

Europe puts its climate targets on the table

BRUSSELS

Claiming a 'strong signal,' E.U. pledges to curb emissions 40% by 2030

BY JAMES KANTER

A deal reached early Friday by the European Union to cap its greenhouse gas emissions was meant to increase pressure on the rest of the world to achieve a landmark accord on climate protection next year, the bloc's leaders said.

The approval of a target to reduce emissions by 2030 by at least 40 percent, compared with 1990 levels, makes the European Union the first major global emitter to put its position on the table ahead of a United Nations climate meeting in Paris at the end of 2015.

That target will send "a strong signal to other big economies and all other countries," said Connie Hedegaard, the union's commissioner for climate action. "We have done our homework, now we urge you to follow Europe's example."

But environmentalists said the agreement, approved at a summit meeting here after late-night marathon negotiations, amounted to a weak compromise reflecting the complexity of managing a bloc of 28 member nations with widely varying energy systems. Elements of the deal were watered down to account for countries like Poland that rely on carbon-heavy coal, and for countries like Britain that were unwilling to accept binding targets on some measures, such as energy efficiency and the percentage of energy that comes from renewable sources.

"The E.U. deal was probably the best compromise that progressive countries could hope for, given concerns of various nations about coal-burning and competitiveness," said Richard Black, director of the Energy and Climate Intelligence Unit, a nonprofit organization in Britain. "However, it is also a compromise with the climate system and with the needs of future generations."

The European Union had come to the 2030 target after determining that it was the only way the Union could keep its 2009 pledge to cut greenhouse gas emissions by up to 95 percent of 1990 levels by mid-century.

Mr. Black said that even so, he doubted that the new target would "allow the E.U. to meet its long-term target of virtually eliminating carbon emissions."

The deal also included a clause, demanded by nations like Hungary concerned about their global competitiveness, to reconsider the carbon reduction target if an ambitious international treaty is not reached next year.

But Angela Merkel, the German chancellor, and François Hollande, the

CLIMATE, PAGE 4

European Union sets climate goals ahead of global talks

CLIMATE, FROM PAGE 1

French president, both suggested that the target would not be adjusted downward no matter the outcome of the United Nations talks next year.

The United Nations has been pressing for a climate deal that will require significant action by major economies like the United States and Europe, as well as China, India and Brazil.

The global effort poses significant problems for President Obama: while he has pushed for domestic carbon pollution cuts and for a global climate deal, there is almost no chance that the current Senate will vote to ratify a climate change treaty—and even less after the midterm elections, should Republicans gain the majority. Instead, Mr. Obama's climate change negotiators are working with their international counterparts to forge a hybrid deal blending a mix of binding and nonbinding provisions, what the negotiators are calling "politically binding."

The major polluting nations will most likely enact their targets in the first half of next year. It remains unclear what they will look like.

But even as the European Union has tried to pave the way by setting its climate targets early, experts said they may not be as ambitious as they first appear.

The deal requires a 40 percent cut in

emissions from levels in 1990, a period when carbon pollution from European coal plants was at high levels. In the United States, President Obama is pushing policies to cut carbon pollution by 17 percent from levels in 2005, a year in which carbon pollution was much lower. The European Union deal could still top that, but probably by only a few percentage points using the 2005 benchmark.

"It puts them once again in first place if there is a race to be out first—but the race between first and second place might be quite small, depending on baseline years," said Robert Stavins, director of Harvard University's environmental economics program.

Curbing emissions that contribute to a changing climate has long been a popular cause in Europe. Policy makers here frequently highlight how their industries and citizens emit lower levels of greenhouse gases like carbon dioxide than those of the United States and other industrialized countries.

But because of the stagnant economy that has depressed manufacturing, jobs and wages; an unwillingness to adopt regulations that could worsen Europe's declining international competitiveness; reductions in financing for green projects; concerns about nuclear energy as an alternative since the disaster

at Fukushima, Japan; and diminished interest in identifying renewable alternatives given the advent of technologies to extract cheap shale gas despite its uncertain prospects in Europe, there has been less enthusiasm among Europeans for a green agenda. European leaders have also been a bit more reluctant to step up since a climate conference in Copenhagen ended in failure five years ago.

The talks were "not easy, not at all," said Herman Van Rompuy, the president of the European Council, the body that represents European Union leaders.

The result was an overall package that was significantly weaker than what countries like Germany and Sweden had been seeking.

A target of generating at least 27 percent of its energy from renewable sources will be binding at the European Union level, but not at the national level. That raised questions among climate experts about how the target would be enforced. "We could have envisaged getting more, but we, in the spirit of compromise, decided to agree on a 27 percent target," Ms. Merkel said.

A separate target for improving energy efficiency by at least 27 percent was "indicative" only, meaning it would not be binding even at the bloc level. The tar-

get also was lower than the 30 percent proposed by the European Commission.

But the outcome suited David Cameron, the British prime minister, who had been concerned that binding targets on renewable sources and energy efficiency would give ammunition to his political opponents who contend that he has surrendered too much sovereignty to Brussels. Climate goals could now be accomplished at "the least cost to our industries, at the least cost to our consumers, and the least cost to families up and down Britain who don't want to pay any more on their energy bill than they otherwise should have to," said Mr. Cameron.

The Polish prime minister, Ewa Kopicz, came away with most of what she sought to protect jobs in her country's important coal-mining sector, including significant support measures for Polish industry. That success was also a sign of Poland's growing heft within the bloc and of the strength of its arguments that tougher rules would have risked pushing the country toward greater reliance on Russian natural gas.

"I told you we will not return from this summit with any extra burdens," Ms. Kopicz said after the meeting.

Coral Davenport contributed reporting from Washington.