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EU Climate Diplomacy: Projecting Green Global Leadership

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About the Speaker

Marc Vanheukelen is Ambassador at Large for Climate Diplomacy at the European External Action Service. He previously served as Ambassador of the European Union to the World Trade Organisation. Prior to his posting in Geneva, he was a Director in the European Commission's Directorate-General for Trade responsible for sustainable development, economic partnership agreements, and agri-food and fisheries. Before that, he was the Chief of Staff of EU Trade Commissioner De Gucht. Marc Vanheukelen has built a long-standing career across various departments of the European Commission (external relations, environment, and economic & financial affairs). He holds degrees in history and in economics from the University of Leuven, as well as in international economics from the Graduate Institute, Geneva (IHEID). He has taught and lectured widely at various universities on international trade, economics and EU affairs.

Abstract

On 14 October 2021, Ambassador Marc Vanheukelen, Ambassador at Large for Climate Diplomacy at the European External Action Service, delivered the eighth annual high-level *EU Diplomacy Lecture* on “EU Climate Diplomacy: Projecting Green Global Leadership” at the College of Europe in Bruges. After outlining the importance of climate action, he discussed three tasks of climate diplomacy: first, persuading other countries to step up their climate efforts drawing on the power of example, the power of the purse, and the power of the internal market; second, managing the geopolitics of decarbonisation associated with a sharp cut in the consumption of fossil fuels and the increased consumption of raw materials necessary for green technologies; and third, addressing the climate and security nexus. He concluded with the observation that the European Union remains a pivotal actor in advancing multilateral climate efforts and projecting green global leadership.

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Ladies and Gentlemen,

All of us recall the images of violent weather during the past summer. In Germany and Belgium, a deluge turned towns into rivers, killed dozens of people and caused widespread damage to farmland and houses. In the Chinese city of Zhengzhou, where a year's rain fell in three days, several persons drowned in underground trains. Turkey saw a temperature of 49,1 degrees Celsius, the highest ever recorded in the country. On the North American west coast, firefighters faced forest infernos amidst an unprecedented heatwave. These images have vividly illustrated the reality of a hotter planet. And then most of us did not see what happened in the meantime in poorer parts of the world, like rivers overflowing in Uganda or mudslides in India.

The science of climate change is getting more precise and holds starker and starker warning signals. The leading scientific body, the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, operating under the auspices of the United Nations Environment Programme and the World Meteorological Organisation, issued the first part of its new assessment report last August. It shows that emissions of greenhouse gases (i.e. carbon dioxide, methane, nitrous oxide and HFCs) from human activities are responsible for approximately 1,1 degrees Celsius warming since 1850 and finds that over the next twenty years global temperature is expected to reach or exceed 1,5 degrees Celsius. This relates to the global average, but some parts of the world warm faster than others. Temperatures rise, for example, more rapidly on land and more than twice as fast in the Arctic.

At 1,5 degrees Celsius of warming, there will be increasing heat waves. Dry parts of the world will become dryer, wet parts will become wetter, and uncommon weather events will become more common. At 2 degrees Celsius, heat extremes will reach critical threshold levels causing harvest failures and in some parts of the world, like India or Pakistan, a combination of heat and humidity, the so-called 'wet bulb temperature' level, which is literally lethal for humans.

However, the report also shows that human actions still have the potential to determine the future course of climate. Mankind can still make the difference, but as UN Secretary General António Guterres commented, we are now at 'code red'. Stabilizing the climate will require strong, rapid and sustained reductions in greenhouse gas emissions, and reaching climate-neutrality (i.e. net zero emissions) by mid-century.

Unfortunately, neither humankind's behaviour of today, nor its intentions for the future, are consistent yet with that climate stabilisation objective.

Annual global emissions still have not peaked. Owing to COVID-19 and the resulting slump in the world economy, they fell by close to 10% last year, but are forecast to rebound above 2019 volumes, definitely with the current gas crisis where countries resort more to coal again for fuelling their power stations.

Last month, the UN drew up a report card tallying up countries' national climate plans as formally submitted to the secretariat of the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC). They put the world on track for around 2.7 degrees Celsius of warming by the end of the century. If one takes into account the improved plans that have been announced but not yet formally submitted, like that of the top emitter, China, the temperature rise could be limited to possibly 2,3 degrees.

Differences of tenths of degrees may sound trivial to you, but they do matter a great deal. With any rise above 2 degrees, havoc is likely to go up much more steeply and tipping points could be passed, leading to much more unpredictable and violent weather patterns.

This explains why the world community set for itself the objective of limiting global warming to well below 2 degrees Celsius, and ideally, 1,5 degrees, in the Paris Agreement it struck during the 21st meeting of the Contracting Parties of the UNFCCC, better known under its acronym COP-21, in December 2015. Having been ratified by almost all of the Contracting Parties – one of the last countries outstanding, Turkey, did so last week - the Paris Agreement is today's global legal foundation for tackling climate change.

However, and this is crucial to frame the theme of this lecture, EU climate diplomacy, the Paris Agreement reflects a fundamentally different approach than its predecessor, the failed Kyoto Protocol. The Kyoto Protocol of 1997 took the form of a 'top down' treaty imposing specific targets for carbon emission cuts, but only on the developed countries of the 'North', and not on the developing countries of the 'South'. This was increasingly perceived as unfair and unworkable, in particular by the US, which abandoned the Protocol.

By contrast, the approach of the Paris Agreement is 'bottom-up', voluntary, and non-punitive. The Paris Agreement sets out the common task of reaching carbon neutrality by the second half of the century. However, each country is free to choose its own emission-cutting targets and select its preferred ways of meeting them, and will not be subject to any penalties if its voluntarily announced targets (the so-called Nationally

Determined Contributions) are missed. On top of this, the Paris Agreement is supposed to bring about progress over time, through a mechanism of regular 'pledge and review', which is hoped to lead to a ratcheting-up of climate action and ambition. The underlying political logic of the Paris Agreement is therefore that continuous international 'peer pressure', 'naming, faming and shaming', will propel the world toward attaining the Paris objectives.

This is where the first task of EU climate diplomacy comes in: persuading other countries, and notably the big emitters, to step up their climate efforts and help others to reach their emission reduction targets.

The EU is nowadays responsible for about 8% of global emissions only and that share is declining further. Admittedly, looking at historical emissions, say those of the last 100 years that have created the present concentration of greenhouse gases in the atmosphere, our share is a little over 15%. All the same, we are clearly not going to save the planet on our own. China alone accounts for 28% of today's emissions, the US for 14%, India 8%, Russia 5%, Japan 4%, and so forth. The G-20 countries together emit about 80% of the total. Developing countries represent roughly 2/3 of emissions. In sum, the North and the South are in it together, and the G-20 is definitely a good place to start.

To deliver on this first task of climate diplomacy and persuade others to adopt more ambitious targets for 2030 and commit to climate neutrality by 2050 or thereabout, the EU has three levers at its disposal: the power of example, the power of the purse, and the power of the internal market.

First, convincing others by showing the way. Over the past years, the EU has built up a strong credibility on domestic action. We have reached our emission reduction target for 2020, adopted in a climate law the legally binding goal of climate neutrality by 2050, and have ramped up our target for 2030 from -40% to -55% compared to 1990 in order to ensure compatibility with the Paris objectives. To walk the talk, the Commission has in July unveiled 13 draft regulations or directives to accomplish the more ambitious target. Doing so will not be a mean feat as we – companies, workers, households – will have to make in less than a decade emission cuts that we achieved before in thirty years!

Anyhow, there is no other large emitter in the world that has followed a similar transparent, systematic approach to emission reduction. Practising what we preach, leading by example, has given us a strong standing on the international climate scene.

If there is one area of global affairs where the EU is seen as blazing the trail, it is climate action.

Second, using the power of the purse to climate ends. Through its own budget and that of the Member States, the EU is by far the largest donor of development aid. As part of the external dimension of the European Green Deal, it has been decided to allocate between 30 and 35% of aid to developing countries and those of our neighbourhood, equating to around 28 billion euros in 2021-2027 for climate action, and programming is underway. The latter may at times be a laborious exercise as some of the beneficiary countries might wish to spend a smaller portion of the available envelope on green goals, privileging other development priorities instead. On top of grants, there are the loans to third countries of the European Investment Bank, whose ambition it is to grow into Europe's climate bank. With these amounts, we can put in place Green Deals with developing countries. For example, the EU is exploring at present, together with other developed countries, the creation of a green energy transition partnership with South Africa, offering financial support to exit from coal.

By virtue of its efforts, past and present, the EU is the undisputed leader in what is called 'climate finance'. Back in 2009, in Copenhagen, developed countries promised developing countries to mobilise 100 billion dollars annually by 2020 for climate mitigation and adaptation. This promise has so far not been honoured – the tally for 2019 stands at 79 billion – but extra efforts, notably by the US, are being made to close the gap. However, the EU and its Member States are definitely not to blame. We have kept more than our fair share of that promise, transferring around 28 billion dollars a year.

Third, the power of the European internal market, one of the biggest in the world. By conditioning access to our market to compliance with climate-related rules, exporters to Europe are prodded to clean up their production methods and supply chains. This is a green instance of what the literature calls the 'Brussels effect' where third countries, or at least their companies, mend their ways to safeguard their business in the EU, a practice they then often generalise on other markets, including their own.

The July 'Fit for 55' package contains several legal proposals imposing new requirements of this nature on foreign suppliers of goods and services. International maritime transport to and from the EU will be subject to carbon pricing, in other words shippers will have to buy allowances for the greenhouse gases they emit, at a market

price of currently about 60 € per tonne. Aircraft and ships, regardless of their nationality, will be obliged to fill up on European territory with fuels having a minimum renewables content. Exporters of bio-energy, like wood pellets, will face stricter limitations in order to protect primary forests outside the EU. Last but not least, the package features the hotly debated Carbon Border Adjustment Mechanism which introduces a levy at the EU border on certain imports reflecting the carbon content embedded in the product.

Using the power of the market to incentivise third countries to lower their emissions is, however, not without controversy. What some will acclaim as spearheading climate action through trade, others will condemn as disguised protectionism, possibly triggering 'tit-for-tat' retaliation. To stay within the rules of the World Trade Organisation, climate-driven restrictions on the way in which products are produced must notably not discriminate between domestic and foreign goods, nor between foreign goods, and the trade restriction must be proportional to the environmental goal aimed for.

Drawing on the three 'powers' I just reviewed, the daily practice of European climate diplomacy is about outreach to third countries – their governments and civil society – to spur them into stronger climate action and ambition, and to present and, if necessary, defend the EU's climate measures in force or in preparation.

As with all well-designed diplomacy, this outreach has to be tailor-made to the sensitivities, interests and challenges of the country in question. How you engage on climate with Canada differs from how you demarche Colombia or Cambodia, let alone China.

A necessary condition for effective engagement is a proper understanding of the national political, economic and social landscape surrounding the climate question. Who in government is influential on climate decisions? Where do employers and trade unions stand? Do NGOs or opinion-makers in academia or the media play any role? Who are the country's main friends? What are the bottlenecks for the green transition: are they financial, technical, social? How important is the EU as a trade and investment partner? What is it that they want from us and that we may offer?

Needless to say, a thorough preparation of such engagement is a labour-intensive exercise, drawing on the intelligence of our Delegations on the ground, on expertise of Member States and like-minded third countries, and publicly available information, which has got to be regularly updated as the landscape evolves. And again as with

other diplomatic work, it necessitates building up painstakingly networks with people who may help sway a country's position.

For EU climate diplomacy to be effective, close coordination between the Commission and the European External Action Service (EEAS) is called for. The Commissioners in charge of Climate, Energy, and to a lesser extent Environment, Transport and Agriculture, and their services, are responsible for the substance of policy, whilst the High Representative and the EEAS are in charge of the EU Delegations in the world and have the overview of the whole spectrum of relations and problems with a given country. Such coordination is greatly facilitated if EEAS officials possess a firm grasp of policy substance and sectoral Commission DGs recognise that, however important, their policy is only one dimension of the relationship with the country in question. The latter may make linkages between very diverse files like trade, aid, investment, justice, nominations in international organisations, which may help or hinder the pursuit of climate goals.

Equally, climate diplomacy benefits much from regular coordination with Member States, as climate is a mixed competence. What is more, several of them focus strongly on climate in their foreign policy, which they often also approach from a commercial angle, furthering their export and investment interests. A number of channels exist, like the Council's Working Party on International Environment Issues and the Green Diplomacy Network, not only to determine a common position for UNFCCC negotiations, but also to liaise with individual third countries in concert.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

What I have dealt with so far in this lecture is climate diplomacy in the rather narrow, operational, sense. However, climate diplomacy also has a more analytical, strategic, longer term component, that is more consonant with traditional foreign policy. This component can be split in two broad domains: the geopolitics of decarbonisation, and climate and security.

The geopolitics of decarbonisation concerns the international economic and political side-effects and problems associated with a sharp cut in the consumption of fossil fuels and the increased use of raw materials necessary for green technologies. These geopolitics can be said to display four distinct aspects.

The first aspect, which is the most familiar, is the fragility the exit from fossil fuels may cause to many fossil-fuel exporting countries. They are in danger of significant revenue

losses weakening their international influence and possibly triggering major social and political turmoil at home. The main source of public expenditure, and notably of all sorts of subsidies to large parts of the population, will dry up. Countries that are often mentioned in this regard include Nigeria, Venezuela, Algeria, Libya, Iraq, Iran, whilst the Gulf countries are in a better position thanks to the vast financial reserves they have been able to accumulate since the first oil shock of 1973. That has bought them more time to adjust. Russia is in a category of its own because dwindling revenues will also put its 'great power' status to the test.

The second aspect is the revision of existing military strategies and alliances put in place to secure the international transport of oil and gas. Some hotspots, like the straits of Hormuz or of Malacca, will probably become less vital for global energy supply than they are at present. Gas transit through the Ukraine or Black Sea countries will probably also play a smaller role in international energy politics.

The third aspect is the resources security questions associated with the rapid deployment of low-carbon technologies. Moving out of fossil fuels does not do away with import dependence altogether, but creates new forms of dependencies that call for a pro-active foreign, industrial, energy and trade policy. For decades, the EU and its Member States have developed a largely successful strategy that has allowed to avoid too strong a dependence on, and thus political vulnerability to, specific oil or gas exporters. The rapid, widespread, deployment of clean energy and greater energy efficiency has to be flanked by policies that lower the risk of a new dependence on imported raw materials, which otherwise third countries may be tempted to 'weaponise'.

More concretely, renewable technologies and batteries require certain minerals for their production. Within the perspective of achieving climate neutrality by 2050, it has been estimated that the EU's demand for these minerals will rocket. To give some examples, for batteries for electric vehicles and energy storage, we would need up to 18 times more lithium and 5 times more cobalt in 2030, and almost 60 times more lithium and 15 times more cobalt in 2050 compared to what is supplied today. Demand for a series of rare earth metals – which have in common that they all having difficult names to pronounce – used in magnets for electric vehicles or wind turbines could increase tenfold. For a big uptake of green hydrogen we would need a reliable supply of platinum for fuel cells and electrolyzers.

The demand for these minerals will not only soar in Europe, but world-wide. What is more, some are relatively scarce and mined in a limited number of countries. Critical raw material deposits are sometimes more concentrated than those of oil or gas. For cobalt the current lead producer is Congo; for lithium, Chile and China; for platinum South Africa and Russia; for most rare earth minerals China. For green electricity, the most obvious candidate to import from would be North Africa, whilst for green hydrogen Gulf countries and Australia are frequently mentioned.

Many of these countries are characterised by a pronounced role of the state in the economy, be it by way of state-owned enterprises, mining or processing licenses, or export restrictions. Securing supplies cannot be left therefore to European industry alone, but requires EU institutions and Member State governments to engage in an energy/raw materials partnership dialogue with the authorities.

The fourth and final aspect of the geopolitics of decarbonisation is that the nature of international power deriving from energy will profoundly be altered. The power from fossil fuels is primarily a question of natural endowment, a gift of nature. It is geology. The future power relationship with respect to energy is technology: it will be much more rooted in technological dominance in domains like batteries, electrolysis, ultra-high voltage transmission, new advances in wind and solar, carbon capture and storage, small nuclear reactors and so on. Exploiting that technological dominance and denying access to it for third countries may become a source of future conflict.

The last area of work for climate diplomacy is the one that lies closest to the core of mainstream diplomacy, that is, security. Climate change is happening already and, because of the inertia of physical processes, will go on for decades even if tomorrow we were able to stop greenhouse gas emissions. Climate change is a function of the concentration of greenhouse gases in the atmosphere and that concentration will decrease very gradually only.

We therefore need to adapt, and ensure that our cities, our infrastructure, our agriculture can cope better with heatwaves and droughts, storms and floods and rising sea levels. If countries ill adapt, climate change in combination with other sources of environmental degradation, will pose growing challenges to peace and security. It will act as a risk multiplier, rendering more acute latent vulnerabilities and instability.

Examples, unfortunately, are plenty already. The Sahel has been identified as a region where climate change is likely to exacerbate insecurity and conflict. In the Lake Chad basin, climate change, along with poor water management, has caused severe food scarcity and resource competition. Dwindling water supply in the Aral Sea and the Indian subcontinent is at the root of several international disputes. Many islands in the Pacific threaten to sink. If global temperatures climb well above the critical benchmark, livelihoods in large, often the poorest, parts of the world will become increasingly untenable, triggering mass migrations, which we know will give rise to tremendous international tensions.

The climate and security nexus has therefore rightly become an integral part of the EU's approach to conflict and crisis management and is factored into the programming and deployment of the various Community, CFSP and CSDP instruments, notably for conflict prevention.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

I am coming to the end of my lecture. In a fortnight, COP-26 will begin in Glasgow, after a one-year delay. Against the backdrop of unmistakeable evidence that the planet is heating up but also of a growing awareness and conscience that more must and can be done to stop warming, Glasgow has generated high expectations, also because it will be the first physical world gathering since COVID-19.

COP-26 will constitute a checkpoint as to whether the political logic underlying the Paris Agreement of progress through international peer pressure, works. Thanks to the momentum the prospect of Glasgow has generated, headway has undoubtedly been made in closing the gap between where we are and where we need to be with respect to climate finance and emissions reductions. After all, whilst two years ago, at COP-25 in Madrid, the world was estimated to warm by more than 3 degrees Celsius, we should now have come down to under 2,5 degrees, provided, of course, that countries prove able to effectively implement their plans. This is not a minor proviso: the economic transformation it will require will be huge, in magnitude as well as speed, not to mention the overawing fact that those plans still fall short of what the Paris objective calls for. There is a lot of detailed negotiations to be rounded off at the Conference itself, so it is uncertain today whether Glasgow will be rated a success or failure, which anyway depends on the chosen yardstick.

However, one thing is certain. For the reasons I reviewed, the EU will again be pivotal in advancing multilateral climate work and project green global leadership.

Another thing is certain. As I say to my younger colleagues in the European External Action Service, there are two subjects you will deal with throughout your entire career: migration and climate change. Many of you are interested in pursuing a career related to the EU, be it in government, civil society or business. My observation also applies to you. Climate change is among the defining issues of your lifetime. Be among those who will shape the transformation.

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