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In missing its climate targets, the EU is endangering its green leadership and itself

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The European Union has reached an agreement on its 2035 Nationally Determined Contribution (NDC) in a final-hour deal ahead of COP30. However, for Europe, the struggle to agree on climate targets is just the tip of the melting iceberg. Rolling back major climate policies is casting doubt on its commitment to the green transition, weakening its global leadership, and increasing influence from far-right groups at home.

Mere days away from the start of COP30 in Brazil, the EU has agreed to a 2035 Nationally Determined Contribution (NDC) promising emissions reductions in the range of 66.25% to 72.5% from 1990 levels. Delays in passing the plan caused the bloc to miss the UN's September deadline, reducing its influence at the summit. At the same meeting, European ministers set a legally binding 2040 target to cut emissions by 90% from 1990 levels. However, the target's credibility is questioned because, after pushback from Member States, Brussels allowed up to 5% of emissions to be offset through international credits—though their reliability is uncertain—effectively reducing the target to 85%, below the 90–95% range scientists recommended. Both targets are underwhelming and signal a shift in the EU's approach from its previous position as a global climate leader.

The EU's decision was not taken in a vacuum; the political environment is vastly different from a long decade ago, when nations pledged to hold global warming to 1.5ºC in Paris. In 2015, there was talk of a World War II-level mobilisation to address the climate crisis. In 2025, geopolitical uncertainty has moved Europe to go through a real rearmament. NATO countries—except for Spain—have agreed to spend 5% on defence and security under pressure from the US. This is the same level of expenditure once projected by the IEA as necessary to achieve decarbonisation in time to stop the worst effects of climate change.

In consequence, the EU is embracing the notion that security and climate action cannot be pursued at the same time. A new global order may be taking shape, but it is still doing so on a burning planet—adopting this narrow approach implies choosing to focus on the immediate existential threat along its Eastern border, at the expense of the long-term existential threat that climate change poses to the continent.

External pressures are not solely responsible for the EU's shift. Domestically, the European Green Deal has been subject to increased scrutiny following the 2024 European elections, in which far-right climate-sceptic parties secured over 25% of parliamentary seats, while green parties experienced a loss of more than a quarter of their electorate. Several European leaders have interpreted these results as a political mandate to recalibrate, if not retreat, from climate action.

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While various rollbacks began before the election—aimed at appeasing protesting farmers—the new term has accelerated these efforts: attempts to void key green reporting and investing policies in name of simplification are ultimately expected to succeed, the deforestation law has been halted, carmakers have received a two-year extension to meet pollution targets, and pending parts of the Fit for 55 package may be dropped to ease legislative burdens. Moreover, the 2040 climate target agreement includes the delay of the EU's new carbon market (ETS2) by a year. The EU's climate agenda now primarily focuses on the Clean Industrial Deal. However, implementation challenges risk turning it into yet another empty promise. This weakening of the Green Deal undermines Europe's credibility, causing uncertainty for transitioning industries and, ultimately, endangering the EU's move to a low-carbon economy.

Approval of the green agenda among younger and lower-income voters has declined. Yet, most citizens still support climate action: according to the June 2025 Eurobarometer, 81% of Europeans still back reaching climate neutrality by 2050. Even among far-right voters, there is evidence of concern for climate change: a survey found that 26% of far-right party voters in France, Germany, Poland, Italy, and Sweden ranked the issue as a top priority. I argue this gap can be largely attributed to the unequal impact of climate policies. The EU's strategy for cutting emissions has relied on market-based solutions and extensive regulations, which have often functioned as regressive policies that disproportionately harm low-income households. While Europeans continue to endorse the goal, they express dissatisfaction with the methods selected to achieve it.

Programs designed to offset these negative effects, such as the Just Transition Fund, have proven largely ineffective, with only 3% of the €26.7 billion spent by August 2025 ahead of the program's end in 2027. In turn, far-right parties have capitalized on this frustration, framing climate

policies as elitist and anti-working class, thereby creating a feedback loop that erodes public support and makes future climate action politically untenable.

Europe does not need a way out of climate action; it needs a way forward. Effective policies can drive economic growth and strengthen European autonomy, following frameworks proposed by Draghi and Letta. Draghi advocates for investing in productive sectors to boost competitiveness, while Letta recommends addressing climate change by completing the Common Market. Although these reports are open to debate and revision, it is better to tackle the challenges of putting them into practice than to remain stuck in the paralysis that now grips the Union.

Additionally, adopting a redistributive agenda may mitigate the influence of the far right. The proposed Social Climate Fund comes as a positive first step. Although, it could face implementation issues that could render it ineffectual, like the Just Transition Fund before it. Thus, the Commission should leave behind the restraining notion of simplification: The aim should not be to slash regulation, as its benefits to businesses are uncertain and it diminishes the EU's influence as a global standard-setter. Instead, making compliance simpler for firms and ensuring that its bureaucracy is capable of implementation, both in Brussels and across Member States, could better serve European citizens.

In security matters, Europe would be wise to follow an integrated agenda that addresses both defence and climatic challenges. Opportunities for synergy abound: cutting reliance on fossil fuels would grant greater autonomy and hardier armed forces. Investment in infrastructure could bolster both security and climate resilience. This holistic approach would ensure spending remains environmentally and fiscally sustainable—even if war never comes.

Finally, Europe should not allow the push against green politics to jeopardise its global green leadership, which it has assembled over more than three decades of careful diplomacy and multilateral bridge building. By failing to meet the UN's September deadline for the declaration of its NDC, the bloc will appear at COP30 in a weakened position, unable to push other countries into more ambitious efforts.

This failure stands in stark contrast to China, which for the first time has announced a decarbonisation target, aiming to cut emissions by 7–10% by 2035. Although unaspiring, it hints at Beijing's intention to fill the void left by the US and the EU. This would see climate mitigation rely on Chinese-dominated, market-based solutions. While these have proven valuable in accelerating the rollout of clean technology, without international coordination led by the EU, they are insufficient to prevent global warming from exceeding the 2ºC limit set by the Paris Agreement.