with the US and China as two privileged poles, and the focus has shifted to emissions from all countries. As a result of its declining shares in world population, GDP and global GHG emissions, and further weakened by Brexit, the EU has become a more medium-sized climate power ranking clearly behind the US and China – even though with significant historical responsibility, capabilities to provide financial assistance to developing countries and increasing political, economic and technological

capacity to mitigate GHG emissions (Dupont & Moore, 2019; Oberthür, 2016; Vogler, 2016).

Third, climate change has become an issue of geopolitics. While climate policy only occasionally attracted the attention of heads of state in the 1990s, it has increasingly become embedded in the agenda of European and world leaders in the twenty-first century across bilateral, minilateral and multilateral encounters, including the G7, the G20, the UN Security Council and others (Kirton & Kokotsis, 2015). Over time, it has become a firm part of geopolitical competition and has thus increasingly moved into the realm of 'grand strategy'. Grand strategizing implies the highest political level giving integrated consideration to the pursuit of highest priorities across policy fields through domestic and external action in a long-term perspective (e.g., Silove, 2018; van Hooft, 2017). With its elevation to the highest echelons of international statecraft, climate policy has become part of grand strategizing – and hence also susceptible to great power competition in a zero-sum logic (Dupont, 2019; Kuzemko et al., 2020; Vogler, 2016; Van de Graaf & Sovacool, 2020).

Exemplary leadership

The EU has made important headway on domestic climate policy thereby filling an early gap of its international credibility in the 1990s (e.g., Oberthür & Roche Kelly, 2008; see also Parker & Karlsson, 2010). To start with, the EU has regularly strengthened its domestic GHG emission reduction targets in step with the development of multilateral climate policy (see Table 1). Although the targets have not necessarily fully reflected advancing scientific knowledge, they have consistently been the most ambitious among the major economies and have increasingly aligned towards mid-century climate neutrality (Torney & O'Gorman, 2020; von Homeyer et al., 2021). The progress in climate policy occurred in a turbulent internal context that featured the emergence of a strong East–West cleavage around 2010 (Bocquillon & Maltby, 2017; Skovgaard, 2014) as well as rising populism and Euroscepticism (Huber et al., 2021), and was balanced with public support and societal mobilization for action on climate change (see also Buzogány & Ćetković, 2021; Petri & Biedenkopf, 2021).

The EU has also strongly developed its climate policy framework, including climate policy integration in other policy fields. The development of EU climate policy especially took off in the 2000s. Since 2007/2008, climate policy has advanced under the umbrella of decadal frameworks for climate and energy policy for 2020 and 2030, including key implementing legislation on the EU emissions trading scheme (for power and industry), member-state emission targets for other sectors, renewable energy and energy efficiency. The 2030 framework also introduced a cyclical governance system that is

roughly aligned with the quintennial cycles under the Paris Agreement (Torney & O'Gorman, 2020). Other EU climate policies have addressed various sources of emissions (e.g., cars, fluorinated GHGs, etc.) and other policy fields (especially energy, transport, buildings and finance/investments). The desire to abide by international commitments and support the EU's international role has consistently been a major motivation in the legislative processes. Overall, EU climate policy development has, despite growing competition, remained leading by international comparison and today includes a thick mix of regulatory, market-based and procedural instruments (e.g., Delbeke & Vis, 2019; Delreux & Happaerts, 2016; Iacobuta et al., 2018; Skjærseth et al., 2016; von Homeyer et al., 2021).

As a result, the EU has so far delivered on, or overachieved, its domestic mitigation targets. With emissions down about 24 per cent from 1990 levels in 2019, the EU as a whole is on track to exceeding its 20 per cent emission reduction target for 2020 (facilitated by the economic recession of 2008/09 and reinforced by the Covid-19 crisis in 2020). However, the EU is not yet on track to meeting its emission targets for 2030 and 2050 which will require considerable additional efforts (EEA, 2020).

The European Green Deal, launched in 2019 as a European Commission strategy and policy programme for transforming the EU's economy for a sustainable future, promises such additional efforts. Next to anchoring the increased 2030 emission reduction target of 55 per cent and the 2050 climate neutrality goal, it foresees a suite of proposals for implementing legislation mainly in 2021, prioritizes climate policy objectives across all other EU policy fields, and includes a Just Transition Mechanism and Fund to assist regions and sectors particularly dependent on fossil fuels or carbon-intensive processes (European Commission, 2019). Whereas the EU recovery programme from the global Covid-19 pandemic is meant to synergise with the European Green Deal, the Deal's effectiveness will depend on its implementation (Dupont et al., 2020).

In addition to enhancing the EU's international credibility, EU climate policies have increasingly become a benchmark and a source of inspiration for others. Since international policy diffusion also hinges on the fit of EU policies with domestic conditions in recipient countries, the considerable expansion of the EU's climate policy portfolio, including a diversified set of market-based, regulatory and procedural instruments, has enhanced the diffusion potential. It has also created potential for more diversified climate diplomacy efforts to support policy diffusion (so far with a strong focus on selected key instruments such as emissions trading) (Biedenkopf et al., 2017; Adelle et al., 2018).

Finally, the overall importance of domestic climate policy as a source of international influence has increasingly come to the fore. Climate policy has come to be understood as shaping access to the sizeable European

market, building the regulatory and technological capacity to address climate change, and supporting international competitiveness (Oberthür, 2016; Tomlinson, 2019). Prime examples include the inclusion of international aviation in the emissions trading scheme and the regulation of biofuels affecting related imports (Birchfield, 2015; Daugbjerg & Swinbank, 2015). The European Green Deal – which includes an industrial strategy, plans for a carbon border adjustment mechanism, and a hydrogen strategy as key elements – signals increasing awareness of the geopolitical clout of domestic climate policy (European Commission, 2019). Having said that, there is little evidence that this is given systematic consideration as part of an overall EU leadership strategy across EU institutions and member states, as also seen in the analysis of diplomatic leadership.

Diplomatic leadership

The EU has significantly enhanced its coordination for coherence and unity in international climate diplomacy. It consolidated its system of coordination and external representation in the 1990s and early 2000s, especially for multilateral climate governance. Coordination has occurred in a dedicated Council Working Party, and the EU moved to officially 'speak with one voice' in multilateral climate negotiations from the mid-1990s, led by the rotating Council Presidency. Reforms in the early 2000s streamlined internal coordination to facilitate external outreach and ensured the appointment of capable 'lead negotiators' (next to a stronger acknowledgement of the role for the European Commission). Furthermore, the Green Diplomacy Network, created in the early 2000s, has served to coordinate climate diplomacy initiatives and strategy across national and EU foreign services, since 2010 with the support of the European External Action Service (EEAS) established under the Lisbon Treaty. Furthermore, the Council (foreign/general affairs) has enacted a rolling climate diplomacy action plan since 2015 and a climate ambassador was appointed to the EEAS in 2019 (Schunz, 2019). Although the EU at times suffered from internal discord (e.g., at the 2009 Copenhagen conference: see Groen & Niemann, 2013), progress on domestic climate policy, ahead of international discussions, has increasingly supported substantive unity (see above; overall, see Delreux & Van den Brande, 2013; Hoffmeister, 2017; Oberthür & Pallemaerts, 2010; van Schaik, 2013).

Furthermore, the EU has adapted its diplomatic leadership to the advancing polycentricity of international climate governance. It has hence broadened its climate diplomacy beyond the UN process (as also reflected in the aforementioned climate diplomacy action plan). In the early 2000s, the EU, following the US withdrawal from the Kyoto process in 2001, increasingly engaged on climate change in other multilateral and intergovernmental fora, including the G20, the US-initiated Major Economies Forum, ICAO, the

IMO and the Montreal Protocol for the protection of the ozone layer. Together with Canada and China, the EU established the Ministerial on Climate Action in 2017 replacing the Major Economies Forum that was abandoned by the US administration under President Trump. The failed Copenhagen conference in 2009 spawned increased engagement with the growing number of transnational climate initiatives, such as the Covenant of Mayors, which was launched by the European Commission in 2008, and new emphasis on bilateral climate partnerships (Torney, 2015; Belis et al., 2018). Climate and the environment have also become prominent parts of bilateral and inter-regional trade negotiations and have begun to reshape external energy relations (Goldthau & Sitter, 2015; Musch & De Ville, 2019). Overall, the EU has shifted from a strong focus on the multilateral UNFCCC process in the 1990s towards engagement in a variety of minilateral, multilateral, transnational and bilateral fora and relations (Oberthür & Pallemaerts, 2010; Wurzel et al., 2017). Having said that, the aforementioned coordination efforts have so far primarily focused on the key intergovernmental processes (UNFCCC, G7/20, etc.), leaving room for improvement regarding other policy fields and transnational initiatives.

The EU has also adapted its diplomatic leadership to the changing landscape of international climate politics. In response to the EU's failure at the 2009 Copenhagen conference and reflecting its declining international weight, the EU recalibrated towards a 'leadiator' role characterized by more moderate policy objectives and greater emphasis on coalition and bridge-building (Bäckstrand & Elgström, 2013), that has remained valid since (Oberthür & Groen, 2015). In this context, the EU has also recalibrated support for capacity building and climate finance, key elements of its climate diplomacy toolbox, towards (potential) allies, including African developing countries, least developed countries, and small island developing states. This has entailed paying more attention to adaptation and loss and damage as issues particularly close to the hearts of developing country allies. The 2019 European Green Deal reconfirmed the focus on supporting alliance-building, especially with Africa and the European neighbourhood (European Commission, 2019, pp. 20–22). Overall, the stronger reflection on the international context and the clearer definition of ends has amounted to a 'more strategic' approach (Schunz, 2019, p. 353).

The EU seems less advanced in realizing the full implications and potential of the turn towards climate geopolitics. This turn calls for an integrated and permanent consideration of climate policy across governance levels and policy fields in an overarching long-term perspective at highest political level ('grand strategy' – see above). Given mixed EU-member state competences across relevant policy fields, the definition and pursuit of a joint EU grand climate strategy requires coordination across EU institutions (especially the Parliament and Commission) and EU member states at highest level. The

European Council has increasingly addressed climate change but has so far in particular addressed discrete issues (such as the 2030 Framework) (e.g., European Council, 2020). Other fora such as the Council Working Party on international climate policy and the general/foreign affairs Council are only mandated to consider part of the overall picture. The EGD signals a more strategic approach, acknowledging the need for more progress in integrating EU policies (e.g., trade and other external policies) (European Commission, 2019). However, it represents a Commission strategy rather than a framework for strategic coordination across the EU and its member states. Overall, the EU so far lacks an obvious centre for regular and sustained grand climate strategizing.

Discussion and conclusions

Our approach has enabled us to systematically assess the EU's leadership record on climate change against a comprehensive set of criteria. It is based on the systematic distinction of different facets of exemplary leadership (credibility, policy learning and diffusion, market and regulatory power) and diplomatic leadership (coherence/unity, adaptation to international context), as well as the identification of key trends in international climate governance (polycentricity, multipolarity, geopolitics). This has allowed us to pinpoint key achievements of, and remaining challenges to, EU climate leadership.

This EU leadership has registered important achievements in (1) mobilizing its capacities and (2) adapting to external conditions over the past decades. The EU successfully plugged an early credibility gap by strongly developing its domestic climate policy from the 2000s, as most recently reinforced by the European Green Deal and the response to the Covid-19 crisis. Putting GHG emissions on a downward path, this domestic policy framework has also radiated beyond the EU that especially promoted key instruments such as emissions trading. Reformed arrangements for EU 'actorness' in the multilateral UN process in the 2000s have rendered the EU a more efficient and effective negotiator. Also, foreign services have been increasingly involved and coordinated across the EU for enhanced climate diplomacy. The EU has furthermore significantly adapted its international approach to the evolving turbulent context. This has included its new 'leadiator' strategy in response to the rise of emerging powers and resulting stronger multipolarity, including enhanced targeting of climate support. It has also entailed a stronger engagement with multiple international and transnational fora and initiatives beyond the UN process as well as in bilateral contexts in response to growing polycentricity. Notably, the EU has adapted its international approach in reaction to particular problems (inefficiencies in international negotiations; the EU's Copenhagen failure).

A consequential first challenge for EU climate leadership going forward is maintaining and further expanding the aforementioned achievements. Coordination of climate diplomacy across foreign and climate policy, arrangements for the EU's pursuit of multilateral climate negotiations, and advancing effective 'polycentric' engagement beyond it all require continued efforts and regular reflection. Effective 'leadiatorship' requires regular review of positions and opportunities/needs for coalition and bridge-building and well-considered deployment of support. Not least, the EU can – as foreseen in the European Green Deal – further develop its domestic climate policy to advance the EU's regulatory and market potentials and to boost its own low-emission capabilities for maximum international influence.

Our approach leads us to another, interrelated major challenge towards the further development of the EU's leadership capabilities, thereby advancing analysis of the strategic qualities of EU environmental foreign policy (Schunz, 2019). The geopolitical turn of climate policy impels the EU to embed its climate 'leadiatorship' into a broader 'grand climate strategy'. Developing the EU's more strategic approach that emerged in the 2010s (ibid.) into a full-fledged joint grand climate strategy would entail systematic, integrative and continuous consideration of climate strategy at highest political level, including the interplay between exemplary and diplomatic leadership across policy fields and fora. Given the particular character of the EU, such an integrated and comprehensive approach demands coordination between EU institutions and member states. The European Green Deal contains relevant elements (e.g., integration of climate objectives across policy fields), but as a Commission programme, it does not (yet) provide for the required coordination across the EU.

In this context, our analysis of past EU climate leadership highlights the strong potential of better integrating domestic and external climate policy development. EU climate diplomacy has helped diffuse domestic policies internationally and has significantly relied on the credibility of domestic action, as well as on EU regulatory and market power. In turn, EU leadership aspirations have been an important driver of domestic policy development. Hence, the distinction between EU exemplary and diplomatic leadership becomes blurred and the separation of EU domestic and international climate policy – reflected both in policymaking and related academic literature – elusive. Increasing the coherence and integration of internal and external climate policies remains a major challenge and source of untapped potential, which an EU grand climate strategy could aim to address.

How could the development of such an EU grand climate strategy be facilitated and enabled? So far, the EU lacks a strategic centre capable of coordinating such a grand strategy at the highest political level across EU institutions and member states. One means for moving towards such a strategic centre could be a new body of high-level climate ambassadors or 'czars'

from the member states and the EU institutions. It could serve to advance discussions on grand climate strategy, while also facilitating the maintenance and further development of the existing achievements addressed above. It could generally enhance the capacity for shaping EU strategy and capabilities proactively under conditions of continuing turbulence and new crises (e.g., Covid-19). The development of an integrated and uniform grand climate strategy may remain an uphill battle for a composite actor such as the EU. However, even if full strategic convergence may remain illusory, the creation of related structures and capacities could – supported by increasing alignment of climate policy – facilitate joint strategizing. The urgency of the climate challenge and the persisting high demand for international climate leadership underline the need for further thinking about ways to advance EU grand climate strategy in the context of the European Green Deal, both in policymaking and research.

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Notes on Contributors

Sebastian Oberthür is professor of environment and sustainable development at the Vrije Universiteit Brussel and professor of environmental policy and law at the University of Eastern Finland.

Claire Dupont is assistant professor of European and international governance at the Department of Public Governance and Management at Ghent University.

ORCID

Sebastian Oberthür 🔟 http://orcid.org/0000-0001-8626-5082
Claire Dupont 🔟 http://orcid.org/0000-0003-4967-6792

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