



The "Ecological Imperative" as Major Foreign Policy Guideline

Dr Heinrich Kreft

March 2021

Abstract

In order to avert the global climate catastrophe, the ambitious cooperation of ALL countries is needed. The Paris Agreement on climate protection provides a broadly legitimised set of instruments that must be further expanded.

With a view to COP26 in Glasgow next November, great hopes rest on the joint leadership role of the US after its „return to Paris“ and the EU, which wants to be the first continent to become climate neutral by 2050 with its "Green Deal".

ISPSW

Das Institut für Strategie- Politik- Sicherheits- und Wirtschaftsberatung (ISPSW) ist ein privates, überparteiliches Forschungs- und Beratungsinstitut.

In einem immer komplexer werdenden internationalen Umfeld globalisierter Wirtschaftsprozesse, weltumspannender politischer, ökologischer und soziokultureller Veränderungen, die zugleich große Chancen, aber auch Risiken beinhalten, sind unternehmerische wie politische Entscheidungsträger heute mehr denn je auf den Rat hochqualifizierter Experten angewiesen.

Das ISPSW bietet verschiedene Dienstleistungen – einschließlich strategischer Analysen, Sicherheitsberatung, Executive Coaching und interkulturelles Führungstraining – an.

Die Publikationen des ISPSW umfassen ein breites Spektrum politischer, wirtschaftlicher, sicherheits- und verteidigungspolitischer Analysen sowie Themen im Bereich internationaler Beziehungen.



Analysis

Philosopher Hans Jonas extended Jean-Paul Sartre's claim of the global responsibility of the individual to the entire biosphere and demanded that we also consider the consequences of our actions for future generations: "Act in such a way that the effects of your actions are compatible with the permanence of human life on earth". With his "ecological imperative," he expanded Immanuel Kant's categorical imperative.

Despite huge forest fires in Brazil, California, Australia and Siberia, despite melting of the glaciers in the high mountains and the polar caps, floods and heat waves on all continents, the realization grows only slowly with still too many that this is a fatal fallacy.

Despite early warnings of the "limits to growth" such as those of the Club of Rome and others, there has been little shaking of the belief in technological progress and unlimited economic growth, particularly in the two largest economies – the U.S. and China – and in most emerging economies.

Also, the willingness to take responsibility for the consequences of one's own actions, or inactions, varies widely around the world. Although it has been undisputed in science for some time that mankind must radically change its interaction with nature to sustainability in order not to destroy our own livelihoods in the long term.

However, we are still very far from an international consensus that every country, every organization, indeed every human being is responsible for this.

In 1983, the United Nations established a World Commission on Environment and Development, which, under the leadership of Norwegian Prime Minister Brundtland, presented its report "Our Common Future" in 1987. In it, it developed the concept of sustainability, a "long-term environmentally sound use of resources." The concept of sustainability, which has since become internationally accepted as a guiding principle, means: "development that meets the needs of the present generation without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs and choose their standard of living."

From local to international environmental protection

Sustainability in climate, energy and environmental policy must start at home for each and every one, but nonetheless sustainability must not be thought of only locally, regionally or nationally. Ultimately, the international dimension is crucial – especially in climate policy.

If only individuals – if only Germany – or if only Europe behaves "correctly" in terms of sustainability and, for example, reduces its greenhouse gases, this will not stop global warming with its catastrophic consequences. Not without reason, people in the countries of the global South point to the historic burdens on the world's climate left behind by the development of European (and other industrialized) nations. In my view, this implies that we also have a responsibility to shoulder greater burdens for international environmental policy, especially in combating climate change.

The environmental catastrophe that some scientists believe we are heading toward can only be prevented if we reach a global consensus that encourages each individual to act responsibly to preserve the environment.



Climate change moves to the center of international environmental policy

Soon after the end of the Cold War, it was recognized that climate change posed a major challenge to the future of humankind. Climate policy encompasses many areas of politics and life. From the general environmental protection issue that was the focus of national and international attention in the 1980s and 1990s, along with biodiversity protection, combating ozone holes and forest dieback, and the dangers posed by the chemical and nuclear industries, climate policy has emerged as THE leading global issue.

Climate protection requires collective action and is a prime example of the provision of a global public good. No one can be excluded from the benefits of climate protection; nor is there any rivalry in terms of use between different actors. This automatically creates a free-rider problem. The distribution of the high costs of climate protection is a political and economic challenge, since its benefits cannot be allocated either directly or in a timely manner. Every state and every non-state actor that invests in climate protection must assume that the benefits will accrue to everyone or that they will no longer enjoy them themselves due to the inertia of the climate system. This makes international climate policy an enormous diplomatic feat and the achievement of global agreements that offer all partners more advantages than disadvantages a difficult task.

From Kyoto to Paris

In 1988, the "Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change" (IPCC) was founded, which summarized the scientific findings on climate change known to date in a first status report.

At the so-called "Earth Summit" in Rio de Janeiro in 1992, the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) was adopted, creating the basis for international climate policy under international law. The UNFCCC entered into force in 1994 and includes 196 states and the EU.

The objective of the UNFCCC is to stabilize greenhouse gas concentrations in the atmosphere at a level that would prevent dangerous interference with the climate system. It also lays down the basic principles for necessary climate policy measures as well as the distribution of burdens according to the principle of "common but differentiated responsibilities and respective capabilities." The financial burdens for global climate policy were imposed on the "Western" industrialized countries, which are members of the OECD, while the developing countries were not required to make any efforts of their own. This was soon to ignite a fierce dispute.

The continuation of negotiations eventually led to the Kyoto Protocol, which was signed in 1997 and had to be ratified as a binding treaty under international law, leading to controversial domestic debates in many countries. It did not enter into force until 2005, after it had been ratified by the Russian parliament.

From the outset, however, the Kyoto Protocol struggled with its birth defects, particularly the fact that the agreement did not commit the major emerging economies – above all China and India – to climate protection. The non-inclusion of China prompted the USA to withdraw from the Kyoto Protocol as early as 2001. Moreover, the scientific community considered the Protocol's ambitions to be too low and criticized the lack of sanctions. It therefore did not provide a sustainable basis for a balance of interests and thus for global cooperation.

Therefore, as soon as the Protocol entered into force, the Parties to the UNFCCC sought a comprehensive new basis that would not only require all states to contribute to climate policy, but would also broaden the focus of climate policy in line with the progress of scientific knowledge. A first step in this direction was taken in 2007 with the Bali Action Plan, which adopted an expanded negotiating mandate. The UNFCCC's basic principles for



a new climate order remained the same: The OECD countries were to continue to bear the main financial burden in order to achieve the common climate policy goals, but the developing countries, first and foremost the large emerging economies China and India, were also to be obligated to contribute – but they were by no means willing to do so at this point. On the contrary, they organized the resistance of the developing countries united in the Group of 77 against these efforts. It was therefore not surprising that the first attempt to reach a new agreement in Copenhagen in 2009 failed, primarily due to resistance from China, India and other emerging economies.

It was not until the subsequent annual Conferences of the Parties (COPs) that positions converged and key points were drawn up for a new regime to be adopted. This paved the way to Paris.

The Paris Climate Protection Agreement

The Paris Climate Agreement is the new reference agreement for international climate, energy and environmental policy. The agreement is characterized by universality because it commits all signatory states to contribute to climate policy.

Thus, after many years of negotiations, it has been possible to place the climate regime on a new footing based on the experience gained with the Kyoto Protocol. The most significant innovation is the abandonment of top-down targets that have to be met. Instead, all states are called upon to set their own national targets and to undergo an international review process ("pledge and review"). The goals are to be achieved through international negotiation and national implementation processes. The signatory states undertake under international law to meet their declared targets and commitments (the NDCs), to make them successively more ambitious and to provide the information needed for review.

The Paris Agreement achieved the highest possible level of legitimacy when it was adopted in 2015, with all 197 UNFCCC Parties agreeing to it.

The Paris Agreement not only agreed to limit climate change to "below two degrees Celsius" from pre-industrialization levels, but also set a broader goal of curbing warming to an average of 1.5 degrees Celsius. This goal seems a long way off, as greenhouse gas emissions accumulated in the atmosphere to date have already led to 1.0 degrees Celsius of warming in 2015, and an evaluation of nationally determined contributions (NDCs) to date shows that the necessary trend reversal has not materialized.

The future of international climate policy

In the coming years, the 2015 Paris Agreement will remain the linchpin of international climate policy and its dimensions of climate change mitigation, adaptation, and international burden sharing. In this context, the cooperation of those who have mainly caused climate change and those who are exacerbating it is particularly important. That is, above all, that the goals cannot be achieved without the constructive behavior of the United States and China. Because of the uncertainties and risks inherent in climate policy and the unequal distribution of costs and benefits, many smaller countries look to their larger "peers" – Europe, the U.S. and China – to join them.



The urgency of climate protection is growing

Meanwhile, the changes and anomalies in the climate system predicted by scientists are occurring. Extreme events such as heat waves, forest fires and floods are accumulating on all continents, highlighting the consequences of global and ocean warming. Climate change is also leading to increasing pressure on essential resources such as drinking water and arable land, especially in Africa. Many fragile states in particular see their precarious stability and security additionally threatened as a result. New insights into the risks of climate change are therefore already leading to a more in-depth discussion of prevention and response options.

Although governments in Moscow, Canberra, Brasilia and some other capitals have been little or not at all impressed by climate-related natural disasters in their countries, civil society movements have recently emerged or strengthened there, demanding more environmental protection from their governments. The "Fridays For Future" movement initiated and supported by European students has also reached these countries. Cities and business enterprises are also among the most active non-governmental supporters of the Paris Agreement. For example, at the 2017 Bonn Climate Conference, in addition to the U.S. government delegation, a civil society alliance called "America's Pledge" was represented, consisting of 20 U.S. states led by California, 450 municipalities, and more than 1,700 companies, entrepreneurs, investors, universities and churches from the United States.

The return of the U.S. to Paris Agreement is crucial

In June 2017, U.S. President Donald Trump, known as a denier of man-made climate change, announced the U.S. withdrawal from the Paris climate agreement. Despite great efforts, the European Union and individual member states such as Germany were unable to stop him from taking this step, which led to the feared paralysis of international climate policy. The lack of U.S. leadership made itself immediately felt as other key countries from the G-20 circle distanced themselves from the agreement. In 2014, it had been the U.S., with personal input from President Obama that ultimately persuaded China and India to join the Paris Agreement. Now it became apparent that the EU, despite all its ambitions, does not have the leadership power to replace the USA. For the processes of the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change, the departure of the U.S. meant that important implementation points could not be further negotiated and the internationally agreed processes to increase climate protection and financing targets could not be met.

As a result, much depended for international climate policy on the outcome of the presidential election on November 3, 2020. On inauguration day President Joe Biden returned the US back into the Paris climate protection agreement, which already is producing the hoped for positive effects on international climate policy.

Climate foreign policy – German ambitions

Germany is a driving force in European and international climate policy. The German government is convinced that implementation of the Paris Agreement, which is the linchpin of international climate policy, can only be successful if development, economic, financial, energy and transport policies are also aligned with climate protection goals. Germany's national climate policy is also correspondingly broadly based, involving all levels – federal, state and local – and all actors – state, private sector and civil society.

Three goals are at the heart of the German government's foreign climate policy under the leadership of the Federal Foreign Office and with the cooperation of other specialized ministries:



- Supporting international climate policy with the Paris Climate Agreement.
- Addressing the foreign and security policy consequences of climate change under the heading of climate and security.
- The dialogue with other countries for more climate protection.

In the context of the climate protection dialogue with foreign countries, two messages are central from the perspective of the Federal Foreign Office: climate change is a security risk and climate protection must also be understood as an opportunity.

On the one hand, it is said security risk and, in combination with other factors, can endanger the stability of states and societies and trigger or intensify geopolitical tensions. Climate diplomacy aims to mitigate tensions by balancing interests, identifying conflicts at an early stage, and working toward their resolution. Growing awareness of the security significance of climate change can also – it is hoped – help states to become more involved in UN climate negotiations than in the past, to pursue an ambitious climate protection policy domestically and to implement the national pledges they made in the Paris Climate Agreement.

The German government has used Germany's two-year membership of the United Nations Security Council (2019/20) to put the security implications of climate change on the agenda of the UN Security Council and to raise awareness of the security implications of climate change in the United Nations. Man-made climate change is not only an environmental phenomenon, but also one of the key security threats of the 21st century. Rising sea levels, more frequent weather extremes and the growing risk of environmental disasters are increasingly depriving people in affected regions of their livelihoods. As a result, climate change is increasingly acting as a "risk multiplier" that threatens the stability of states and societies worldwide. In island states or in the Sahel region, the effects of man-made climate change on stability and security are already clearly noticeable.

In addition, climate protection offers the opportunity to combine sustainable development and economic growth. Investments in climate and environmentally friendly technologies offer job and growth prospects. At the same time, they reduce environmental pollution and its costs. Climate diplomacy therefore aims to promote sustainable development through international technology and knowledge transfer.

The European Union in International Climate Policy – "Green Deal" and "Green Recovery"

The EU is a driving force in global climate policy. The emission reductions of 22 percent already achieved in 2017 and the agreed target of 40 percent for 2030 (both compared to 1990) secure the Europeans a top position in the group of industrialized countries. However, significant conflicts repeatedly arise over the issue of differentiation within the EU, especially between the ambitious member states of northwestern Europe and the less ambitious governments of central-eastern Europe. This is also evident in the negotiations on a greenhouse gas neutrality target by 2050 as well as on a significant tightening of the target for emission reductions by 2030 from 40 to 55 percent (EU Commission proposal). Therefore, an important goal of the German EU Council Presidency (2nd HY 2020) in the internal EU relationship was to advance the agreement between the progressive and the skeptical member states, so that the EU can present a unified front as an actor in international climate policy and vis-à-vis third parties.

In the coming years, the focus of EU climate policy will primarily be on a realignment along the lines of the "Green Deal" conceived by the EU Commission. The "European Green Deal" is a concept presented by the



EU Commission under Ursula von der Leyen on December 11, 2019, with the goal of reducing net greenhouse gas emissions in the European Union to zero by 2050 and thus becoming the first continent to become climate neutral. The "Green Deal" is to become a central component of the European Union's climate policy. This will involve various policy areas such as financial, agricultural, trade and development policy. On the other hand, the EU wants to engage with its international partners to breathe life into the most important resolutions of the Paris Agreement. This applies not only to the five-year review cycle (global stock take) of the nationally determined contributions (NDCs) of the 196 signatory states, but also to technology options for achieving the 2-degree or 1.5-degree target. These include, in particular, technological processes to remove CO₂ from the atmosphere and recycle it. The vision of a geopolitical commission under Ursula von der Leyen can therefore be primarily tied to EU climate policy.

In the coming years, it will also be important to relaunch climate policy cooperation with the United Kingdom after Brexit; after all, the UK has always been one of the key drivers of international progress.

The EU's stimulus measures to combat the Corona-induced recession are to be linked to this programmatic approach ("green recovery"), in particular by financing structural reforms toward a sustainable economy. The effectiveness of long-term, climate-friendly stimulus to overcome the economic crisis in 2021 is scientifically supported by leading economists, including Nicholas Stern and Joseph E. Stiglitz. Frans Timmermans, EU Commissioner for Climate Action, also justified the need for a climate-friendly recovery program on the grounds of intergenerational justice: the loans to be taken out now would ultimately have to be repaid by future generations, who for that reason alone have an interest in ensuring that ecologically sound projects are also financed with them. The draft of the EU Commission's "Next Generation EU" economic stimulus package therefore contains proposals to strengthen the Green Deal.

Conclusions and outlook

The tensions and contradictions that still exist worldwide between economic policy interests and environmental policy requirements can only be resolved slowly even in Germany and the EU; outside Europe, the political will to do so is already lacking in many cases. The balancing act between traditional growth targets and innovative alternative economic models that mitigate the external damage of economic activity is already difficult today. So far, no country has succeeded in applying the guiding principle of a new economic model geared to climate and environmental protection in its national economic policy. Much remains to be done, both nationally and internationally.

International climate policy is also likely to be subject to enormous tensions in the coming years, which have built up in the relationship between the major powers, the USA and China. Since criticism of China extends far into the Democratic Party spectrum, U.S. policy toward China has not changed fundamentally under President Biden.

If disruption were to come from the development and spread of climate-friendly technologies, the geopolitical tide would also turn. These include the use of hydrogen and also the use of technologies that slow the accumulation of greenhouse gases by removing CO₂ from the atmosphere. The latter, on which research is being conducted primarily in the USA and China, could initiate a climate policy turnaround.

At the latest at COP 26 in Glasgow in November 2021, further steps are also to be taken to implement the Paris Agreement. Among other things, an agreement is to be reached on emissions trading, which was not achieved



at COP 25 in Madrid. In addition, NDCs are to be increased, long-term strategies submitted and an initial global stocktaking undertaken.

The global climate protection agenda remains, indeed must remain, ambitious.

The Corona pandemic has reminded us that, despite all the technological advances, man has not and will not conquer nature. The only sustainable development, therefore, can only be a green one; one that is in harmony with nature.

Remarks: Opinions expressed in this contribution are those of the author.

About the Author of this Issue

Dr Heinrich Kreft holds the Chair of Diplomacy and is Director of the Center for Diplomacy at Andr ssy University Budapest. He is a career diplomat and was previously German Ambassador to the Grand Duchy of Luxembourg from 2016-2020.



Heinrich Kreft