G20 SUMMIT 05.07.2017 | Paul Hockenos

Germany: Cooling off on global warming

Berlin will let Trump win at the G20 Summit

The G20 summit on 6-7 July in Hamburg presents to those nations discontent with US global leadership a golden opportunity to step out of America's shadow and embrace a truly new, multipolar world. Never before has distrust of and frustration with the US been greater, among political leaders but also with ordinary people worldwide. The G20, with its global perspective, is the perfect forum to work around a belligerent US administration if it won't listen to reason. Even though a US-led free world has long been an anachronism, there's been no viable replacement – neither in the form of one state or multilateral institution or entente of powers. No country is more guilty of clinging to the fiction of US global leadership than Germany. But now the Trump administration has made that path untenable.

Established in 1999, the purpose of the G20 was to shift power from the hands of the developed world's few to the globe's many: among them India, Brazil, Mexico, China, Australia, Turkey, Argentina, and Indonesia. The Trump administration's isolationist attitude and chaotic modus operandi leaves the door wide open for a competent multilateral broker, such as Germany, to step in and forge new, working alliances in the multipolar world order.

Americans (not) in Paris

As the consequences of global warming continue to make headlines – from extreme weather across the US and raging forest fires in Portugal, to the rapidly melting polar ice caps and rising seas – climate change, and implementation of the 2015-signed Paris Agreement are top of the agenda. There's a significant global consensus, minus Washington but including California, that more has to be done to stall climate change, even if there's little unity on exactly what "more" means. But that's the purpose of fora like the G20: to hash out such issues.

The Paris Agreement set ambitious goals, such as striving to remain below a 1.5 degree Celsius rise in global temperatures, but it kicked the hard decision making of how to get there into the long grass – an endeavour for another day. The Hamburg summit is that day: an opportunity to design specific strategies to animate the Paris Agreement, which is in desperate need of shoring up a year and a half after its signing. Among the realistic options include commitments to end fossil fuel subsidies by 2025 and phase out coal production. Experts in Germany's environmental ministry say a 2050 mid-century target of net zero emissions is entirely possible with international coordination. These and other measures can be found in early drafts of the German-authored agenda.

The West's reluctant representative

Indeed, all eyes will be on Germany which – for lack of a better candidate – has been nominated as the ersatz guarantor of Western values. Although Chancellor Angela Merkel publicly shuns the title, she'll have no more opportune moment than in Hamburg to lend it some substance. If host country Germany can pull off the negotiation of meaningful post-Paris pledges from G20 members – save perhaps the US – it will be hailed a phenomenal success. Climate experts reckon we've missed the boat on keeping global warming below the 1.5 degree target, but two degrees is still within reach.

Leaving the US out of a conclusion on climate protection wouldn't make the summit a flop – nor would it particularly offend the US. After all, in May this year the G7's declaration on climate change excluded the US, which refused to commit to the Paris goals, although the country did join its six colleagues – Canada, France, Germany, Italy, Japan and the U.K. – on other issues in the final communiqué. Notably, the parts of the declaration that the US did sign up to included vague pledges to continue free trade, which the US had watered down until they were acceptable to the Trump administration protectionists. The result on trade, unlike climate, was a lowest-common-denominator compromise determined by Washington.

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Critically, the option of forging ahead without the US is viable even if all 19 other members aren't of one mind. Smaller alliances, even bilateral pacts, can be forged in the wings, on climate and other issues. If the EU, China and India could agree in climate, for example, they could bring others with them.

But the signals from Berlin just days before the summit's start point to a lowest common denominator outcome on climate. Under US pressure, the summit's agenda concerning climate change has been dramatically scaled back. "The US massively weakened the language in the energy part of the action plan," one source with knowledge of the negotiations told the British online magazine Climate Change News. "It pushed for references to so-called 'clean' fossil fuels and made it less explicit that the energy transition has to be built on energy efficiency and renewables. It also provided cover to some other G20 members – such as the Saudis and Russia – to weaken some climate sections of the document, including the pledge to phase out fossil fuel subsidies."

The current version of the agenda, following one penned in March, was substantially altered, omitting any mention of the Paris Accord, exiting from coal production, the pricing of carbon, mid-century decarbonisation blueprints by next year, references to the UN's 2018 review of nationally-determined contributions, and mention of infrastructure decarbonisation. The draft action plan now even refers to "clean technologies such as energy efficiency, renewable energy, natural gas and nuclear power, for those countries that opt to use it, and advanced and cleaner fossil fuel technologies."

"What this terminology means is that for the first time in years climate protection will have no place on the G20's agenda," explains Sascha Müller-Kraenner, director of the German section of Environmental Action Germany, a Berlin-based NGO. "The term 'clean technology' hails from the nuclear and gas industries, which use it to suggest an alternative to 'dirty coal.' It has nothing to do with climate protection but only with these industries' market shares."

US engagement "at any price"

Rather than attempting to commit the rest of the G20 countries to serious climate measures, the Germans seem to want the US on board at any price. We will probably see a declaration making vague references to renewable energy and energy security. This might be the outcome on other issues, too, such as aid for Africa (to curb migration), migration management and free trade. Rather than a setback, Merkel, in the heat of a national election campaign, will spin it as a victory: she as a savvy statesperson, the only one who can bring together difficult leaders such as Trump, Russia's Vladimir Putin and Turkey's Recep Tayyip Erdogan.

This is why all signs point to a mealy-mouthed compromise that everyone including Washington can sign onto. If the Merkel administration sells this as a victory, it will be an empty one. Trump will

have set the agenda – and let Germany push it through.



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