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Will Only a Green Power Remain a Great Power?

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When the coronavirus broke out in 2020 the whole world literally came to a pause. The pandemic overshadowed all other major problems and started to shape relations between states. Climate change suddenly disappeared from the international agenda. However, the effects of the global climate crisis are showing faster and more severely than ever before: wildfires in Australia, extreme weather events in Asia, tornado's in America, a melting Arctic… Secondary effects like climate migration and conflicts have become visible as well. This crisis is more urgent than ever.

The COVID-19 crisis has shattered our economies, but lockdown measures taken by almost all governments have had a positive impact on the emission of greenhouse gases. The world took a step forward, even if unintended, towards the goals set in Paris in 2015. COVID-19 has taken away a lot from the world, but it may also have created a momentum to continue this downward trend and make it structural. Even the world's great powers will have to integrate the green transition in their COVID-19 economy recovery plans in order to not fall off the wagon. But will only a green great power remain a great power?

Climate change is a global crisis and therefore cannot be seen in isolation from the current multipolar world. Competition will continue to define the dynamics between today's great powers: Russia, China, the United States, and the European Union. Just because it is a global problem, climate change will not be the exception on which these great powers work together as close partners. Competition will remain, and that is not necessarily a bad thing: if it is well regulated, it can have a positive effect on the fast development of green technologies and know-how. If the climate crisis can become the driving force behind this competition, we are up for a fast development towards a carbon free future. It is clear that the climate crisis will have great impact on future relations between the great powers. But will it lead to a change in the balance of power between them?

RACING TOWARDS CLIMATE LEADERSHIP?

The four great powers are all dealing (or not dealing) with this global crisis in their own particular way.

China is currently the biggest emitter of all four: it accounts for almost 28% of all emissions of greenhouse gases in the world.[1] China is a relatively new active supporter of international climate action. Domestically, Beijing started its climate policy as late as 2005. Considering its geography, climate, and densely populated cities, the effects of climate change are emerging rapidly. The Chinese population is suffering from extreme air pollution; in order to not lose legitimacy and provoke internal instability, the CCP was forced to take measures tackling air pollution, and thus the climate. This marked the beginning of a series of five-year plans in which first air pollution and later climate change became a "hot" topic.[2] Internationally, Beijing held on to the idea of "common but differentiated responsibility" until 2014. It had always argued that, as a developing country, it had the right to develop economically without severe climate restrictions. After a joint announcement with the US in 2014, China sought to position itself as a climate advocate, mostly rhetorically and diplomatically. The US and China thus became key players at the summit in Paris in 2015, along with the EU: finally a global (though not very ambitious) agreement became possible.[3]

Furthermore, Xi Jinping has been speaking clear climate language, especially after Trump's withdrawal from the Paris Agreement. His message in September 2020 to make China carbon free by 2060 was precisely timed before the US elections in November.[4] That way he made clear that whoever became president in the US, other states could count on Chinese climate action. It seems Beijing is embracing the green transition, and it has every good reason for it. The shift towards a green future may increase China's energy security, could improve China's economic position, and could boost the domestic legitimacy of the CCP as well the Chinese reputation internationally. But nothing is what it seems. Although Beijing is taking ambitious national measures to halt global warming, it continues to invest in "brown" projects in its flagship foreign project: the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). China invests largely in heavy industries, in which coal, oil, and gas stay the main sources of energy. Once built, it takes a long time to retire from these industries. Furthermore, countries who are mostly (or almost exclusively) receiving aid from China in the form of infrastructure or investment, might become more and more dependent on Chinese investment for their further development. This way, China indirectly shares responsibility for whether these countries meet their international climate objectives or not.[5] Moreover, China actively invests in the Arctic region to extract energy and to develop transport routes. Starting from 2017, China has been "greening" the BRI,[6] for example through green investments and green transport; critics remain sceptical, however. Furthermore, the newly announced five-year plan of March 2021 shows less ambition than Xi's rhetoric six months before. It is thus still unsure whether Beijing is able (or willing) to turn words into deeds.

The EU has been a climate advocate since the start of the UNFCCC in 1997.[7] Overall, Brussels was one of the pioneers for international climate action. The EU repeatedly called for a global and legally binding climate protocol and aimed for a leading role during the climate negotiations in Paris in 2015. Unfortunately, the EU could not convince China and the US to agree to its ambitious climate plans. The bottom-up approach of the Paris Agreement is not ambitious at all; for the EU it meant a big step back. Within the EU, there is a more or less common understanding that climate change is pressing. Climate strikes were held in almost all member states, inspired by Greta Thunberg, and green parties are gradually gaining votes. A rather modest agreement in Paris did not stop the EU from striving for an ambitious climate policy within its borders. At the end of 2019, the Commission of Ursula Von der Leyen announced its Green Deal,[8] aiming to become carbon free by

2050. This deal fits perfectly with the geopolitical agenda from Von der Leyen for the EU. A shift towards green energy decreases the EU's dependence on the import of fossil fuels, notably from Russia. The carbon border adjustment mechanism (CBAM) that has been announced, could safeguard the competitiveness of European companies and prevent carbon leakage.[9] The Green Deal has great potential to catapult the EU towards the top in the battle against climate change.

Yet, however ambitious the deal may be, it misses a strong external dimension. The EU's ambition to become carbon free and embrace green and renewable energy will have a positive impact on the climate, but also a far-reaching impact on the EU's relations with other states. Furthermore, the shift towards green energy does not secure complete energy independence. The further development of green technologies will demand rare earth materials, and China currently has a quasi-monopoly on their production and export of these materials. The EU will need to anticipate on this new dependence to protect its autonomy.[10] In addition, the CBAM already received a lot of criticism from other states because of its potential protectionist character. Furthermore, it is unclear whether the CBAM will benefit European countries if the EU implements it just unilaterally. Climate action thus needs internal as well as external initiatives, to be effective. If the EU does not integrate an external dimension in the Green Deal, instability at its borders is lurking, and the climate crisis may not be solved rapidly at all.

In the US, the ambition to deal with climate change has always depended on party politics. Trump's withdrawal from the Paris Agreement was nothing new: in 2001 Republican president Bush jr. decided to not implement the Kyoto protocol, agreed in 1997.[11] The partisan views on climate change put a spanner in the works of any stable and ambitious climate policy. President Obama can be seen as a climate advocate because of the Paris Agreement and domestic initiatives like his Clean Power Plan.[12] But president Obama was limited to executive orders rather than legislation, due to a reluctant Congress. And even if there is a Democratic majority in the Congress, it is not certain that even all Democrats would vote in favour of an ambitious climate plan. Constantly reversing and reintroducing climate change policies whenever a new president comes into office, decreases the US's international leverage and hurts its reputation as an ambitious climate advocate.

Fortunately, the withdrawal from the Paris Agreement did not have irreversible consequences, because Trump only served one term and individual states of the US continued to take climate measures.[13] But on the other hand, the withdrawal prompted allied countries to take measures regardless of the US, and many have been scarred by their experiences with the Trump administration. In the end, the US remains a key player in successfully tackling climate change, and luckily for the world it is willing to take up its responsibility once again. But it remains questionable whether Washington will be able to take consistent climate action in the future.

In Russia, concrete climate action seems far away. Although, according to different scientists, global warming is evolving faster and more severely in Russia, Moscow has been reluctant to develop an ambitious climate policy. Russian policy-makers rather point out the "good" side of climate change, such as the opportunities for agriculture in Siberia and the opening of the northern sea route.[14] Internationally, Russia adopted the Paris Agreement, by presidential decree, only in 2019. Russian climate objectives are anything but ambitious; they even leave some room to increase the emission of greenhouse gases. Russia still profits from the drop of emissions after the Soviet Union collapsed and currently emits around 70% of what it emitted in 1990.[15] Therefore, Russia does not have any incentives to take ambitious measures.

The pretended benefits do not outweigh the devastating consequences that global warming will have for Russia, directly and indirectly. If all great powers but Russia take measures towards a green transition, Russia will eventually be left behind. As a major exporter, natural gas became part of the Russian identity. Due to the transition away from fossil fuels, including natural gas, Moscow risks losing its most important export markets. This will also affect Russia's external power: its capacity to leverage the gas supply whenever a state does not comply with its demands, of which the 2008 gas crisis with Ukraine was a striking example. Currently, Russian statesmen frame the green transition as an instrument to weaken Russia, instead of naming the real threat: Russian inaction.[16] If Russia does not anticipate on this transition, it might lose not just economic power but even its great power status.

IS THERE A "CLIMATE LEADER"?

One might ask what the point is of being a climate leader, if not all states participate in climate action. In any case, there is no actual leader yet. Nonetheless, some states are performing better than others. But obviously, there is still room for improvement in the climate policy of each of the great powers.

Internal division forms a big obstacle for states to act appropriately on the climate crisis. Only in China can the government take effective domestic measures if it so decides, due to its autocratic system as well as the genuine demand from the public. With 27 member states, the forever EU experiences difficulties in finding consensus, and this is not different for climate. To add an external dimension to the European Green Deal, the EU needs to integrate climate in its foreign policy, which requires unanimity. However, climate should increasingly shape the EU's foreign policy; it might be the perfect opportunity for the EEAS to take responsibility and demonstrate its capacity. This may lead to a positive spill-over to other foreign policy issues and, eventually, to a deeper integration of the EU's common foreign and security policy (CFSP).

The US suffers from internal divisions too. It will remain a substantial challenge for president Biden to overcome partisan fragmentation. The question is not whether Biden will put the US back on the front line of climate action, but whether he can convince Congress to implement new climate legislation instead of a climate policy based only on presidential executive orders.[17] That would secure a more constant and integrated climate policy, and prevent its reversal by a next president. During the Earth Day summit held by the Biden-administration in April 2021, President Biden showed that he was committed to cooperate with the US Congress in order to realize his ambitious climate plan to cut emissions in half by the end of the decade. This is already a step in the right direction.

The cards are worse for Russia. With Moscow ignoring or even denying global warming, Russia risks political and economic marginalisation. Sooner rather than later, Moscow will have to start investing in green and renewable energy. Fortunately for Russia, the global green transition still includes natural gas in the short term. Russia thus has some more time to formulate a green transition. If it jumped on the green train, Russia could switch natural gas for renewable energy, for example green hydrogen. Russia has expertise and experience producing hydrogen, and could make use of its gas infrastructure to export it to Europe and other states. Furthermore, Russia possesses a big potential of wind, solar and hydropower, which are all currently strongly underdeveloped. Because the EU will remain a net importer of energy in the future, Russia could still be one of its suppliers, but now of renewable energy.[18] Letting gas go and embracing the green transition is the only way to secure Russia's international position.

Obviously, climate change cannot be halted by domestic action alone. Climate measures can only be effective over the long term if they are integrated in the wider framework or foreign policy. The EU integrated its climate policy in the Green Deal, which

is ambitious, but as stated above misses a foreign policy dimension. The EU mostly imports energy from neighbouring countries, mainly the MENA region and Russia. If the EU shifts to renewable energy, MENA countries will lose economic and geopolitical power, which may cause instability. It is important for the EU to actively support these fossil fuel-rich countries in their transition to green energy to prevent instability at its borders. If the EU can offer climate-friendly alternatives, economic regression and secondary effects like conflict and migration can be avoided. The MENA region has a big potential for solar power and, if developed correctly, this could form a new export opportunity.[19] Eventually, this will lead to a win-win situation for both the EU and MENA countries.

Furthermore, the EU imports 40% of its natural gas from Russia. If Russia does not participate in the development of renewable energy, a power-shift may occur. Moscow will lose its leverage over Europe and suffer grave economic losses. This could eventually harm the credibility of the current regime. A collapse of Russia is not completely impossible. This would bring instability to the EU's borders, and might create an opportunity for China to increase its power. But most notably: it would change the balance of power. All of this demands an accurate assessment and nuanced strategies on the part of the EU as well as the other great powers, if the implosion of Russia is to be avoided.

The EU is not the only power introducing big projects. Over time, BRI became the flagship project of Chinese foreign policy. Beijing gained a lot of influence these past years in many countries. Yet, BRI is the Achilles' heel of Chinese climate policy. Beijing is taking far-reaching domestic climate measures, but continues to invest in fossil fuel projects in the BRI countries. In view of great power competition, other great powers will be eager to fill this gap that Beijing leaves, and offer a green alternative to the BRI countries – green energy is the future. In this way, China could easily lose influence. The EU should be able to fill this gap, and win back influence at its borders.

On the other hand, big projects like BRI and the Green Deal can offer an opportunity for Beijing and Brussels to cooperate. Connecting their strategies will bring benefits for the EU and China as well as for climate in general. Cooperation on climate change will give the EU the opportunity to encourage China to play by the same rules, which could eventually result in cooperation in other fields. A good starting point would be the trade of rare earth materials between Brussels and Beijing. There are red lines, however; cooperation on climate with China cannot be unconditional. If Beijing refuses to cooperate according to the agreements made with the EU or continues to invest in fossil fuel projects behind the curtains, the EU should stand firm and not cooperate. Cooperation for cooperation's sake is a waste of time.

Finally, the climate may eventually become subject to the US-China rivalry (if that is not already the case). Rivalry should be understood as actively taking measures against one another, while competition is just a natural consequence of pursuing the national interest. Rivalry is pernicious for climate change, but competition is desirable: a green race can speed up the development of green technologies. At the same time, climate change will only be halted if all states are on board. A good balance between competition and cooperation is thus required. The US intends to isolate climate change from other issues with China and cooperate only on climate.[20] But it is not that simple. China will not just "forget" the rivalry with the US in the case of climate, while it goes on in other areas like trade and technology. Cooperation on climate can form an opportunity for the US to properly manage the relations with China and perhaps create positive spill-over effects. Cooperation and competition go hand in hand; it is better to integrate China rather than to exclude it and risk an escalation of rivalry. The EU can play an active role in this scenario. If the EU

manages to build bridges between China and US, it could regain its leverage and position as a climate advocate, and maybe become a "*leadiator*".[21] The EU could then hope to influence US-China relations in its favour, safeguard its position on the first row of climate action and, not least, ensure a strong and global response to climate change.

CONCLUSION

In the end, it is too soon to already name a climate leader. Currently, the power balance between the great powers remains more or less the same. However, I assume that climate will become a game-changer in the future. Climate change can neither be reversed nor avoided, and thus it will have a massive impact on all great powers. If Russia doesn't start to develop a green energy transition, it will be the first great power to lose power. But an implosion of Russia is bad news for most states, and must be avoided if possible. On the other hand the EU, though facing some obstacles, is running its best race until now. If the EU manages to redirect its foreign policy towards climate and succeeds in mitigating US-China rivalry, the golden medal might be waiting. As the old saying goes: where two dogs fight over a bone, a third one takes off with it…

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