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The fierce urgency of COP26

With a US administration under Trump, European unity and leadership is the only hope for driving China's climate ambitions

There are turning points in history. Moments that matter, that mark beginnings and ends. As Martin Luther King reminded us, 'There is such a thing as being too late.' It is that which can give politics its fierce urgency. As far as global climate politics is concerned, 2020 may be such a moment — and it is vital that Europe should not be late.

The latest round of United Nations-sponsored global climate talks, COP26, to be hosted in Glasgow from 9 to 19 November, was always going to be important. This is the moment, when the Paris agreement of 2015 is scheduled for another round of updated national commitments that reflect the ever-more alarming reality of the climate emergency.

Inadequate targets

Even at the time, it was obvious that the national targets submitted as part of the Paris agreement were inadequate to meet the professed global ceiling of 2°C warming, let alone the desired 1.5°C limit. The inconsistency was accepted back in 2015 because it was important to reach an agreement that bound everyone, from the most reluctant to the most climate-concerned nations. Climate activists gambled that the national targets would be progressively improved. Five years on, COP26 in Glasgow — the first global conference to be hosted in post-Brexit Britain — is the moment when that gamble has to pay off.

The bar is set high. As global emissions continue to rise, the clock is ticking. Year by year the glide path to sustainability becomes steeper and more demanding, in technical, economic and political terms. According to the United Nations Environment Programme's latest report on the 'emissions gap', published in December 2019, the targeted emission reductions need to be three times more ambitious.

What are the prospects for achieving those goals and what can Europe do

to help? Individual European states are no longer a large part of the global-emissions puzzle. But taken as a bloc the EU is the number-three emitter. And since the 1990s it has played a key role in climate diplomacy.

After the fiasco of the climate talks in Copenhagen in 2009, when the meeting broke up without reaching even a token agreement, the road to Paris in 2015 was opened by the EU's willingness to commit unilaterally to a second round of emissions reductions under the 1997 Kyoto Protocol. The EU's condition was that India and China would agree to join a comprehensive climate pact. It was that deal, struck at Durban in 2011, which opened the door to bilateral agreements between Beijing and Delhi and Washington.

Coalition of the unwilling

Of course, those agreements depended on having a climate activist in the White House. Today, Donald Trump's America leads a coalition of the unwilling. The United States is due to complete its formal exit from the Paris agreement only days before the start of COP26, on 4 November. That also happens to be the day after the presidential election.

The outcome of that vote is anything but certain. But, even in the increasingly unlikely event that the Democrats sweep the presidency and both houses of Congress, we know how little to expect from the US. Both Bill Clinton and Barack Obama were frustrated by the Senate, where a bipartisan majority opposes any binding international climate treaty. That leaves American climate diplomacy on weak foundations. It was the fact that Paris was never ratified by the Senate which made it so easy for the Trump administration to pull out.

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But the damage goes deeper. Not only has Trump rejected America's global climate commitments. His administration has attacked the geopolitical premise of the Paris agreement — the possibility of lasting co-operation between the west and China. The US has openly declared a great-power competition with Beijing. And this is not limited to mavericks in Trump's entourage or even to the Republican Party. This is a pivot which embraces the entire US security establishment and large parts of the Democratic Party.

The recent 'phase one' trade deal between China and the US is nothing

more than a truce. It deals with tariffs and bulk purchases of soy beans. It does not address the broader issues of strategic competition and technological 'uncoupling'. This is not just a matter of military competition. It is already affecting aspects of technological co-operation and trade, ranging from university labs to subway trains and microchips. Last year the US Department of Interior grounded the fleet of drones it uses to monitor changes in land use and wildfires, because the drones were manufactured in China.

Signs of backsliding

Though less overt than in Trump's America, in Beijing too there are signs of backsliding from the Paris agreement. Under the pressure of the domestic air-pollution crisis, in its early years Xi Jinping's regime was proactive on energy policy and climate, signalling a determination to clean up and run down its coal-fired power stations. With the recent slowdown in economic growth and escalating tensions with the US, however, that anti-coal stance has softened.

Coal may be dirty but it is a safe, domestic source of power. Though the pace of expansion has slowed, China is still today opening more coal mines than are being closed in the rest of the world put together. If America is going to define its relations with China in openly antagonistic terms, Beijing will not risk its energy supply becoming more dependent on oil and liquefied natural gas imported along vulnerable sea lanes.

This will not stop China's energy transition. China will continue to build its dominant position in solar, electric vehicles and battery technology. But geopolitical confrontation will cause China to cling to coal and will inhibit the two-way technology transfer that should be a fly-wheel on the global energy transition. This will cost time that we cannot afford.

In the geopolitical arena in which China and the US increasingly compete, the Europeans have chosen powerlessness. This does not mean that they are inconsequential. A neutral party in a conflict has real advantages. European corporations may be able to benefit from closer collaborations with their Chinese counterparts than American firms are able to pursue. Through its market power and regulatory reach, the EU may exercise a degree of leverage over both sides.

Active role

But on climate diplomacy the EU has a more active role to play. The success of COP26 in Glasgow hangs by a thin thread. The Spanish

government, to its great credit, rescued COP25 in December after the mass street protests in Santiago forced Chile to bail as the organiser. But the talks in Madrid were unproductive and demoralising. They deadlocked over the search for an international carbon-trading mechanism and the rearguard action of the conservative governments in Australia and Brazil.

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Our best hope for Glasgow is that the EU and China arrive at a grand bargain ahead of time, which enables them to corral key members of the G20, such as Japan and India. In the complex web of national groupings at the climate talks, deals are built one coalition at a time.

The EU should be under no illusions. As far as Beijing is concerned, a deal with Europe is a second best. But in the absence of the US, the EU is the only near-peer that has anything to offer. As was noted in December by a global alliance of think tanks, the Sino-EU duo is crucial to driving the ambition of global climate politics.

The EU does have real strengths. It is a vast market. Its technological capacities make it a major player in renewables. It already had a carbon-pricing system in place, a model which China is following. The question is whether Europe has the political will, leadership and institutions to deliver a worthwhile partnership for Beijing.

Painful spectacle

The von der Leyen commission has come into office trumpeting a Green Deal. But the divisions and foot-dragging of the member states have made for a painful spectacle. France and Germany bicker over the incorporation of nuclear into the green taxonomy. Berlin delayed the move by the European Investment Bank to end the financing of fossil fuels and is now expressing skepticism over increasing the EIB's capital. Poland remains wedded to coal and the compromise reached in Germany over its own protracted exit hardly offers a shining example to others.

Of course, haggling and tactical delaying actions are the norm in EU politics. But did the protracted agony of the eurozone crisis and the subsequent political fallout not provide a lesson? Timing matters. And in 2020 on climate, it really does.

Right now, much of the conversation in Europe is inward-looking. It is about the terms of a just transition. The gilets jaunes protests have

brought home harshly that for decarbonisation to be sustainable in the long run a social compact is crucial. But there is an additional constraint: if Europe wants to play a leading part in a broader global coalition, COP26 is vital. All efforts must be bent towards concerting the EU position itself as quickly as possible and arriving at an understanding with China. If Europe 'sleepwalks' into COP26, it risks a historic failure.

But above all the EU must do everything possible to avoid divisions in its own ranks.

Ahead of Glasgow, in September the Europeans and Chinese have a summit scheduled for Leipzig. One should not expect too much from such talks. Many difficult items will be on the agenda, including trade and the Huawei corporation. On climate, China's stance will be set by its own internal politics. A commitment to an early stabilisation of China's emissions and a return to the policy of running down coal has huge implications for China's economy, society and strategic position.

Europe's influence is marginal at best. But if it wants to strengthen the hands of those in Beijing who argue for a more ambitious climate stance, then Europe needs to make clear its own commitment to radical action, as promptly and convincingly as possible.

Urgent task

In practice this means that, alongside the Green Deal being advanced by the Commission, the European Council has an urgent task. If an EU-wide agreement is to be reached by the summer, there is no time to lose. The Council must use the spring of 2020 to drive the ambition of nationally determined emissions cuts.
France and Germany need to concert their positions and avoid bickering over nuclear power.

Neither Paris nor Berlin is going to give ground on this issue and the Chinese, who have their own significant nuclear programme, are unlikely to have much patience for European arguments. It will take commitment from both Emmanuel Macron and Angela Merkel if Xi himself is to be engaged at Leipzig, rather than lower-ranking Chinese figures.

The British as hosts of Glasgow have a key role to play in the success of the talks. COP26 is also a test for the new diplomatic relationship, post-Brexit, between the EU and London.

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own ranks.

This means patching up a deal that keeps the recalcitrant Poles on board. Warsaw has made clear that it wants more money. No one likes being held to ransom. But this is a vital moment. It is crucial at this juncture to keep the COP show on the road. An internal EU compromise, even if it is an expensive one, is a small price to pay.

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