**Journal of Contemporary European Research**

Volume 8, Issue 2 (2012)

# The EU as a Global Leader? The Copenhagen and Cancun UN Climate Change Negotiations

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**Citation**

Groen, L., Niemann, A. and Oberthür, S. (2012). 'The EU as a Global Leader? The Copenhagen and Cancun UN Climate Change Negotiations', *Journal of Contemporary European Research*. 8 (2), pp. 173-191.

First published at: www.jcer.net

## Abstract

This article compares the degree to which the European Union (EU) managed to play a leadership role at the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) Copenhagen negotiations in December 2009 and the Cancun negotiations in December 2010. Our notion of leadership is composed of (a) direction (i.e. the degree to which an actor pushes towards a recognized collective purpose), and (b) goal-attainment (which is explained by three factors: coherence, the opportunity structure, and politicisation). The outcomes of the Copenhagen negotiations have been rather disappointing for the EU in terms of its substantial ambitions and leadership expectations. At Cancun, the Union had a firmer hold on the outcomes, but its goals have also been less ambitious compared to the Copenhagen negotiations.

## Keywords

Climate change; Conference of the Parties (COP); EU actorness, coherence, external relations; international climate policy; UN Framework Convention on Climate Change

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For over a decade the European Union (EU)[1] has been characterised as a leader in international climate policy-making and negotiations (see Zito, 2005; Groenleer and van Schaik, 2007; Oberthür, 2009). However, the outcomes of the 15th Conference of the Parties (COP) to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) in Copenhagen in December 2009 were disappointing for the EU given its ambitious goals and expectations. No ambitious legally binding agreement on limiting greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions of major emitting nations, which the EU aimed at, could be concluded for the period after 2012, when the first commitment period of the Kyoto Protocol expires. Moreover, the Copenhagen Accord, a series of non-binding political commitments by states eventually agreed among major emitters at the end of the Copenhagen conference, could not gain the support of the entire COP and, from a European perspective, contained disappointingly few concrete and ambitious provisions.

More concrete decisions were taken at COP16 in Cancun one year later. On the basis of more moderate objectives, the EU seems to have played a more influential role at the Cancun negotiations than at Copenhagen, being more involved in the decision-making process and having a firmer grip on the outcomes (Fuhr et al., 2011; IISD, 2011; Oberthür, 2011a).

In this article, we analyse and compare the degree to which the EU managed to play a leadership role, and seek to explain variation, across the two cases. By investigating the varying role of the EU at two consecutive COPs, we hope and expect to be able to identify the specific factors that help explain this variance. To what extent did internal and external factors affect EU leadership and influence? To what extent did the improved influence of the EU at COP16 result from learning of the Union from the Copenhagen

[1] In this article, we define the European Union (EU) as the combination of both the EU institutions that represent the EU at the climate negotiations (the European Commission, the Council Presidency) and the 27 EU Member States.

failure? Our case selection and analytical approach are targeted at providing an answer to these questions.[2]

We proceed as follows: in the next section we briefly specify our analytical framework. On this basis, we then analyses the COP15 negotiations leading to the Copenhagen Accord. Subsequently we examine the COP16 negotiations culminating in the Cancún Agreements. Finally, we draw some conclusions from our findings.

## Analytical framework

*Leadership*

In the growing literature on (international) leadership (e.g. Underdal, 1994; Gupta and Grubb, 2000; Skodvin and Andresen, 2006; Schirm, 2010), two aspects can be identified that have proven to be particularly promising/relevant for a conceptualisation and analysis of leadership: (a) direction and (b) goal-attainment. In terms of direction it matters to what extent a particular actor drives and steers others towards a recognised collective purpose (cf. Underdal, 1994, p. 178; Eckersley, 2012). Arild Underdal (1994, p. 178) relates leadership to the "collective pursuit of some common good or joint purpose". Robyn Eckersley (2012) also mentions the importance for a leader of working towards a "shared" or "common purpose". Leaders are "progressive" by nature and push their followers forward rather than backward.

Criteria for a common international good/standard are not specified in the literature, but in the area of climate change the ultimate goal of the UNFCCC "to achieve […] stabilization of greenhouse gas concentrations in the atmosphere at a level that would prevent dangerous anthropogenic [human induced] interference with the climate system" (UNFCCC Article 2) is widely recognised. More recently, the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) has suggested that this goal implies limiting the global temperature increase to 2 degrees Celsius above pre-industrial levels. To this end, it should be necessary to reduce global GHG emissions by at least 50 per cent by 2050 from 1990 levels; GHG emissions by developed countries by 25-40 per cent by 2020 from 1990 levels (and 80-95 per cent by 2050); and GHG emissions of developing countries by 15-30 per cent by 2020 below "business as usual" levels (IPCC, 2007). Hence, in the empirical analysis, we will assess to which degree the EU's goals are in line with these benchmarks.

Going beyond direction, it does not make sense to talk of leadership if other actors do not follow at all (Schirm, 2010). This can be best operationalised by assessing the degree to which an actor's goals have been attained. EU goals can only be achieved if other parties follow the EU and the required agreement on them is secured. The extent to which the EU succeeds in transforming its goals into "COP-wide" decisions affects its degree of success, effectiveness – and thus leadership. Our account of goal attainment has been derived inductively from prior research (Groen and Niemann, 2012) and has been found relevant in studies that focus explicitly on EU actorness and effectiveness

[2] While comparing the Copenhagen conference with the Durban conference in 2011 might have provided an even starker contrast as regards EU influence, the Cancun conference also provides for an interesting comparison as it was the meeting immediately following the Copenhagen conference, enabling us to investigate immediate EU adaptation and learning. Pragmatically, the origins of the article are prior to the Durban conference.

(e.g. Jupille and Caporaso, 1998; Bretherton and Vogler, 2006). The subsequent analytical factors – that are somewhat intertwined and cannot always be neatly separated from each other – account for goal-attainment.

*Coherence*

A first analytical factor that we consider to explain the degree of EU goal-attainment is coherence. Several authors have considered coherence to be crucial for EU effectiveness in terms of goal attainment (e.g. Ginsberg, 2001; Thomas, 2012). In addition, coherence is often considered an indispensable ingredient for successful leadership (Elgström, 2007; Gupta and Grubb, 2000). We build on the concept of cohesion from Joseph Jupille and James A. Caporaso (1998)[3] to define coherence. Jupille and Caporaso build a theoretical model to analyse the degree of actorness/actor capacity[4] of an entity in world politics, of which cohesion is one of the four indicators. They state that cohesion is a "slippery concept", which does not equal substantive agreement on values and goals (Jupille and Caporaso, 1998, p. 219). Such substantive agreement would mean that interests are completely in harmony over a longer period of time, which in reality is almost never the case.

In order to clarify their definition of cohesion, Jupille and Caporaso (1998) distinguish between four types of cohesion: value (goal) cohesion, tactical cohesion, procedural cohesion and output cohesion. Accordingly, we will take into account the analytical questions that derive from these four categories of cohesion. Related to value (goal) cohesion, we thus investigate to what extent EU Member States share common basic preferences and goals. Regarding both tactical and procedural cohesion, we ask to what extent the EU has been able to overcome diverging preferences and resolve disagreements by means of established procedures and instruments within the EU's negotiating infrastructure – or tactical instruments, such as issue linkage and side payments. In relation to output cohesion, we in particular analyse to what extent the EU has succeeded in formulating common positions followed by the EU actors involved (the Commission and the Member States).

*Opportunity structure*

Whether the EU can attain its goals, may to a large extent depend on the "opportunity structure", i.e. the external context of events and ideas that enable or constrain EU action. It signifies the environment surrounding the EU in which action can (or cannot) take place (Bretherton and Vogler, 2006, p. 24). Ideas and events in this external environment can stimulate EU action, be conducive to EU action, or rather hamper the EU to act. For example, we analyse whether the overall constellation of actors (and their objectives) at the negotiations strengthens or weakens the EU's pursuit of its goals. The position of the other major negotiating parties (based on their domestic

[3] We use the term 'coherence' rather than 'cohesion' because it is more widely used in the literature (and signifies basically the same phenomenon/concept) (Niemann and Bretherton, 2013 forthcoming).
[4] Jupille and Caporaso (1998, p. 214) define actorness or actor capacity as "the capacity of an entity to act in world politics". Their three other indicators of actorness, besides cohesion, are recognition, authority and autonomy.

preferences/constraints), and how the EU reacts to these positions, are important determinants for the final outcome of the international negotiations.

In addition, we also consider the degree of politicisation of the items on the negotiating agenda as a part of the external environment. Politicisation can be described as the extent to which discussions about these agenda items are turned into a political debate. To politicise an issue means to make it political. An issue that is handled by bureaucrats can move to the agenda of top politicians when it is politicised (Elgström and Jönsson, 2000, pp. 691-692). Politicised issues/areas are hypothesized to be "permeated by national interests and competitive strategies, and non-politicized issues by segmented co-operation and a desire to preserve the arena as a locus for generating future, joint benefits." (Elgström and Jönsson, 2000, p. 692) The extent to which discussions about the agenda items of the negotiations become political debates and affect discussions in other countries, often involving a range of interest groups with different preferences concerning the outcome of the negotiations, influences the EU's ability achieve its goals at international negotiations. The degree of media attention and attention of the public, non-governmental organisations and political leaders for the COP meeting is also a factor that we consider in this respect, which can increase the overall degree of pressure put on the negotiating parties and impede or stimulate action.

## The EU at the Copenhagen Negotiations

Negotiations at the Copenhagen conference of December 2009 took place at three different levels. First, negotiations proceeded among senior officials of the parties to the UNFCCC and the Kyoto Protocol during the first week of the conference. Second, political decisions at COPs in general usually involve ministers joining the conference during its "high-level segment" (normally towards the end of the conference). In Copenhagen, ministers arrived somewhat earlier than usual, because the conference was to culminate in a third level of decision-making; and due to the far-reaching decisions expected, heads of state and government were invited to take (or sign off on) the final decisions during the last days of the negotiations, from 16 to 18 December 2009. In the case at hand, about 30 heads of state and government were convened informally by the Danish COP Presidency during the last days of the conference to hammer out what was to become the main outcome of the conference: the Copenhagen Accord.

This informal setting superseded the preceding formal division into two negotiating tracks. First, in the Ad-Hoc Working Group on Further Commitments for Annex-I Parties under the Kyoto Protocol (AWG-KP), established in 2005, parties to the Kyoto Protocol (i.e. excluding the US) discussed a possible second commitment period under the Kyoto Protocol. Second, in the Ad-Hoc Working Group on Long-term Cooperative Action under the Convention (AWG-LCA), established in 2007, all parties to the UNFCCC (including the US) considered how to advance action under the Convention (UNFCCC, 2012; van Schaik and Schunz, 2012).

### *EU goals and their attainment*

As expressed in Presidency Conclusions of the European Council and Council Conclusions of EU environment ministers, the EU aimed at a legally binding agreement to limit global

average temperature rise to less than 2°C above pre-industrial levels. Accordingly, the EU supported that global GHG emissions should start falling from 2020 and be reduced by at least 50 per cent as compared with 1990 levels by 2050. Developed countries should thus collectively reduce their emissions by 25–40 per cent by 2020 and by 80–95 per cent by 2050. Developing countries should achieve a substantial relative emissions reduction in the order of 15–30 per cent from 'business-as-usual' by 2020. The EU itself made an unconditional commitment to an emissions reduction of 20 per cent and offered to increase this to 30 per cent in the context of an ambitious agreement (Oberthür and Pallemaerts, 2010, pp. 44–46). This goal can be considered to be very ambitious and nearly completely in line with the ultimate goal of the UNFCCC and the related scientific advice (see above). It was also ambitious because it was far ahead of the much less ambitious goals of other negotiating parties at Copenhagen, such as the United States, India and China (see also below).

Eventually, the EU achieved hardly any of its goals in Copenhagen. With the exception of the 2°C goal, there is hardly anything in the last-minute Copenhagen Accord that would live up to the very high EU ambitions and reflect the above EU goals. In particular, there is no mention of any legally binding emission reductions. National emission reduction pledges should be submitted to the UNFCCC secretariat, but countries are not bound by these pledges (UNFCCC, 2009, Oberthür, 2011b). The negotiations did not deliver the much-wanted results, due to persisting differences between the EU, the United States, and developing countries, in particular the group of advanced developing countries, the 'BASIC' countries (Brazil, South Africa, India and China). A deep divide between developed and developing countries became apparent in Copenhagen, especially on the form a future agreement on climate change should take. Developing countries (and the US) did not want to bind themselves to any legal commitments and other developed countries refused to do so unless the United States and major developing countries would go along (Metz, 2011, pp. 347-348). The contents of the final agreement, the Copenhagen Accord, were mainly determined by the US and the BASIC countries, whereas the EU was marginalised (Curtin, 2010; van Schaik and Schunz, 2012).

*Coherence*

At Copenhagen, EU coherence faced significant challenges and remained severely limited. While EU Member States managed to agree on an ambitious EU negotiating position (see above), preferences among Member States diverged significantly and led to serious internal political debate and conflicts on important issues on the negotiating agenda, including in particular whether to move the own emission reduction goal to 30 per cent and regarding financing for adaptation and mitigation measures in developing countries. Political debate inside the EU Member States effectively diminished the degree of EU coherence.

Debate and conflict among EU Member States on these core issues were rooted in a long-standing divergence of preferences. The conditional 30 per cent reduction commitment complementing the unconditional 20 per cent reduction commitment had already been established in 2007 (Council of the European Union, 2007, p. 12). Differences of opinion among EU Member States concerning climate change ambitions subsequently came to the forefront during the deliberation of the climate and energy package of legislative measures implementing the unconditional 20 per cent commitment

within the EU in 2008. Throughout 2009, the EU continued to struggle internally over GHG emission reduction targets with the debate focusing on whether to move to 30 per cent (New York Times, 6 December 2009). The issue also became a major issue of contention at the Copenhagen conference itself. Internal dissent was increased by the upcoming economic crisis (Parker and Karlsson, 2010). Disagreement among EU Member States, with Britain, Denmark and the Netherlands among those supporting further substantial emission cuts, and Italy and Poland leading the front against such steps (tacitly supported by other Eastern European Member States), "created the potential for an embarrassing public dispute among EU nations right when the bloc most hopes to assert its leadership" (International Herald Tribune, 2 December 2009; see also New York Times, 6 December 2009; The Times, 17 October 2008).

In addition, many EU Member States, most notably the Eastern European Member States, were reluctant to commit financial resources to help developing countries adapt to and mitigate climate change, because of the financial crisis (Guardian Unlimited, 11 December 2009). In contrast, Member States like the Netherlands, the UK, Germany, France, Denmark and Sweden were ready to put concrete amounts of money on the table (Interview with Dutch delegate, The Hague, 12 May 2010).

Internal procedures did not facilitate progress. The consensus requirement often drove negotiators towards the lowest common denominator (Interview with UK delegate by telephone, 10 May 2010). Despite a substantial number of meetings beforehand, no concrete common EU position could be formulated at all on some agenda items (e.g. climate finance and land use, land use change and forestry) because the Member States could not reach sufficient agreement (Interview with Council Secretariat representative, Brussels, 3 May 2010).

Under the circumstances, EU negotiators were seriously constrained. They could not deviate from the negotiating position before the Member States had unanimously approved of change (interview at the Council Secretariat, 3 May 2010). Consequently, it was difficult for the EU to interact with third parties at the negotiations (also because it lost a lot of time at the negotiations with internal coordination). In addition, when the negotiations shifted to the level of heads of state and government, even the daily coordination meetings between them did not allow keeping ranks closed. At this final stage the leaders of France, the UK and Germany took over the lead from the Swedish Council Presidency representative Prime Minister Fredrik Reinfeldt and from Commission President José Manuel Durão Barroso in order to secure an ambitious outcome and left the less ambitious EU Member States behind (Interview with Council Secretariat representative, Brussels, 3 May 2010; NRC Handelsblad, 11 December 2009).

Internal divergence continued beyond the conclusion of the Copenhagen Accord. While France, the UK, the Swedish Presidency and the Commission were disappointed about the non-legally binding outcome, Italy and the Central and Eastern European Member States indicated that they were quite satisfied (Barroso 2009; Interview with EP delegate by telephone, May 2010). Substantial disagreements also continued on the EU's GHG reduction target (whether to upgrade it to 30 per cent or not). By the required 31 January 2010 deadline, the EU could thus only send to the UNFCCC secretariat the target of reducing GHG emissions "by at least 20 per cent by 2020 relative to 1990 levels and by 30 per cent relative to 1990 levels provided that other developed countries commit themselves to comparable emission reductions and that economically more advanced developing countries contribute adequately according to their responsibilities and

respective capabilities consistent with staying below 2°C" (UNFCCC, 2010, p. 11). Disagreement on climate finance also remained. By the end of the negotiations the EU had not yet settled on how much it would contribute to the required long term finance of $100 billion from 2020 for adaptation and mitigation measures, owing to persisting disagreement on the questions of how this burden should be shared and whether payments had to be recorded (CAN Europe, 2009).

*Opportunity structure and politicisation*

First of all, the international context at Copenhagen was far more multi-polar than in earlier negotiations on the Kyoto Protocol. The US, under Barack Obama's administration, was back at the negotiation table at Copenhagen and the group of BASIC countries (four emerging economies: Brazil, South Africa, India and China) also came to the table with firm stances. In 1990, the 15 EU Member States and the US accounted together for about 60 per cent of the CO2 emissions of developed countries (UNFCCC, 1998), and the EU and the US thus dominated the discussions within the UNFCCC in the 1990s. When the US withdrew from the Kyoto Protocol in 2001, the EU became the clearly most important actor. However, when global emissions (rather than emissions of industrialised countries, as in the case of the Kyoto Protocol) were discussed in the Copenhagen process, the EU only constituted one of several important actors, including the US and the BASIC group. In 2005, the EU only accounted for a share of about 13 per cent of global GHG emissions. While the EU reduced its emissions, China and the other BASIC countries significantly increased their share in global GHG emissions. China's global GHG emissions share was already higher than that of the EU in 2005. The US also increased its global GHG emissions. Thus, in terms of emissions share, the EU had become less important than the BASIC group and the US (Oberthür, 2011b).

The stances and objectives of the US and the BASIC countries were considerably less ambitious than their own. Compared to the EU's unilateral GHG reduction target of at least 20 per cent, the US and BASIC country reduction targets were a lot more modest. The US target was to cut GHG emissions by 17 per cent by 2020 from 2005 levels. China, which can be considered the leader of the BASIC country group, pledged to reduce the amount of carbon dioxide emitted per unit of economic output by 40 to 45 per cent by 2020 compared to 2005 levels, which would not decrease the total amount of emissions in 2020 compared to 2005, as China's economic output would continue to grow (New York Times, 26 November 2009). Especially, both were not prepared to accept any legally binding commitments. Also detrimental in terms of the overall actor constellation was that, in late November, just before the start of the conference, the BASIC countries decided to act jointly against the developed nations at the COP15 meeting (Dasgupta, 2009). During a closed-door meeting in Beijing they drafted an accord that became the basis for the final Copenhagen Accord. They decided to jointly walk out of the meeting if the developed countries tried to move them to go beyond their limits. This initiative was led by the Chinese government (Schall-Emden, 2009). On 15 November 2009, at the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) forum, the group of attending leaders, including both US President Obama and Chinese President Hu Jintao, agreed to consider the Copenhagen negotiations as a "staging post" rather than an end point in the search for a global climate deal (BBC News, 2009).

The EU's goals seem to have been too ambitious to be reconcilable with the interests of the United States and the BASIC countries. The latter could not be convinced by the normative arguments of the EU to shift their positions. The negotiating strategy adopted by the EU did not sufficiently take into account the fact that the US and the BASIC countries had adopted rather conservative negotiating positions (van Schaik and Schunz, 2012). There was no plan B included in the EU negotiating strategy, which could have allowed the EU to react to the negotiating realities and stay more closely involved in the process of arriving at some sort of compromise agreement. In particular, the position of the EU to abandon the Kyoto Protocol and replace it with a new global agreement alienated developing countries and made a possible coalition with them (small island states and least developed countries) virtually impossible (Oberthür, 2011b, pp 678-679). As a result, the US and the BASIC countries more or less sidelined the EU during the final negotiations among the heads of state and government on the Copenhagen Accord (van Schaik and Schunz, 2012; Curtin, 2010).

The COP15 negotiations were characterised by an exceptionally high political salience. It was expected that decisions would be taken about important topics like climate finance and concrete GHG emission reduction goals in Copenhagen. The summit marked the culmination of several years of negotiations and was attended by an unprecedented number of media, non-governmental organisations and political leaders. According to a Commission delegate the political pressure put on the EU before and during the Copenhagen conference was very high. The EU stood fully in the spotlight of public opinion, stronger than ever before at a COP meeting. It was challenged from various sides to adjust its position, both in more ambitious and in less ambitious directions. Climate politics had acquired a geo-political dimension. The result was a political chess game at the level of the heads of state and government and finance ministers (Interview with European Commission delegate, Brussels, 14 April 2011). The high degree of politicisation at Copenhagen (also) adversely affected EU coherence (see above), as it cemented member governments' positions and left little scope for manoeuvre due to significant domestic public attention and pressures.

In addition, domestic constraints prevented other players from moving away from (substantially) amending their positions at Copenhagen and searching for a compromise closer towards the EU's stance. The new US Obama government, for example, that was more predisposed to a far-reaching deal than its predecessor, would have needed the agreement by both chambers of Congress for entering into a legally binding international agreement (Council on Foreign Relations, 2009). Moreover, the general US external policy stance is that the US will only ratify international agreements "when domestic policy is settled on the issue in question" (Bang and Schreurs 2011, p. 247), which was not the case with the issues on the Copenhagen agenda. Federal climate policy requiring mandatory emission reductions had been blocked for many years. A bill proposing a 17 per cent cut in US GHG emissions from 2005 levels by 2020 was passed in the House of Representatives in 2009, but stalled in the Senate. Oil, coal and manufacturing lobbies had been spending millions to frame the proposed bill as fuelling unemployment and increasing home heating bills (Guardian Unlimited, 17 November 2009). Such domestic constraints on a considerably politicised issue limited the US' willingness to compromise. Overall, it can be assumed that the high stakes at play at Copenhagen made it less feasible that the negotiations would result in a highly ambitious agreement as proposed by the EU.

*Interim conclusions*

The analysis above suggests that both internal coherence, and opportunity structure and politicisation may have worked against the EU attaining its goals at Copenhagen. The EU could not present more ambitious common positions because of internal disagreement on important agenda items, such as the EU's GHG emission reduction goal and its financial contributions to developing countries. Preoccupation with internal conflict also made it more difficult to reach out to third parties at the negotiations. At the same time, the external opportunity structure and a high level of politicisation also worked against EU goal attainment. In the changed and evolving international context, the EU was no longer the most important player and was not considered crucial by others (such as the US and BASIC countries). A high level of politicisation further limited the willingness of the other players to compromise and increased their level of ambition.

Under these circumstances, it may appear that the unfavourable opportunity structure and politicisation trump coherence as regards explanatory power. Given the external circumstances, it is difficult to see how a more ambitious EU position could have enhanced EU influence. After all, the EU was already the player with the most ambitious position. Consequently, there is little reason to believe that even a highly coherent EU could have changed the positions of the US and the BASIC group. At most, a higher level of EU coherence and unity may have assisted in gaining room for strategic thinking. In this respect, the EU position of abandoning the Kyoto Protocol foreclosed the possibility, and the EU failed to make a concerted effort, to build a coalition with like-minded developing countries (see also Oberthür, 2011b).

## The EU at the Cancun Negotiations

The Cancun COP16 negotiations, held in December 2010, one year after the Copenhagen negotiations, were able to take away a large part of the distrust between developing and developed countries culminating into an agreement, which formalised many elements of the Copenhagen Agreement by incorporating them in a UNFCCC decision (Metz, 2011; Barroso, 2010). Agreement was reached, among others, on administrative UNFCCC mechanisms on adaptation, technology transfer and REDD+, including the decision to establish a Green Climate Fund (UNFCCC, 2011).

*EU goals and their attainment*

For Cancun, the EU adopted a more pragmatic approach and set less ambitious goals than for Copenhagen. It aimed at a concrete set of decisions that implement the elements of the Copenhagen Accord (e.g. Oberthür 2011a, p. 10). In its Environment Council Conclusions of 14 October 2010, the EU stated that it aimed for a balanced outcome across and within the two negotiating tracks (the Long-Term Cooperative Action under the Convention track and the Kyoto Protocol track) involving all parties, that would contribute to the establishment of a post-2012 regime and deliver actions on the ground. The Council Conclusions also confirmed the EU's long-term GHG emission reduction objectives, both at the global level (50 per cent by 2050) and for developed countries including itself (80-95 per cent by 2050) (Council of the European Union, 2010). While its goals thus remained progressive, the short-term ambition for Cancun

was significantly more moderate than for Copenhagen: the EU did not aim for a universal legally binding treaty as an outcome of the conference (but instead as an aim for the future), nor for concrete commitments by other players. Instead, it advocated a set of concrete decisions on various institutional issues with a limited immediate impact on mitigating climate change. Importantly, the EU now also signalled "its willingness to consider a second commitment period under the Kyoto Protocol, as part of a wider outcome including the perspective of the global and comprehensive framework engaging all major economies" (Council of the European Union, 2010, para. 4). All in all, achieving the EU goals would thus constitute progress, but deliver little in terms of achieving the emission reductions required (see above).

To a large extent the EU's goals for the Cancun conference can be said to have been reached. Whereas little progress was made towards establishing a global post-2012 climate regime, decisions were adopted under both the Convention and the Kyoto Protocol tracks that elaborated on the Copenhagen Accord and kept the possibility of a second commitment period of the Kyoto Protocol alive. Many elements of the final package, the so-called "Cancun Agreements" (including the establishment of various bodies and agreement on all elements of the Copenhagen Accord), reflected what the EU had laid down in its Council Conclusions – although one may want to caution that the EU position was also carefully crafted in general terms. This lack of concreteness certainly facilitated reaching the goals established (see also Oberthür, 2011a). Overall, we can nevertheless conclude that the EU was considerably more successful in achieving its goals in Cancun than in Copenhagen – while these goals were also considerably less ambitious (so that it was much easier to realize them).

*Coherence*

Towards the Cancun conference, the coherence of preferences among EU Member States had changed little as compared with Copenhagen. The emission reduction target and climate finance were still very contentious. At the Environment Council meeting in October the question of whether the EU's emission reduction target should be raised from 20 per cent to 30 per cent below 1990 levels by 2020 was discussed. No agreement on scaling up the target could be reached. The divide between two blocks of Member States, already present before the Copenhagen negotiations, seemed to persist. On the one hand, a group of Western European Member States – including the UK, the Netherlands, Sweden and Denmark – was in favour of raising the target, while on the other hand a group that included many of the Eastern and Central European Member States and also Italy, only wanted to agree on scaling up the target when other major GHG emitters commit themselves to similar targets within the UNFCCC negotiation process (Euractiv, 2010a; Santarius et al., 2011, p. 9). EU Member States also did not make further progress on the question of climate finance. Reports rather suggested that the EU would fall 200 million EUR short of its 2010 yearly financial commitment and 357 million EUR over the entire period 2010-2012. Reportedly, four Member States failed to deliver their share for 2010 (Euractiv, 2010b). As a growing number of Member States had to cope with severe budget problems, it seemed likely that problems regarding climate finance commitments would increase in the future.

The division among EU Member States on the two topics mentioned above could not be overcome, as the divide was rather deep (Interview with Commission official, Brussels,

14 April 2011). This divide did, however, not restrain the EU from adopting a coherent negotiating stance, albeit a less ambitious one than the Commission and the more progressive Member States would have liked (which was also the case for Copenhagen). Because the EU did not aim for a highly ambitious outcome at Cancun, the contentious issues among its Member States did not stand in the way of its negotiating efforts (Interview with Commission official, Brussels, 14 April 2011). At this point, the Cancun and Copenhagen conference clearly differ. Whereas serious internal conflicts arose especially regarding the emission reduction target and climate finance on the way to Copenhagen, the negotiating positions that the EU could agree upon in its Council conclusions for Cancun matched the international agenda so that not much internal debate ensued. As a matter of fact, neither upgrading climate finance nor strengthening emission reduction targets stood high on the agenda of the Cancun conference that was focused on formalising and elaborating the Copenhagen Accord. Whereas internal disagreements thus remained in substance, they hardly translated into incoherence as regards the international negotiations as they were not relevant for that context.

*Opportunity structure and politicisation*

In the first place, many parties considered the Cancun negotiations as the make-or-break-moment for the international climate change negotiations, after the failure of Copenhagen. If the Cancun negotiations did not result in an outcome, there would be little chance that a meaningful global deal on climate action would ever be reached and the UNFCCC could have lost its value. Therefore, the majority of the UNFCCC parties were eager to reach a substantial outcome in Cancun, that is to say an outcome involving all parties, both developed and developing countries, including conclusions on a list of topics.

The EU benefited from this atmosphere. Compared to the Copenhagen summit, the US and the group of BASIC countries behaved in a more cooperative manner, which made it easier to arrive at a final package of agreements that satisfied all negotiating parties, including the EU. The US' goal was to ensure that the Copenhagen Accord would survive and be given a more definitive shape. This goal matched with the EU's goal for Cancun. The US was especially concerned about transparent climate action in China (measurable, reportable and verifiable). It urged China to proceed towards such action, which was also in the interest of the EU. China showed its support for the multilateral process and pushed for a second commitment period of the Kyoto Protocol, as did Brazil. Thanks to Brazil's persuasion efforts India and China showed more willingness to consider binding mitigation actions. South Africa tried to form strategic alliances with the other BASIC countries, the African Group, the G77 and the EU and tried hard to resolve divergences, for example on a second commitment period for the Kyoto Protocol and on legally binding mitigation commitments. The Cancun Agreements include two Indian proposals, one on a technology transfer mechanism and another on an International Consultation and Analysis mechanism that helped to break the deadlock on the transparency of mitigation efforts. These Indian proposals were favourable to the EU, which also wanted the divisions on mitigation transparency to be overcome (Santarius et al., 2011, pp. 12-20).

Another important contextual factor enabling the EU to act at Cancun was that expectations were scaled down considerably after the disappointing outcome in

Copenhagen (IISD, 2010b). The Cancun negotiations were less politicised than the negotiations at Copenhagen. After the failure of the Copenhagen negotiations nobody expected a big and highly ambitious (legally binding) outcome anymore, neither the negotiators, nor the public at home. Much fewer heads of state and government attended the Cancun negotiations. Also, the COP16 meeting was much less discussed in the media and lobby groups were less active than they were before and during the Copenhagen summit (IISD, 2010b). The EU did not stand as much in the spotlight of public opinion as was the case at the Copenhagen summit and much less was expected from it.

The EU could profit from this atmosphere to find its own way to reach many of its goals, step by step. In a highly politicised atmosphere interest groups with different positions might have pushed the EU's negotiating stance in various directions, thereby weakening the EU's ability to negotiate. In a low-ambition-level-context with less interference from such groups than at Copenhagen, it was easier for the EU to operate. Its pragmatic approach towards a concrete set of decisions that get action going on the ground suited the low-ambition context well (Interview with Commission official, Brussels, 14 April 2011).

In this low-ambition context, the EU took proactive steps at Cancun by which it made progress towards its goals. It tried to act as a bridge-builder by positioning itself between the major blocs – Brazil, South Africa, India and China (the BASIC countries), the US, Japan, Canada, Australia and the developing countries – and tried to shift the balance as much as possible towards its own objectives. Arguing that existing mitigation pledges need to be strengthened and clarified and that more needs to be done on measurement, reporting and verification, the EU sometimes aligned with the developing countries and the BASICs, in other cases with the US and other developed countries, depending on the issue under discussion (Oberthür, 2011a, p. 10). Importantly, the EU actively engaged in outreach activities and coalition building with other countries, most importantly by taking part in the "Cartagena Dialogue for Progressive Action". This Dialogue is "an informal space open to countries working towards an ambitious, comprehensive and legally-binding regime under the UNFCCC" (IISD, 2010a). 30 like-minded developed and developing countries from the Alliance of Small Island States, Latin America, Europe, Oceania, South East Asia and Africa participate in the dialogue. Their goal is to explore areas of convergence and joint action. The EU engaged actively in these talks and thereby made progress in coalition building (Oberthür, 2011a, p. 10; IISD, 2010a). In addition, the fact that the EU clearly expressed in its Council Conclusions for Cancun that it was willing to consider a second commitment period under the Kyoto Protocol (as part of a wider outcome) provided the basis for coalition building with the developing countries (which had turned against the EU at Copenhagen because of the EU's position on the Kyoto Protocol).

*Interim conclusions*

Whereas preferences of EU Member States had changed little one year after Copenhagen, there was much less internal conflict regarding the international position of the EU towards the Cancun conference. This has to be seen in the context of an evolving international opportunity structure and a much-reduced level of politicisation. The agreed EU negotiating positions matched the international agenda, so that not much

internal debate ensued. Whereas internal disagreements remained in substance, they hardly translated into incoherence as regards the international negotiations as they were not relevant for that context. Furthermore, most parties considered the negotiations as the make-or-break-moment for the UNFCCC, after the failure of Copenhagen, and were eager to reach concrete outcomes of a much more similar level of ambition than in Copenhagen (e.g. no immediate legally binding agreement). At the same time, (public) expectations for Cancun were scaled down considerably after the disappointing outcome in Copenhagen.

The EU itself contributed to an improved level of goal attainment in particular in three ways. First, its much less ambitious (and less concrete) goals for Cancun substantially facilitated achieving them. Second, the EU's change of position on the future of the Kyoto Protocol, now signalling its willingness to consider a second commitment period, facilitated coalition building especially with developing countries. Finally, its active engagement and strategic focus on such coalition building and a bridge-building role seems to reflect a growing awareness of the need to adapt EU strategy to the changing geopolitics of climate change, which eventually enhanced EU influence (under the constraints of these geopolitics).

## Conclusion

Comparing the EU's role in the Copenhagen and Cancun conferences, it may be unsurprising that there appears to be an inverse relationship between ambition and goal achievement. In Copenhagen, the EU pursued highly ambitious and concrete goals that were largely in line with authoritative international scientific advice to achieve the ultimate objective of the UNFCCC to avoid dangerous anthropogenic interference with the climate system – but it failed miserably in achieving these goals. In contrast, the EU arguably reached many of its goals for the Cancun conference, which were, however, much toned down from and less concrete than the previous year.

However, more factors have been at play. Internal EU coherence and conflict have also varied significantly. To be sure, general interests and preferences of EU Member States did not significantly vary between 2009 and 2010. Significant divisions existed throughout the period investigated between a group of more progressive “old” Member States and a group of mainly ”new” Member States (led by Poland but also including Italy) that stalled more ambitious EU climate policies. However, Member States still acted in a much more united way in Cancun than they did in Copenhagen because the most divisive issues (ambition concerning emission reduction targets and climate finance) had essentially been exhausted for the time being in Copenhagen and were thus not prominently on the agenda of the Cancun meeting. This correlation between coherence/unity and EU goal achievement is in line with expectations in much of the relevant literature, but our analysis does not allow us to make causal claims in this respect. It does highlight, however, that EU coherence and unity regarding EU external policy cannot be assessed on purely internal grounds, but that such coherence and unity is contingent on the external context, in our case the international negotiating agenda (which relieved the EU from having to resolve its internal divisions at Cancun).

On the basis of our analysis, we furthermore suggest that the international opportunity structure and the level of politicisation trumps internal coherence when it comes to

understanding EU goal achievement in the cases at hand. A careful look at the international context and the nature of the internal disagreements within the EU as regards Copenhagen leads to the conclusion that greater EU unity (e.g. on a higher ambition) at Copenhagen could hardly be expected to have contributed significantly to enhancing the EU's weight in the highly politicised international discussions in view of (1) the unwillingness especially of the US and China to move significantly, (2) the large divergence of preferences of the major players, and (3) the limited weight of the EU in the evolving geopolitics of climate change (somewhere in between multi- and bi-polarity). Conversely, the reduced politicisation, the scaled-down international agenda and the larger overlap of preferences of the major actors towards Cancun provided a more amenable context for the EU to exert influence and achieve its objectives. Importantly, a majority of countries were eager to prevent another failure (which would have dealt a major blow to the UNFCCC) and reach an agreement in Cancun.

We should also not forget about the EU's room for manoeuvre to adapt its positions and strategy more or less well to the international opportunity structure – a factor that also varied significantly between the two cases investigated. In the Copenhagen process, to some extent preoccupied with internal discussions, the EU isolated itself from developing countries as a whole, including important potential allies in its quest for an ambitious international agreement (including small island states, least developed countries, Latin American countries, and others), by abandoning the Kyoto Protocol. Overall, it did hardly pursue a strategy suitable for its reduced weight in the new geopolitics of climate change. In contrast, it adapted its positioning and strategy towards the Cancun conference by taking a middle position between the other major blocs and investing heavily in coalition building, especially with developing countries (enabled by its modified position on the Kyoto Protocol). On this basis, it was able to act as a bridge-builder, sometimes aligning itself with the developing countries and the BASICs, in other cases reaching out to the US and other developed countries. Overall, our analysis thus suggests that the EU has been able to learn its lesson from Copenhagen by adapting its position and strategy to international political reality – an adaptation that may have been facilitated significantly by requiring agreement on less rather than more ambition (with more ambition having proven particularly divisive among EU Member States).

This successful adaptation and learning illustrates a major dilemma of contemporary EU external policy and international leadership on climate change, relating to the possibly impossible task of realigning ambition with political reality. On the one side, pushing for policies in line with scientific advice so as to prevent dangerous anthropogenic interference with the climate system may not be politically realistic under current circumstances and diminish influence. On the other side, the EU pursuing less ambitious goals may have better prospects of being successful and influencing outcomes, but dangerous climate change may not be prevented thereby. In practice, the EU's challenge consists in pushing for the most ambitious margin within the realm of realistically possible agreements (while working towards upgrading the ambition scope of this realm, inter alia by means of coalition- and bridge-building).

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