

# The World is *Our* Oyster: Strengthening Transatlantic Action on Climate Change



by Maria Elena Sandalli

April 2020 marked the 50th anniversary of Earth Day. With all eyes on the COVID-19 pandemic, the relationship between the global health crisis and the climate emergency took on new meaning.

The UN Secretary-General urged the international community to “rebuild the world for the better”,<sup>1</sup> while Pope Francis, who dedicated an entire encyclical to Mother Earth, called on believers to protect the environment and embrace solidarity.

Scientific evidence pointing to the decisive role humans play in the warming of the global climate is

unequivocal,<sup>2</sup> and so are the dangers of climate change. As a direct threat to human security, climate change transcends geographical boundaries.

It also acts as a threat multiplier, exacerbating food shortages, migration and conflict. The exploitation of natural resources and the related environmental effects of mass production and globalisation can lead to earth-shattering changes, including creating an environment that can lead to global pandemics such as the one we are witnessing today.

The current slump in economic and industrial activity due to COVID related lockdowns has cleared our air and

<sup>1</sup> UN Secretary-General, *Secretary-General's Remarks to Petersberg Climate Dialogue [as delivered]*, 28 April 2020, <https://www.un.org/sg/en/node/251767>; Frank Jordans, “UN Chief: Use Pandemic to ‘Rebuild Our World for the Better’”, in *AP News*, 28 April 2020, <https://apnews.com/9e1d4e3dd7f57318cdc69b7b45227023>.

<sup>2</sup> Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), “Summary for Policymakers”, in *Climate Change 2013: The Physical Science Basis, Contribution of Working Group I to the Fifth Assessment Report...*, 2013, p.15, <https://www.ipcc.ch/report/ar5/wg1/summary-for-policymakers>.

*Maria Elena Sandalli graduated with a joint Master degree in Transatlantic Affairs from the College of Europe and The Fletcher School of Law & Diplomacy at Tufts University. She works at FleishmanHillard in Brussels where she covers EU tech and digital policy. This is the winning article (1st place) submitted to the 2020 edition of the IAI Prize contest and presented at a public debate organised by the Istituto Affari Internazionali (IAI) in Rome on 28 September 2020.*

oceans, but such relief is short-lived. Our economic recovery must address climate change, placing environmental sustainability at the forefront of the post-crisis recovery.

As the largest and wealthiest market in the world, the transatlantic economy accounts for one third of global GDP in terms of purchasing power, providing employment “to 16 million workers [...] on both sides of the Atlantic”.<sup>3</sup>

At the same time, the EU and the US are responsible for one fourth of global greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions. With market power and environmental impact feeding off one another, the world needs a concerted transatlantic response to climate change.

That being said, the United States and the European Union have clearly parted ways on climate change and environmental policy. How can the transatlantic relationship be expected to drive a “green” economic recovery, and what proposals can be developed for renewed EU–US cooperation on this vital objective?

Environmental relations across the Atlantic have gone through phases of cooperation and conflict due to a combination of constraining factors. First, different risk perceptions have resulted in varying degrees of state interventionism: on health and the environment, for instance,

<sup>3</sup> Daniel S. Hamilton and Joseph P. Quinlan, *The Transatlantic Economy 2020. Annual Survey of Jobs, Trade and Investment between the United States and Europe*, Washington, Foreign Policy Institute-Johns Hopkins University SAIS, 2020, p. v, <https://transatlanticrelations.org/?p=4000>.

US regulation is significantly more permissive than in the EU.<sup>4</sup>

Voluntary agreements between industry and government have largely fuelled the creation of US regulation,<sup>5</sup> and advocacy groups, such as the coal lobby, have significantly influenced environmental policy. In Europe, on the other hand, regulations have been shaped by environmentalist groups within EU institutions and implemented through mandatory and harmonised legislation across the Union.

Political will has also played a critical role in shaping environmental policy. Former president Obama firmly believed in combating climate change. The 2015 Paris Agreement on Climate Change, for instance, was the result of successful negotiations between the EU and the US – with the former famously “leading by example”<sup>6</sup> – and was hailed as a milestone in global environmental

<sup>4</sup> See Mitchell P. Smith, *Environmental and Health Regulation in the United States and the European Union. Protecting Public and Planet*, New York, Palgrave Macmillan, 2012; Paul F. Steinberg and Stacy D. VanDeveer, “Comparative Environmental Politics in a Global World”, in Paul F. Steinberg and Stacy D. VanDeveer (eds), *Comparative Environmental Politics. Theory, Practice, and Prospects*, Cambridge/London, The MIT Press, 2012, p. 4.

<sup>5</sup> Lily Hsue, “Calling All Volunteers: Industry Self-Regulation on the Environment”, in David M. Konisky (ed.), *Handbook of U.S. Environmental Policy*, Cheltenham/Northampton, Edward Elgar, 2020, p. 243-256.

<sup>6</sup> Arnault Barichella, “How Europe Can and Should Become the Guardian of the Paris Agreement on Climate Change”, in *Fondation Robert Schuman European Issues*, No. 450 (7 November 2017), <https://www.robert-schuman.eu/en/european-issues/0450-how-europe-can-and-should-become-the-guardian-of-the-paris-agreement-on-climate-change>.

policy. However, during the Trump administration, climate relations have steadily declined.

The EU has taken decisive steps to transition towards a circular economy and has progressively reinforced its commitments to the Paris goals. Most recently, the European Commission has put forward the European Green Deal, which aims to make the continent carbon neutral by 2050. Trump, on the other hand, has announced the US withdrawal from the Paris Agreement and is dismantling existing environmental legislation.

His administration has replaced the Clean Power Plan with the Affordable Clean Energy Rule,<sup>7</sup> which is expected to boost coal consumption,<sup>8</sup> and has made changes to the way the Environmental Protection Agency calculates the health risks of air pollution.<sup>9</sup>

Then came COVID-19. Transatlantic reactions have diverged on the response to the pandemic, but the health crisis will also impact climate change policy on both sides of the Atlantic.

In Europe, COVID-19 has placed EU cohesion under scrutiny. How likely is the EU to act as a bloc on decarbonising

the economy when it is collectively headed into a recession?

That being said, the need to weave environmental standards into the post-coronavirus recovery programme seems to be generally understood on this side of the Atlantic. In July, European leaders finally agreed on an unprecedented recovery plan intended to mitigate the damage caused by the pandemic and reinforce the “growth strategy” enshrined in the European Green Deal.<sup>10</sup>

In the US, meanwhile, tensions are mounting as the institutional response to the pandemic has been fraught with divisions. At such a difficult time for the United States – and with a climate denier in the White House – it is highly implausible that environmental protection will supersede the country’s pro-fossil fuel agenda.

Quite the opposite, given that the Trump administration has recently rolled back restrictions on the release of mercury and other toxic metals.<sup>11</sup> A Democratic electoral victory in November could change Washington’s negative stance on environmental policy, helping to repair transatlantic cooperation on these issues.

Both climate change and the COVID-19 pandemic are global issues. To resolve

<sup>7</sup> US Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) website: *Affordable Clean Energy Rule*, <https://www.epa.gov/node/224259>.

<sup>8</sup> Valerie Volcovici, “Trump Administration Replaces Obama-era Power Plant Rule, in Boost to Coal”, in *Reuters*, 19 June 2019, <https://reuters/2x7ay7m>.

<sup>9</sup> Jan Wesner Childs, “EPA Seeks Dramatic Change in Calculating Health Risks from Air Pollution”, in *The Weather Channel*, 21 May 2019, <https://weather.com/news/news/2019-05-21-air-pollution-new-model-risk>.

<sup>10</sup> Bertrand Piccard and Frans Timmermans, “Which World Do We Want After COVID-19?”, in *EURACTIV*, 16 April 2020, <https://www.euractiv.com/?p=1455092>.

<sup>11</sup> Lisa Friedman and Coral Davenport, “E.P.A. Weakens Controls on Mercury”, in *The New York Times*, 16 April 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/04/16/climate/epa-mercury-coal.html>.

them, cooperation between the US and the EU is paramount. To quote Stavros Lambrinidis, the EU Ambassador to the US, by failing to tackle climate change, the world is heading for a crisis “that will make the coronavirus look like a joke”.<sup>12</sup> This should serve as a wakeup call for urgent transatlantic action.

In the absence of federal support, non-state and sub-state actors have filled the regulatory vacuum in the United States. Most policy activity in the US since the early 2000s has occurred within US states, as cities and private enterprises step in to formulate their own environmental targets.<sup>13</sup>

Ever since Donald Trump announced the US withdrawal from the Paris Agreement, a growing coalition of states, cities, businesses and other organisations have repeatedly confirmed their commitment to the Paris process.<sup>14</sup>

In light of this, transatlantic city-to-city and state-to-state cooperation on climate change should be intensified, for example through the Global Covenant of Mayors for Climate and Energy, and possibly through an exclusively transatlantic forum. This

could ensure continuity, regardless of the political preferences at the federal level in the US and within single EU member states.

No talk of transatlantic climate governance is complete without mentioning China. Taken together, the EU, China and the US make up more than half of the world’s carbon output. With the US increasingly isolated, China has established itself as an important European partner in addressing climate change.

Chinese authorities have well understood the economic potential stemming from clean energy investments. The EU and progressive forces in the US – mayors, governors and epistemic communities – should explore opportunities for EU–US–China cooperation in these domains.

EU–China cooperation, with the participation of US non-state and sub-state actors, could also be used to turn up the heat on the federal government, lobbying authorities to enact climate-friendly legislation and deliver on the Paris goals independently from Trump’s withdrawal. Such action could moreover help prepare the ground, in anticipation of a new administration in Washington, either in November or four years from then.

COVID-19 has demonstrated that security and prosperity at home are contingent on events elsewhere. Similarly, climate change should be framed by transatlantic leaders as a security issue, one that increases the likelihood of government instability and military escalation, with rippling

<sup>12</sup> Stavros Lambrinidis, “Transatlantic Relations in the Midst of COVID-19 & the 2020 U.S. Elections” (video), in *Delphi Economic Forum*, 30 April 2020, <https://youtu.be/4Yn0qTiZvV4>.

<sup>13</sup> Paul F. Steinberg and Stacy D. VanDeveer, “Comparative Environmental Politics in a Global World”, cit., p. 14. See also Henrik Selin and Stacy D. VanDeveer, “Federalism, Multilevel Governance, and Climate Change Politics across the Atlantic”, in *ibid.*, p. 341-368.

<sup>14</sup> Karen Donfried and Sydney Simon, “Karen Donfried Puts the Year in Transatlantic Challenges into Perspective”, in *GMF Blog*, 20 December 2018, <https://www.gmfus.org/node/13215>.

effects across the globe.<sup>15</sup> NATO, for instance, could place climate change at the centre of its agenda, ramping up preparedness to tackle non-traditional security threats in today's volatile global reality.<sup>16</sup>

The pandemic has given new urgency to discussions about the environment, but its immediate consequences run the risk of distracting us from the climate emergency.

The EU has gone to great lengths to champion climate action, but alone it cannot reverse the catastrophic effects of climate change. Far from replacing economic growth, transitioning to a green economy enhances it.

Owing to the size and interconnectedness of the transatlantic economy, green growth in the EU will have a tremendous impact on the US and vice versa. The economic response to COVID-19 thus demands stronger transatlantic cooperation.

Transatlantic conversations on the climate have shifted to the local level under Trump, but this dialogue is producing encouraging results. China is a common challenge for both Europe and the US, and should be factored into the equation as well. Still, avenues for cooperation with Chinese partners

should be pursued, particularly on climate finance and clean technologies.

While the present political scenario is far from promising, there is no shortage of means to foster cooperation across the Atlantic, independently from Trump. A sustainable, competitive recovery is in the interest of both partners and the longevity and prosperity of the transatlantic partnership will very much depend on how well we address this defining challenge of our time, together.

25 September 2020

<sup>15</sup> See Jeroen Warner and Ingrid Boas, "Securitization of Climate Change: How Invoking Global Dangers for Instrumental Ends Can Backfire", in *Environment and Planning C: Politics and Space*, Vol. 37, No. 8 (December 2019), p. 1471-1488, <https://doi.org/10.1177/2399654419834018>.

<sup>16</sup> See Tyler H. Lippert, NATO, *Climate Change, and International Security. A Risk Governance Approach*, Santa Monica, RAND Corporation, 2016, <https://doi.org/10.7249/RGSD387>.

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Via dei Montecatini, 17 - I-00186 Rome, Italy

T +39 06 3224360

[iai@iai.it](mailto:iai@iai.it)

[www.iai.it](http://www.iai.it)

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