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EUROPEAN PERSPECTIVES ON THE PARIS ACCORDS AND CLIMATE CHANGE POLICY

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INTRODUCTION

The politics and science of climate change are remarkably settled. We can only say this is remarkable because of the context of the vibrant and often bitter debates on legacy and online media outlets between activists, that gives the impression that the science is contested, which it is not. All serious, peer-reviewed scientific studies confirm the thesis that global climate is warming, and that the impacts of this warming are fulfilling the hypotheses for this stage of the warming process. By that rationale, the “do nothing” approach to climate change would see average temperatures rise by 6 degrees Celsius (11.8 Fahrenheit) above pre-industrial levels by 2100. Such a rise in global temperatures would see a considerable part of sub-Saharan Africa rendered uninhabitable, increase the quantity and ferocity of extreme weather events in all parts of the globe, and cause sea levels to increase to a point where some landmasses will be permanently under water.

In 2015, there was landmark agreement (known as the Paris Agreement and Paris Accords) made between 196 nations under the auspices of the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change, which aimed to achieve three things: 1) to hold

increases in global temperatures to “well below” two degrees Celsius of those recorded in the pre-industrial globe, with an aspiration of 1.5 degrees, 2) to increase the ability of the world to adapt to climate increases, without endangering food supplies, and 3) to make finance flow in a way to support the lowering of global climates.¹ These are ambitious goals, but the multilateral politics of tackling climate change means that Paris was, in effect, a lowest-common-denominator agreement that did not create onerous impositions for its signatories. There was and remains no formalized route to sanction for nations who transgress, and sovereign states retain sovereignty over the quantity of carbon emissions they pledge to reduce. So, the strength of the Paris Accords is in the political symbolism of the world coming together to tackle a global problem, in a way that does not exclusively privilege short-term electoral cycles or short-term industrial interests.

In November 2017, the United Nations held its annual climate summit in Bonn as part of this “Paris process.”² The purpose of the summit was for the signatories to continue the process of moving towards implementation of the 2015 Agreement. At the time of writing in June 2018, 178 states have become party to the agreement, but the process faces some serious challenges due to President Donald Trump’s administration signaling its intention to withdraw the United States from the Agreement, a position that becomes live—subject to several procedural issues—in November 2020, which closely ties up with the Presidential election cycle. This paper examines the developments within the Paris process from a European perspective. It will

examine the EU's collective response to climate change and why this response is viewed by European governments as such a priority. The paper explores the progress that has been made towards climate change initiatives, including where positions of tension remain. This note also looks at the European view of the United States' current position and the impact this will likely have on the European approach both to Paris and to regulatory positions related both to trade and the environment. Finally, it notes the current diplomatic relationship between the EU and US, particularly how the EU is seeking to position itself in relation to the US acting—as the EU sees it—in deliberately provocative ways.

ECONOMIC COMPETITION AND TECHNOLOGICAL RESCUES

President Trump promised to put “America first:” in the economic realm this has come to mean a rejection of externally generated restrictions or impediments to American producers. Trump, somewhat ironically in the circumstances, understands Bill Clinton's mantra of “it's the economy, stupid,” better than most, and to free-marketeers environmental regulation is another, externally imposed, unfair form of business taxation that impinges upon growth and therefore profitability and wealth creation.

The EU and US are, at the time of writing, engaged in the opening moves of what seems to be destined to become a much wider trade dispute. The US has imposed a 25% tariff on steel and a 10% tariff on aluminum from a range of countries, including those of the European Union. In return, the EU has placed a number of tariffs on iconic, almost quintessentially US goods entering the single market area including Levi Jeans, certain types of bourbon, and Harley Davidson motorcycles. President Trump – using his Twitter account – has threatened further reprisals against European motor manufacturers consequently, and equity and currency in Europe have responded with a period of volatility. The positioning of the Trump administration on climate change cannot be construed as surprising: this is

precisely the position articulated by President Trump and his campaign's radical view of trade and economics.

The Paris Accords required developed and consumer-driven economies (such as those of Europe and North America) to effectively incur costs, and to invest altruistically, for the long-term dividend of environmental sustainability and lower future costs mitigating environmental damage. There were many forms of moral hazard within this compact. Developing nations argued that they had yet to reap the rewards that come from mature industrialization, and so—in effect—developed nations were attempting to arrest their development, whilst developed nations argued that the worst kinds of polluting is coming from the rapidly developing world, and thus that is where the balance of effort should lie. There is also the moral hazard involved for politicians who are driven by short-term electoral cycles, needing to bring forward measures that seek to produce rewards long after they have left office. Environmental policy is one area where political scientists have long considered it is difficult to find collective agreement precisely because the long-term view required sits in tension with short-term electoral considerations.

The European nations sold the agreement to their publics on the grounds of it being morally right to try to secure a sustainable environmental future for the globe, help to increase the chances of global political stability and the absence of climate-driven conflicts, which in turn would reduce the flow of migrants seeking to arrive in the EU, and which would benefit the technology-driven economies of Europe. They accepted that this economic benefit would be the result of painful and carefully managed transformation of some aspects of European industry: and this is the point of divergence between Europe and President Trump, who saw the Obama Administration as having given too much ground to international competitors, and consequently would damage US industry, jobs, and economic prosperity. Whilst these are largely short-term concerns, they do appeal to a public base of support. They also reflect

different political realities in the US and the EU. The EU has a far longer history of environmental engagement, be it through political parties clustering or appealing to environmental concerns, or to campaign groups successfully energizing sufficiently large percentages of the population.

There are, however, four key areas of economic life in which the European response to climate change is not settled, and which has impacts across wider policy areas: 1) the impact of climate-inspired migration and the provision of aid and support, 2) the need to cut aircraft emissions that is in tension with increasing demand for air travel, 3) the potential increases in food prices because of climate change, and climate change policies, and 4) public and private ground transportation demands, and the fossil fuel legacy. There are several aspects that we should note are common to the European and American responses here: the first is the preference for finding technical or technology-lead solutions to these problems. The second is the extent to which these issues dovetail with other areas of contentious policy, which many legislators are struggling to find the motivation and aptitude to find an adequate response, constrained—as they are—by many other factors. The point of divergence is now that the EU believes it is necessary to regulate, whereas the US federal government does not.

MIGRATION: THE TICKING TIME BOMB OF CLIMATE CHANGE

The issue of migration and migratory flows has been politically problematic for European nations and states for centuries, let alone the recent decades. The disruptions caused by the Second World War, the Cold War and the economic migration after 1989, which accelerated with the accession of East European countries into the EU, have provided a conveyor belt of migration from East Europe, the Balkans and North Africa, which has placed considerable stresses onto national European political debates. These stresses appear to be reaching a peak (and it is not clear if it is a temporary

or existential peak for the EU), but they now threaten to unpick the social democratic settlement and compact across Europe as anti-immigration populists—such as Prime Minister Victor Orban in Hungary, Chancellor Sebastian Kurz of Austria, Italian Interior Minister Matteo Salvini, and the Polish Prime Minister Mateusz Morawiecki, to name but a few—increasingly hold sway across the political landscape of the continent, and they continue to argue for greater national controls over migration and consequently argue for a diminished European role in this policy area.

In Germany, which has a political system designed to promote stability and continuity, the decision of Angela Merkel to allow circa 1.443 million migrants to enter Germany in the 2015-17 period, as a response to the civil war in Syria, which itself has some climate change antecedents, destabilized her government and saw the rise in right-wing anti-migration parties and narratives. The political impact of migration in European recipient countries has been stark, but this impact has also been felt in countries and communities largely unaffected by migration. Whilst the migration noted here has been the result of push factors, such as conflicts, or pull factors such as economy or lifestyle reasons, it has been on a far smaller scale than is predicted will be the case for climate change-inspired migration in the future. Estimates published by researchers from the Environmental Justice Foundation (EJF) prior to the 2017 Bonn summit on the Paris Accords put the estimates for climate change migration to the EU in the tens of millions over the next four decades, and they noted the magnitude of challenge this would present to European governments.³

The challenge that migration in the tens of millions would present European governments would be "whole-government" challenges, stretching across public services, the tax base, and societal cohesion, making this as much a security challenge as a social one. So, for European governments the essential balancing equation of the cost of mitigating climate change, which might include development payments, and increasing the technological

solutions to African nations to ward off migratory flows, versus the cost of allowing climate change to go unchecked is complicated, but the pre-2016 European order had concluded that mitigation of climate change had less risk attached to it.

AIR TRAVEL

The democratization of travel, and air travel in particular, is viewed across much of Europe as one of the key achievements of the post-World War II era. The reduced cost of both short and long-haul flights was estimated to be somewhere in the region of 50%, considering the impact of inflation, between 1980 and 2010. The halving of the costs moved air travel from being the preserve of the monied or professional classes to being something that even working-class families could afford. The increased air traffic has—of course—resulted in a greater level of emissions from aircraft. Indeed, the EU calculates and projects that the amount of air pollution from aviation increased 70% between 2005 and a projected date of 2020. More starkly, climate change scientists warn that by 2050—if demand for aviation continues to grow at the rates projected by the International Civil Aviation Organization (ICAO)—that aviation pollution will consume the entire tradable carbon quota.⁴

So, aviation is a point of vulnerability and risk for climate change policies, both in the EU and across the transatlantic area, but also offers a point of disruption to trade (for Airbus and Rolls Royce in the EU and for Boeing and General Electric in the US), business, and indeed social movement if demand is curtailed, or emissions cannot be dramatically reduced. The model of public finance underwriting research at the highest end of risk (as was the case with supersonic air travel in the 1960s and 70s), is long gone, and so it will be for the manufacturers to find technical innovations and advances to reduce emissions, while fulfilling the anticipated levels of demand. At the time of writing, the British Parliament has just voted to approve the construction of a third runway at London Heathrow Airport, adding emissions equivalent to the whole of

Portuguese contributions to global emissions at the time it will be fully functional; somewhat contrary to the move to reduce emissions as a nation. This is, however, consistent with the European model of technological advancement while retaining the operating model. Consequently, several European manufacturers are working on electric propulsion systems for aviation, including Airbus, Rolls Royce and Avinor, who have prototyped a two-seat “Cesena”-style aircraft for launch in 2025, and the Airlander 10, which is a hybrid airplane and airship.⁵ At the moment, such alternatives are a niche concern, but by 2040 one could reasonably assume that finding alternatives to fossil fuel propulsion will have become a serious endeavor.

GROUND TRANSPORTATION

The issues with ground transportation are like those in aviation. Based on the available scientific evidence, it is impossible to avoid the conclusion that citizens need to be making fewer journeys, while automobiles become cleaner and more efficient. Even better, citizens should be making their journeys in shared transport solutions, be they Ubers, buses, or trains, or using bicycles—something that places public investment pressures upon authorities to provide dedicated bike lanes to improve rider safety. But the realities of modern life, including out-of-town shopping locations, means that the car remains highly convenient, even if it is an expensive item to buy, maintain and fuel. The price of a gallon of gasoline in the UK currently costs \$7.81, compared to \$3.80 in the US, which is a taxation-driven price level geared to dissuade use of the vehicle. From this perspective it is simple to see why manufacturers have placed emphasis on developing more efficient vehicles, including those which employ “stop-start” technology in traffic jams and the inclusion of hybrid electric elements at slow speeds, much as the Toyota Prius pioneered this for the mass market. The increasing development of electric-powered vehicles, such as the Tesla and Nissan’s Note have begun to push the range of these vehicles towards something akin to a gasoline-powered car, making

them more attractive to consumers. Some have noted the carbon impact of extracting lithium for batteries (which is intensive), and in the generation of the electricity required to power them.⁶

There have been emissions scandals on both sides of the Atlantic, confined currently to the Volkswagen group of companies, but independent testing of most new vehicles on the mass market suggests that they cannot meet their stated emissions figures, which means that all European governments will need to adjust their voluntary contributions to carbon emission cuts in the light of real-world data that will become apparent in 2020. Similarly, city-wide congestion measures, including congestion charging, have had very little impact upon the number of vehicle movements in the cities that have adopted them. These charges are increasingly seen as another transaction cost of car ownership and one that citizens have been willing to pay. As with aviation, the most effective means of reducing emissions requires fundamental changes to the way that citizens configure their lives and would also result in very painful transitions for established motor manufacturers, which are seen in Europe as proxies for flag-carrying enterprises.

FOOD

Conventional climate change wisdom dictates that current patterns of Western food consumption (heavily oriented towards the consumption of meat and processed food), and how it is produced (industrial-scale farming), are unsustainable in climate change terms. Food industries, which includes agriculture and processing, contribute 25% of climate change emissions, which is more than various transportation systems combined.⁷ As the climate warms, agricultural yields have diminished: between 1980 and 2008 wheat yields dropped 5.5% and maize by 3.8%, driven by changes to temperature.⁸ The cost of food, as a percentage of citizen income, has markedly decreased over the past forty years, and there are strong arguments to suggest that citizens would find a transition to more expensive pricing very difficult to absorb. Similarly,

transformations to diet have been affected through perceived benefits to health, rather than environmental sustainability, although we can now see wider movements towards alternative protein diets, thus excluding meat. The so-called “organics” movement of sustainably farmed food has a modest market share and has been adopted by those who are ideologically aligned to environmental agendas. Food and farming politics is a touchstone issue in the EU, with the much-maligned Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) and the subsidies it provides to European farmers, coupled with the tariffs it imposes upon non-EU producers, a source of continual contestation and criticism, but a thoroughly entrenched system. From a European perspective, reform of farming and food would require a very large shift to move the effective lobbying and lifestyle, and economic ecosystem that is premised around it. For global climate change efforts, agricultural industries (including questions of land management, packaging and transportation) are highly diverse across the globe and therefore there are few common solutions.

THE RELATIVE STRENGTH OF THE PARIS ACCORDS

One of the curiosities of the US administration's decision to signal its intention to leave the Paris Accords in 2020 is the relative weakness of the provisions in the first place. The Accords provide for each signatory state to state their own contributions towards reduced carbon emissions: a process known as “Nationally Determined Contributions (NDCs)”. As it stood in December 2017, after the Bonn meeting, the UN Environment Programme believed there to be an “alarmingly high” gap between the stated contributions and the scientifically judged necessary contributions. This runs to 11 gigatons of carbon dioxide, and the science judges this gap needs to be closed by 2030 to avoid grave consequences. The Accords ask states to update their NDCs every five years in the light of the latest scientific understandings and measurements of global outputs, but there are no formalized penalties for failing to update the NDCs or indeed for failing to

meet the targets. The only penalties that states may face are those of reputational loss, which is unlikely to compel states to action.

Most commentators expect the required cuts to emissions will continue to increase as we move towards the crucial 2030 date. The US NDC that the Trump administration has repudiated places a target on the US of a reduction of 26–28% of greenhouse gases by 2025 against its official 2005 levels. Like much of the developed world, the US planned to meet these ambitious targets by placing national (federal) regulations on vehicle fuel-efficiency standards, reducing carbon dioxide emissions from electricity generation and general manufacturing industry and in improving conservation standards and technologies. The repudiation means that there will be no updated American NDC in 2020 and consequently the 2025 and 2030 NDC would likely be “very challenging” targets, should they ever be published. The US missing its 2015–2020 targets, and then not setting any further targets, would obviously place an additional onus on the remaining signatories, although there is no formal mechanism by which the US’ shortfall can or should be distributed between the other states.

One of the crucial impacts of the Trump administration’s position to withdraw from the Agreement in 2020 (which itself is contested, as states cannot serve notice to quit the Accords until 4 November 2019 and cannot withdraw until 4 November 2020, but must simultaneously withdraw from the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change) is that it stands in very stark contrast to almost every other nation on earth, including very strong US allies. Only Syria and Nicaragua had failed to sign up to the Paris Accords by the end of 2016, and even these nations have now fallen into line. As noted earlier, 178 of these nations have ratified the accord, and of those who have not, only the Russian government—which is said to contribute 7.5% of global carbon emissions—is notable emitter. The US therefore sits in a minority of one in relation to the accords, which we might reasonably view as being the politics of symbolism. The major challenge to the

EU—whose member states have been some of the strongest voices in the Paris process—is to mitigate the spoiler effect of the US withdrawal, but also the administration’s active support for new-generation coal-fired electricity plants, and its stopping of its \$2.5-billion contribution to the Green Climate Fund.

The EU has already found non-federal allies in the US. A list of notable American multinational enterprises (e.g. Coca-Cola, Microsoft) and the State of California (which is a significant climate change actor in its own right) have made quantified pledges to reduce their carbon emissions.⁹ So, while the absence of the federal government is clearly a dent to the aims and ambitions of the Paris Accords, the presence of significant sub-federal actors is a partial mitigation, and one with which European states amongst others will enthusiastically work.

CONCLUSION: THE FORECAST

For the EU, the debate around the foundational science of climate change (except for a few marginal figures) is settled. The policies adopted to mitigate the effects of climate change remain in a slight state of flux, but there has not been the sort of resistance to transformation that could have been expected, particularly to the prospects of changing habits and paying higher prices for goods. Opposition could have also reasonably been expected to be sourced from the relevant industries, needing to tool away from items and goods they had brought to maturity, and while there is disquiet and some opposition to changes, there has not been serious political unrest as a result. At the micro-level, Europeans have taken to curbside recycling, the high taxation of fuel, and the plans to eradicate fossil fuel-powered cars at various points over the next 30 years with good grace. European industry has also responded reasonably well, and it is currently transitioning away from things like single-use plastics, and fossil fuel technology as well, while—in some industries, like automotive—sitting in an awkward gap between successfully bringing electrification innovations to market, while waiting for nationwide infrastructures to catch up. There are three key areas of economic life

in which the response to climate change is not settled: 1) the impact of climate-inspired migration and the provision of aid and support, 2) the need to cut aircraft emissions that is in tension with increasing demand for air travel, 3) and the potential increases in food prices because of climate change, and climate change policies.

Climate change policy is ultimately a cost-benefit analysis between the costs of mitigating the increase in temperatures, to restricting it to under the two-degree Celsius shift that scientists agree is a tipping point to far more profound consequences, and not mitigating it, and instead dealing with whatever the cost implications might be for a rise of between two and six degrees Celsius across the globe. The clear majority of academics and policy officials working on this area strongly believe that mitigation has a smaller economic impact than the dealing with the consequences approach, because of the indirect costs and the costs of the unknown knowns of excessive global warming. The politics of international climate change have been multilateral, recognizing that the issue does not fit within domestic electoral cycles, and recognizing that there are costs to be borne across the globe. The EU, as it is currently configured, fits squarely within the multilateral format of climate change policy, and given the UK's alignment with this (and the disappointment expressed by the Prime Minister at the US' intention to withdraw) it is unlikely to change after Brexit.

It is highly likely that the EU would persist with its climate change and environment initiatives even without the operation of the Paris Accords. Consequently, the mooted withdrawal of the US from it is disappointing, particularly given the US' status as the second-largest contributor to carbon

emissions, but not fatal to the process. Indeed, the US' changed positioning towards the Paris Accords can be seen in the wider context of its unilateral foreign policy positions towards the UN Human Rights Council, Iranian nuclear proliferation, towards North Korea and to a certain extent towards China and Russia as well. And in Europe—used to relatively predictable and stable US foreign policy making—this is a transition that needs to be quickly understood and managed. European governments have been quick to point out that while President Trump has accused them of free-riding on US military spending to underwrite European security (a preamble to what many assume will be the dissolution of NATO), the withdrawal from the Paris Accords will make the US a free-rider on global efforts to secure a sustainable global climate. Withdrawing from key multilateral forums, where the US is an influential actor, such as the Human Rights Council and the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change reduces the US' global reach and influence, and sees it relying upon economic and military might to project its power. If this persists, the EU will feel emboldened to continue in its self-described role as normative power (projecting positive values) and will see the cohesion of the North Atlantic area slightly degraded. There seems little doubt, however, that the next century will continue to see global warming, and an enormous number of technological innovations to help to mitigate it, but to assure the transformation in technology and human behavior to secure these outcomes will require coordinated regulatory initiative.

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¹ For the wording of the Accords, please see: <https://unfccc.int/process-and-meetings/the-paris-agreement/the-paris-agreement>. Accessed 20 June 2018.

² The conference website can be found at: <https://unfccc.int/process/conferences/un-climate-change-conference-november-2017/about/un-climate-change-conference-november-2017>. Accessed 20 June 2018.

³ Environmental Justice Foundation, *Beyond Borders*, November 2017: <https://ejfoundation.org/reports/climate-2017>

⁴ Alice Bows, Kevin Anderson and Paul Upham, *Aviation and Climate Change: Lessons for European Policy*, Routledge, 2009.

⁵ <https://www.hybridairvehicles.com/> Accessed 26 June 2018.

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⁸ David Lobell, Wolfram Schlenker, Justin Costa-Roberts, Climate Trends and Global Crop Production Since 1980, *Science*, Vol. 333, Issue 6042, 29 Jul 2011, pp. 616-620

⁹ *Reuters*, California and Washington State Join Carbon Pledge in Defiance of Trump, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-climatechange-summit-americas/california-and-washington-state-join-carbon-pledge-in-defiance-of-trump-idUSKBNiE625E>. Accessed 28 June 2018.