

Active foreign climate policy

Six recommendations for the Foreign Minister

Sascha Müller-Kraenner and Martin Kremer

Climate policy is about more than negotiating a fair agreement. It offers a framework for modernising economies, and it will significantly define Germany's relations with emerging nations. How can the new Foreign Minister targetedly develop initiatives in this field? Six recommendations.

International relations, their geopolitical context and governance structures will be redefined by the key global issue of climate. Whatever the scope of agreement at the Copenhagen climate summit, it will provide the starting-signal for a new responsibility for the future and a new foreign climate policy – a new form of global cooperation which we could describe as a European regulatory model, and one which the EU will continue especially to promote.

This new foreign climate policy is not just about supporting the further development and implementation of an effective and fair agreement on protecting the climate and preventing a damaging setback in establishing a new global model of cooperation. It is also and above all about helping to shape a new global regulatory framework for modernising national economies and freeing them from dependence on fossil fuels – and to develop the value system this will require in time as new powers emerge on the world stage. For the new German Foreign Minister, this is an opportunity to play a decisive part in shaping a fundamental debate.

Hardly any topic has figured so largely in international cooperation over the last few years as climate protection. Whether in the European Union – which has raised its profile as a pioneer in international climate protection and is gaining new scope for action through the implementation of the Lisbon Treaty – or the UN and G8 frameworks, climate has long been a subject of interest not just for experts in society and business. It has been taken up by heads of state and government, has embraced foreign energy and climate security policy and is today – as shown not just by the latest ASEM summit in Singapore – a defining issue in US-Asian relations.

For quite some time climate policy has been a key factor in mutual relations between countries. Crucial relationships – e.g. with the US, China and India – are influenced by cooperation or conflict in this area. Climate is today a key factor in a whole range of foreign policy areas of global responsibility, including research, trade, development and health policy. The dangers of climate change and crisis prevention instruments designed to meet these are also increasingly becoming a focus of global security policy.

Over the next few years, climate policy will significantly define Germany's and Europe's relations with the emerging industrial nations. Without the active involvement of emerging nations such as China, India and Brazil, the global climate challenge cannot be overcome. Global climate protection rules and the distribution of burdens will also have a crucial impact on future growth prospects, access to natural resources, technology and intellectual property and also on new flows of finance from North to South.

The forum in which the long-term decisions will be made on climate protection and a new “green” world economy is the G20; preparatory forums could include the Major Economies Forum (MEF) recently launched by the US or a new Gx. Within the G20, only major powers now have veto rights: the US and China. Germany is a major economic player and middling European power which can make a special contribution through its innovative capabilities and the development of new products, processes and markets. In climate policy Germany’s voice is listened to by virtue of its good reputation in environmental policy and green technologies. Foreign climate policy can therefore become the defining feature of an active German globalisation policy within newly-forming constellations of global governance.

Until now international climate policy in Germany has been the domain of the environment ministers; thanks to their high profile, Berlin has secured itself a leading role in the UN climate negotiations. But now, as well as the Chancellor, the Foreign Minister has a key role to play. Even more than before, he must provide strategic support for Germany’s leading role in formulating the new international rules, ensure that specific issues of the climate negotiations feature in the broader relations with the key actors and embed these in a broader definition of German foreign policy interests. The new Desertec initiative shows the degree of support that can be needed to make a project possible, both politically and from business. How can the new foreign minister targetedly develop initiatives and link these with models from partner countries?

1. Cooperation within the foreign minister format for European and global climate policy

In the last few years an informal group has formed of EU foreign ministers who support an ambitious global climate protection agreement. This group includes not only the UK, France, Spain but also the influential smaller member states Denmark, Sweden and Finland, with their traditional good relations with the Baltic states. With its weight in international climate diplomacy as well as its responsibility towards the central European countries, Germany clearly has a part to play in this and can thus contribute its specific experiences in modernising its energy economy, transatlantic climate cooperation and also technology promotion to a common European approach. On questions such as burden-sharing for further emissions reductions within the EU, how the burdens of climate protection financing should be distributed and how EU climate negotiating positions can be consistently communicated to partners, this foreign minister format could play a valuable clearing-house role.

2. Developing the Transatlantic Climate Bridge

The “Transatlantic Climate Bridge” initiated by former foreign minister Frank-Walter Steinmeier began as a confidence-building measure which, at a time of difficult communication between Berlin and the Bush administration, facilitated dialogue with US states, universities and civil-society initiatives. Today, now that the Obama administration is showing active interest in greater transatlantic climate cooperation, this dialogue should be built upon and taken from the purely project-related to a strategic level. Berlin and Washington should, for example, consult more intensively on how they can work together to integrate China, India and Russia into international climate cooperation.

At the same time it is becoming clear how underdeveloped dialogue is with other partners of strategic importance for international climate protection. The range of instruments for political and technological cooperation developed within the framework of the Transatlantic Climate Bridge should be extended to the other key players China, India, Russia and Brazil. In all four BRIC countries, a strategic interest in sustainable growth is becoming apparent.

Here Germany has much to offer with its experience and much to gain with its export interests. In relation to Russia, the newly-founded Russian-German Energy Agency (RuDEA) provides an ideal vehicle for the transfer of energy efficiency know-how and innovative technologies and for cooperation with Russian companies and state players.

3. Systematic dialogue with key second-tier nations

Alongside targeted bilateral cooperation on the implementation of climate protection, dialogue with key second-tier nations remains crucial in finalising the new agreement. The OPEC countries are very tough negotiators and resistant to ambitious regulation. They often use legalistic arguments with catchphrases like “spill-over effects” and “response measure”. In this situation, only a high-level political dialogue can make clear how the land lies. Among the South American countries, Argentina is a similarly awkward negotiator and in this role often acts as a kind of spokesman for all those countries concerned about “climate protectionism”. Here too, a high-level dialogue could bring progress, especially where justified trade interests are involved.

While Argentina regularly complains about “climate protectionism”, South Africa just as frequently raises “international property rights”. Here it might be helpful to use positions already developed in the WTO for climate negotiations too.

4. Climate policy as an integral part of crisis prevention

A climate war may not be imminent, but climate change can easily lead to greater migration flows and an escalation in conflicts in especially affected areas such as coastal states or regions already suffering from water shortage. Although perhaps less drastic in individual detail, the consequences of a 4°C world could add up dangerously, as the UK’s Hadley Climate Centre has recently shown. In this light, assistance in adapting to the already unavoidable effects of climate change is a form of crisis prevention. In central Asia, this would promote the implementation of the EU’s Central Asia Strategy. Such crisis prevention would include support for the small island states particularly affected.

Adaptation to climate change is also becoming a central challenge for development cooperation. The German Government’s plans for close coordination of foreign and development policy and the reform and streamlining of existing agencies for financial and technical cooperation offer new scope for action. The same applies to the International Renewable Energies Agency (IRENA), founded in January 2009, which has since been joined by the US and India.

5. Export promotion of “green” technologies

The promotion of “green” technologies is a highly promising strategy for German foreign economic policy. The Green Recovery Task Force set up jointly by the Foreign Office’s Policy Planning Staff and Atlantische Initiative has made a number of highly promising recommendations on how economic revival can be linked with the promotion of environmental protection and political and economic cooperation between industrial and emerging countries can be fostered within the G20 framework (IP, 11-12/2009, pp. 92-95). A key question, in view of the economic and financial crisis, will be how a reformed market for emissions trading can be complemented by massive investment in green technologies.

By virtue of its scientific and industrial base, Germany is superbly positioned to benefit from the growth of green technologies on the world market. In the light of competition from other European exporting nations and the US, greater support at the political level is necessary.

6. Creation of a Special Ambassador for Climate Diplomacy

Germany does not need an independent climate and energy ministry such as exists in Denmark and the UK. The Federal Environment Ministry already fulfils the key domestic functions of a climate ministry; at the international level, responsibility for the UN climate negotiations lies in its capable hands.

Nevertheless, the creation of a high-profile, politically appointed Foreign Office Climate Ambassador would be of great value. He or she would be responsible for establishing climate protection as a cross-cutting task within the Foreign Office's broad mission of shaping globalisation and for preparing strategic negotiating packages and making these visible externally. Further, the Climate Ambassador and his or her staff would promote a common strategic approach among Germany's embassies and development agencies abroad and a coherent German global climate protection effort.

Over 50 heads of state and government from all over the world are expected to attend the Copenhagen Climate Conference. Thus climate policy has finally established itself as a key action area within global structural policy. After Copenhagen, climate policy will also be the driver for new directions in international financial, trade and development policy. Green financing capability will become a major factor in international competitiveness. The system of global institutions and governance, currently in need of reform, will also develop further. Copenhagen is just the starting-signal for a new foreign climate policy.