EUROPE 27.07.2018 | Arne Lietz & Rosa Beckmann

Let's talk about the climate

With global multilateralism in crisis, climate diplomacy could act as its new driving force

Read this article in German or Russian.

Donald Trump's visit to Europe in July 2018 made clear once again just how deep the rifts between the transatlantic partners have now become. Until now, no one had seriously doubted that relations between the US and Europe, for all the difficulties and conflicts they have gone through, would continue safe and sound. Since Trump was elected as US President however, the atmosphere has changed. Nothing seems certain anymore.

This development is symptomatic of a global trend in 20th and early 21st century multilateralism. Whereas in the 1990s, after the collapse of the socialist bloc, people were still looking forward to the consolidation and further development of the multilateral system, this view turns out to have been merely a past flicker of hope.

The increasing rejection and disintegration of liberal democracies, the return to national borders, isolationist policy and go-at-it-alone approaches in trade and foreign policy are rising dramatically. In addition to the US and Turkey, this also applies to Russia, although here at least this kind of policy may seem less surprising.

This development has also emerged within the European Union. Individual member states, such as Poland and Hungary in particular, are increasingly on the point of abandoning the Union's concept of community in order to pursue their national interests. This is becoming evident in the case of migration and refugee policy especially, but also in the dismantling of the rule of law and the freedom of the press, as well as in the shrinking space for civil society.

The re-nationalisation of the world order is particularly alarming because we saw in the recent past how far advanced global interdependencies have become. A prominent example is the 2008 financial crisis. Further, there are also various regional conflicts, whose reverberations clearly extend beyond national borders and in which far more than two countries are

involved.

Climate diplomacy as the saviour of multilateralism?

Alongside the worldwide crises and conflicts there are also challenges that are quite literally global in nature. One of these is climate change, which has become more and more palpable in large parts of the world, and which has now also affected Europe and the US considerably more than before with forest fires, hurricanes and floods.

Historically speaking, it is the industrial nations that are largely responsible for the effects of global warming. Yet these effects have the most devastating impact in regions which have contributed the least to them. It is catastrophic when voices in the political arena, with primarily economic considerations, continue to debate or even deny climate change. Their most prominent representative is US President Trump.

This is regrettable in the sense that the conclusion of the Paris Agreement on climate change in 2015 represented a milestone in the international fight against climate change. Never before had so many countries been able to agree to climate policy commitments. The climate treaty was in many places celebrated as a success of multilateralism, and was a cause for optimism that globally coordinated, concrete steps could now be taken against the effects of climate change and towards containing it.

Now it looks as though the role played by international climate negotiations is going to be radically reconfigured in the context of a multilateral world order. From one of the greatest successes of multilateral cooperation, thus from a product of a multilateral world order, the climate negotiations taking place within the framework of the annual UN climate change conferences could now become a last bastion of multilateralism – and so ultimately its saviour.

The European Union must implement its own climate targets and look ambitiously to the future if it wishes to play a credible long-term role in shaping and helping to further

In all other important global matters, the international community is fragmented as never before in recent history. In trade policy, migration policy and even violations against international law, such as in the case of the Russian annexation of Crimea, we are no longer able to come up with a lowest common denominator.

international climate policy.

Climate change affects everyone. This means that future climate conferences could have the potential not just to bring negotiating partners together who would otherwise barely enter the same room. It could also to spark a re-organisation of global networks, one that is oriented away from the level of heads of state and government and towards more informal, local and regional networks such as the Covenant of Mayors, a European co-operation movement involving local and regional authorities.

In places where heads of state drop the ball, local players have recognised that they have no time to lose in the fight against the effects of climate change. The local level is thus providing new momentum, becoming in many regions the decisive platform for action.

The EU needs to step up its game

The European Union bears a particular responsibility here. For one thing, it is one of the regions of the world with the highest emissions and so contributes significantly to global warming, whilst the effects of climate change in Europe have, so far, been relatively moderate. For another, it can bring together, as one voice, one of the largest global economic powers and therefore have considerable influence on the negotiations and their outcome. Its self-image as a community of values – as well as an economic union – works well as an international normative force.

Yet for the EU to be able to fulfil this role and also compensate to some extent for the absence of the US, it needs to be truly empowered to speak with one united European voice at the UN climate talks and support countries around the world to help them achieve the climate targets. This critically requires not just the political will of the member states, but also European institutions with the relevant financial and staff resources. The European Union must implement its own climate targets and look ambitiously to the future if it wishes to play a credible long-term role in shaping and helping to further international climate policy.

In order to meet this requirement, I proposed an initiative report on EU climate diplomacy in the European parliament's Foreign Affairs Committee last year, which was adopted with a large majority during the plenary session on 3 July 2018. In this report, the parliament requests, among other things, to significantly enhance the financial and staff resources of the European institutions for climate diplomacy, in order to

promote the realisation of the Paris Agreement around the world. It also requests that the EU raise its own climate policy ambitions and that these become integral elements of all policy areas. This includes, in particular, trade, development, security and defence policy.

With this report, the European parliament is incorporating climate diplomacy into its foreign policy agenda for the first time and acknowledging the global dimension of the issue. As the democratic supervisory body of the EU, it is thereby not only signalling that European foreign policy needs to focus more closely on the role assigned to the EU internationally, but also views itself as the driving force of international climate diplomacy. In the current crisis of multilateralism, this is a strong and important message to the international community, very much in the spirit of those US voices that declared at the last UN climate change conference in Bonn: We are still in!



Arne Lietz
Berlin

Arne Lietz was a Member of European Parliament from 2014 until 2019, where he sat on the EU's foreign affairs and development committees.



Rosa Beckmann
Brussels

Rosa Beckmann is a Policy Adviser in the office of MEP Arne Lietz.As a political scientist, she works on the Common Foreign and Security Policy of the European Union as well as on the Common Security and Defense

Policy.Previously, she worked in the Brussels office of the Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik.