

**THE TRANSATLANTIC CLIMATE DIVIDE:
IS KYOTO AN EXAMPLE OF THE EU ‘SOFT BALANCING’ AGAINST THE
US?**

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ABSTRACT: Numerous theoretical accounts have attempted to capture the dynamics of the idiosyncratic transatlantic relations, whether they were merely simplified polarized depictions or sophisticated analyses. As a recent variant of the balance of power theory, the ‘soft-balancing’ thesis has been developed within this context as a useful explanation for other states’ attempts to undermine and retain the power of the US using non-military instruments. By employing the climate change policy field as a case study, this paper aims at testing the relevance of this theoretical concept on one of the most prominent examples of the transatlantic rift. The arguments brought forward reveal significant limitations of the ‘soft-balancing’ thesis when explaining the transatlantic climate divide, which casts doubt on its merits in capturing power relations in general.

Introduction

The heated debate surrounding the United States’ unilateralist behaviour on the international scene and the so-called ‘transatlantic rift’ has been a propitious context for the development of miscellaneous theoretical concepts and metaphors that aim at better grasping the actual state of play in the EU-US relations, or what Smith calls the ‘European-American conundrum’ (Smith 1984:3). One of these concepts is ‘soft balancing’, used in opposition to ‘hard balancing’ in order to refer to other countries’ use of “international institutions,

economic leverage, and diplomatic maneuvering to frustrate American intentions." (Pape 2004:10) Loosely defined since its occurrence in the late 90's, 'soft balancing' has also been associated with the European Union's effort to pursue an increasingly institutionalized multilateral system, which imposes constraints on the United States by stressing collective problem solving and equality before the law.

Climate change politics has been generally referred to as a salient example for the development of a transatlantic rift. The entry into force of the Kyoto protocol on 16th February 2005 marked the climax of the EU 'success story' (Ochs and Schaper 2005: 14) in dominating climate change politics against the backdrop of U.S. resistance. In the light of these developments, the EU's increasing role in global agenda setting in this salient foreign policy issue has been seen as a strategic effort by a weaker actor to increase its influence towards the United States (Kelley, 2005). However, how strong is the causal connection between the relative power positions of the US and the EU and the latter's prominent role in the development of the international climate change regime?

The article investigates the relevance of the 'soft balancing' thesis in the case of the transatlantic climate divide and of the European Union's emergence as a leading global actor in this field. The starting point will consist in exploring the theoretical concept of 'soft balancing'. A discussion of the salience of the climate change policy within the transatlantic relations will follow, while also documenting the main sources of dissensus between the U.S. and the EU in this issue area. Subsequently, the limitations of the 'soft balancing' thesis in explaining the dynamics of the transatlantic climate divide will be revealed.

'Soft Balancing'-A 'Soft' Concept?

Before any endeavor to test the validity of the 'soft balancing' argument in the case of the relations between the EU and the US in the climate change field, a clarification of the aforementioned concept is in place. The notion of 'soft balancing' rose to prominence in the context of the contemporary unipolar international system, as a variant of the balance of

power theory, in contrast to ‘hard-balancing’ and ‘bandwagoning’¹²². To be more specific, the ‘soft balancing’ argument is a mixture of elements from the two versions of the balance of power theory that are still popular today: the structural variant of Kenneth Waltz (1979) and Steven Walt’s ‘balance of threat’ version (2000). Thus, the recent ‘aggressive unilateralism [which] is changing America’s long enjoyed reputation for benign intent’ (Pape, 2004), as well as the prospect of a dangerous systemic concentration of power (Walt, 2004) have determined a novel type of countervailing power dynamic that does not directly challenge the unipolar’s leader military preponderance. Rather, the second-ranked powers delay, complicate or increase the cost of using that extraordinary power by using non-military instruments such as international institutions, economic statecraft, diplomatic arrangements or strict interpretation of neutrality (Paul, 2004; Pape, 2004). The propensity to use this new type of balance to the chagrin of ‘hard balancing’ has been explained by both invoking pragmatic reasons such as the overwhelming military superiority of the United States, but also by employing the central argument of the democratic peace hypothesis: that all kinds of systematic violence are rare in and by liberal democracies (see Levy and Razin, 2004).

Like any popular political science concept, ‘soft balancing’ is endowed with a highly controversial character. This can firstly be attributed to the fact that this argument is of recent vintage, and also to the lack of a clear, rigorous and consensual definition – the latter being in fact a consequence of the former. Thus, it has been frequently contended that this concept ‘comes undone’, or, in Brooks and Woolhorth’s words, ‘has not yet been fully fleshed out theoretically’ (2004: 107). For instance, one conspicuous difference that would arise in a literature review of the ‘soft balancing’ theoretical accounts, is that between analysts who regard ‘soft balancing’ as emerging ‘hard balancing’ (Pape, 2004; Paul, 2004; Joffe, 2003 ;Walt, 2004) and those who see it as being independent from ‘hard balancing’ (Kelley, 2004).

Furthermore, the most fervent criticisms generally revolve around three main issues: the lack of persuasive empirical evidence to support the theoretical claims, the failure to consider alternative explanations, and the flawed criteria used for detecting soft balance as they do not

¹²² In realist theories of international relations, bandwagoning refers to the act of weaker states joining a stronger power or coalition within balance of power politics. The term is opposed to balancing, and unlike balancing, it is relatively new. Bandwagoning was coined by Quincy Wright in *A Study of War* (1942) and popularized by Kenneth Waltz in *Theory of International Politics* (1979)

(or cannot) offer effective means for distinguishing soft balance from routine diplomatic friction. Commenting upon the cases brought forward by the ‘soft balancing’ advocates, Lieber and Alexander (2005) argue that there is no substantial evidence to prove that states seek to undermine and retain US power in ways that fall short of classical measures. This point of view is also strongly supported by Brooks and Woolhorth (2004) who go even further and contend that the balance of power theory is obsolete: it is not able anymore to explain the asymmetric power relations in the current international system. Do these criticisms apply when looking at the transatlantic climate divide through the lenses of the ‘soft balancing’ thesis?

Climate Change Policy

Climate change is recognized as one of the most important global problems in this century (King, 2004), even though the climate policy did not become a significant political issue until the late 1970s. The current global high-profile of the climate change policy derives from both its purpose to address an utterly pernicious phenomenon, and also from the fact that it is a ‘cross-cutting policy challenge’ (Ochs and Schaper 2005: 1): it has an impact on other areas, such as energy production, transport, infrastructure, industry, economics and North-South relations.

Within the global climate policy, the Kyoto Protocol (or Kyoto Protocol to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change) was hailed as the most salient achievement of modern environmental diplomacy. (Grubb, 1999) Unlike the UNFCCC which established the institutional framework and the general goals of the global climate policy, the Kyoto protocol is more focused, as it stipulates legally binding emission reduction targets of six green house gases (GHGs)¹²³ and groups of GHGs by at least 5.2% under the 1990 level, as well as specific mechanisms in order to achieve these challenging objectives. Furthermore, it is based on the principle of a common, but differentiated

¹²³ Green House Gases are gaseous components of the atmosphere that contribute to the greenhouse effect. The major natural greenhouse gases are water vapour, carbon dioxide, and ozone. Other greenhouse gases include, but are not limited to: methane, nitrous oxide, sulfur hexafluoride, and chlorofluorocarbons etc.

responsibility, according to which the developed countries are supposed to take the lead. (UNEP, UNFCCC, 2002)

However, due to its sheer importance and its far-reaching implications, the Kyoto protocol has been the target of criticism from a variety of interests and thus evolved in a cumbersome manner, reflecting the significant dissensus that existed between the main actors of the complex negotiations. That is, the European Union on the one side, and the United States, along with the other countries from the so called ‘Umbrella group’¹²⁴, on the other. What is more, it has been argued that the high-handed withdrawal of the US from the Kyoto Protocol in February 2001 has elevated climate policy to the level of ‘high politics’, and turned this particular area of international relations into a symbol for the underlying transatlantic divide. (Ochs, 2005)

Furthermore, the dynamics of the negotiations within the framework of the climate change policy have revealed an interesting pattern in terms of assuming the leadership role in this dimension of the transatlantic relations. Firstly, even though historically the US can claim most environmental innovations (both domestically and internationally) before the 1970s (Wiener, 2004), in the case of the climate change regime the EU seized leadership after the US dissociated itself from Kyoto, and managed to bring the Protocol into force. The European leadership role was most conspicuous in the manner in which it succeeded in prevailing on the major issues of contention with the United States: the validity of the scientific evidence, the quality of the instruments used in order to implement Kyoto (bolder and binding), as well as the application of the ‘common, but differentiated’ principle (Jorgensen, 2004). Thus, the metaphors of ‘flip-flop’ or ‘U-turn’ used by some analysts to point out to the swap in positions regarding the support of the emission trading system (see Damro and Luacez-Mendez, 2003; Christiansen and Wettstadt, 2003) could be extended to describe the general political dynamics between the EU and the US in building a global climate regime.

¹²⁴ The ‘Umbrella’ Group was an alliance formed by the US, Australia, Japan, and New Zealand with Russia, Norway, Ukraine, Kazakhstan, and Iceland

All these developments have contributed to the current state of play in the climate change policy, which does seem quite disconcerting and difficult to explain: even though the Kyoto Protocol and the so-called Kyoto mechanisms are by many seen as a US construct (e.g. Yamin, 1998; Grubb et al., 1999), the latter has refused to implement it. The EU accepted the call for global leadership on the issue and managed to generate an unexpected higher degree of policy cohesion within Europe, and also to successfully prepare for pending negotiations as a unified actor. After convincing Russia to partake in the Protocol, the EU and its allies (more specifically Japan and Canada) celebrated the Kyoto's protocol entry into force. (Ochs and Sprinz, 2005)

The Transatlantic Climate Divide-Assessing Evidence of 'Soft-Balancing'

Having briefly outlined the main issues regarding the transatlantic climate relation, the following questions will be addressed: how can this transformation in the European Union's stance in the climate negotiations from a reactive to a highly proactive one be explained? Is this conspicuous divide between the EU and the US, along with European Union's emergence as a leader in global climate policy a matter of consolidating relative power positions, as the 'soft-balancing' thesis would suggest?

In order to establish whether the Kyoto protocol is a case of 'soft balancing' performed by the EU against the US, I shall further discuss whether the transatlantic divide on climate change policy has the three characteristics particular to the 'classical cases' of soft balancing, as identified by its advocates: 1) coordination between two or more states in areas directly related to security; 2) the involvement of at least one great power, and in most cases of several powers; 3) the presence of deliberate state actions that make it harder for Washington to advance its foreign policy goals. (Pape, 2004; Paul, 2005; Walt, 2004)

As far as the first two characteristics are concerned, several important issues must be analysed. Firstly, in what way has the 'coordination between two or more member states' occurred? More specifically, how did the EU deliberately engage as an international actor into balancing the US in this field and how did it cooperate with the other states in order to

finally ratify the Kyoto Protocol in spite of the US withdrawal? Last, but not least – is the climate change field an ‘area directly related to security’ for both the EU and the US?

It has been frequently argued that the EU benefits from international ‘actorness’ in the case of the climate change policy (Jorgensen, 2004; Papadakis, 2002). In this context, the international ‘actorness’ is understood as ‘the EU’s ability to function actively and deliberately in relation to other actors in the international system’ (Smith, 2003a: 24). Indeed, the European Community as such is formally recognised within the UNFCCC as a Party, and has positioned itself for numerous times to take the lead on climate change, especially since other salient actors such as the US have major difficulties in accepting the Kyoto regime. (Papadakis, 2002) Thus, even though the EU policy-making in this area is intergovernmental and thus quite cumbersome, the member states together with the Council presidency succeeded in agreeing upon common positions on implementing the climate change policy and practically tied its political faith to the Kyoto protocol, as a reaction to the US retreat.(van Schaik and Groenleer, 2005) This was most conspicuous in the EU pushing hard for stringent emission targets at the Kyoto conferences, in reaching the 2000 stabilisation target of the UNFCCC, and also when it became the first entity worldwide to adopt the GHG emission trading system-a very significant legally binding mechanism.

By gaining a good reputation, especially through pursuing the high moral ground and positioning itself in contrast to the reluctant United States and other ‘laggard’ countries, the EU operated as a united block to attract other countries such as Canada, Japan and Russia, but also the developing countries to go ahead with Kyoto, despite US opposition.

Moreover, van Schaik and Groenleer (2005) go even further and argue that if it had not been for the EU’s strong advocacy for the Treaty, the other countries would not have continued with the Kyoto Protocol. In this respect, the EU’s behaviour is consistent with its general ‘structural’ foreign policy principles (Telo, 2001): cooperation with others, using non-military principles to secure goals. Thus, the successful ratification of the Kyoto Protocol on 16th February 2005 comes to support the aforementioned arguments.

The sensitivity and far-reaching implications of the climate change have turned it into a high-profile subject in international forum, but is this a *security* issue for the two protagonists of

the transatlantic debate? The answer is positive, but with some observations. In both cases the climate change has been regarded as a threat to security. While in the case of the United States it has become a salient component of the national security policy (Busby, 2005), its inclusion in the security agenda outlined in the Petersburg Declaration reveals the same importance given to this global problem in the EU. Nevertheless, it must be emphasized that, due to the ‘conceptual stretching’ (Benjamin, 2000) of the notion of ‘security’, this term has a different meaning from the one assigned to it by the advocates of the ‘soft balancing’ thesis. Walt, for instance, defines it as ‘the threat, use and control of military force’ (1991:21)

Last but not least, within the transatlantic climate divide regarding the Kyoto Protocol there is also evidence of state actions that make it harder for Washington to advance its foreign policy goals. As various Presidency Conclusions explicitly state, the ultimate aim of the EU in the climate negotiations is to establish a multilateral climate agreement with binding commitments. The multilateral arrangements entailed by the UNFCCC negotiations on the implementation details of the Kyoto Protocol have significantly limited the possibility of the US to see its policy preferences reflected in the final Protocol. With the single notable exception of the emission trading system (which was an initiative coming from the US), the EU prevailed in all areas of contention (Ochs and Schprinz, 2005). Hence the US withdrawal from the Kyoto Protocol.

At this point, the ‘soft balancing’ thesis seems quite convincing: by successfully coordinating its own member states and by attracting other ‘great powers’ on its side, the EU has emerged as a leader in global agenda setting in the climate change policy, thus increasing its influence towards the United States through significantly limiting its policy alternatives. Still, to what extent was the transatlantic climate divide and the European Union’s effort to take the lead on climate change a *deliberate* attempt to counterbalance the United States dominant power position?

Firstly, the manner in which policy preferences are formulated in both the US and the EU is a salient point to be discussed, as the domestic political process in the US as well as the internal EU dynamics do provide an alternative explanation for this issue. In both cases certain groups and influences have dominated the policy process and discourse, with an anti-

Kyoto stance having predominated in the US and a pro-Kyoto, anti-flexibility mechanisms view prevailing in Europe at the time of major decisions regarding the international climate change regime. In the United States, as multiple actors hold veto over policies, the commitment to pursue any policy is significantly undermined, especially if this policy is highly contentious and polarizes powerful interests. As Busby and Ochs (2005) convincingly argue, political institutions such as the separation of powers, voting rules and campaign financing systems, aggregate the plurality of interests in the US. Thus, in this case, there was no consensus that binding emissions reductions are necessary. This is also confirmed by the fact that during both Clinton administrations, a rhetorically ambitious White House was consistently blocked by Congress (the Byrd-Hagel resolution is a relevant example). What is more, even if the US has not ratified the Kyoto Protocol, a significant number of American states are currently engaged in making significant reductions in emissions at local level, while some of them are even working together to develop an emissions trading scheme for carbon dioxide emissions from power plants (BBC, 2005).

Furthermore, the EU's distinctive political, constitutional and administrative structures enforce the idea that the transatlantic climate divide and the EU's emergence as a global leader in this area has institutional origins, as well. There is an ongoing legal and political debate with the member states regarding competences, and thus the EU lacks an 'agreed internal strategy and clear line of responsibility for actually delivering the ambitious declaratory targets for green house gas emissions' (Bretherton and Vogler, 1999: 104). The positions adopted are the result of consensual agreement between many competing interests (member states, NGOs and business groups) and are usually inflexible, being a significant cause of the diplomatic frictions that have taken place during the Kyoto negotiations between the two parties. What is more, due to the fact that there are so many interests at play and that internal struggles have often occurred between the member states (as at the COP6 in the Hague- see Papadakis, 2002), it is highly unlikely that the EU's predominance in the climate change field is a result of a common deliberate strategy to countervail the power of the US. Rather, a combination of an increased awareness on the seriousness of global warming and the emergence of five green parties in the coalition governments (Grubb and Yamin, 2001) are some of the elements that have galvanized European interests and turned EU into a more pro-environmental actor than its counterpart.

Other equally important factors that have been suggested by both Wiener (2005) and Papadakis (2002) are the economic interests of each party, as well as the ideology or the national culture regarding climate, precaution and the environment. Indeed, as far as the economic interest is concerned, the EU's effort to attract other countries to go ahead with Kyoto was perhaps less a 'soft balancing' strategy against the US, and more an attempt to minimise competitiveness losses caused by greenhouse gas reduction policies and to ensure environmental effectiveness. Furthermore, the business sector in the EU has been much more in favour of serious environmental reforms at a global level, as they have come to perceive the high environmental standards as a competitive advantage, since they serve to promote innovation (Porter, 1998). One extremely interesting development that stresses both the lack of homogeneity of the US and the EU, as well as the stringent need for cooperation between the two parties, is that the European business interests have been extremely active in advocating the 'technology push' that was earlier supported by the US as a complement to the existing 'market pull' approach at the EU level. (Euractiv, 2005).

Finally, it has been also argued that the EU manifests a greater concern for environmental issues, which is reflected at both the rhetorical and performance level, and unlike the state of play present in the US, it is shared by both the public and the elites (Ochs and Sprinz, 2005). More specifically, most of the EU countries are more sensitive to the global warming challenges brought forward by the scientific evidence. As a result, the notion of 'ecological modernization' which supports the shift from a reactive to a proactive approach to environmental damage has become imbedded in several European states. (Papadakis, 2002)

Conclusion

Change is inherent in every system, and the fascinating dynamics of the transatlantic relations only serve to reinforce this statement. The EU's emergence as a leader in global agenda setting in the climate change policy field to the chagrin of the United States has raised questions about the significance of this development with regards to the relative power positions of these two actors. As the aforementioned arguments clearly indicate, the

recently emerged 'soft-balancing' thesis cannot explain the swap in leadership roles that occurred between the US and the EU. Even though the European Union operated as a united bloc and succeeded in attracting other important actors to support the Kyoto protocol despite the evident opposition of the United States, there is a paucity of evidence that would suggest that these efforts constitute a deliberate attempt to counterbalance the latter's dominant power position. Rather, the disconcerting state of play in the transatlantic climate relations is the result of a multiplicity of factors ranging from the specificities of the domestic decision-making mechanisms, the economic interests in both the US and the EU, to their ideologies or national cultures regarding the environment.

These findings substantiate the claims of several authors (see Lieber and Alexander, 2005; Brooks and Wohlhort, 2005) that criticize the 'soft-balancing' thesis for the insufficient supporting empirical evidence, the lack of conceptual rigorousness or the inability to consider alternative explanations. Perhaps the analytical flaws of this concept constitute a further invitation for the scholarly research to concentrate upon discovering other theoretical frameworks that could better serve for exploring the dynamics of the current global political system.

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