Conference Report: The Paris Climate Talks
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The International Affairs Program is one of the largest majors in the College of Social Sciences and Humanities at Northeastern University, which is located in the heart of Boston, MA, USA.
It was an honor for me to head the Northeastern University (NU) delegation to the United Nations summit on climate change, held in Paris in December 2015.

The United Nations Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) was negotiated in 1992 as a result of the Earth Summit in Rio de Janeiro, the largest gathering in history of heads of state concerned with the protection of the environment and the stewardship of the planet. It was a time of great hope for change that set in motion aspirations for long-term environmental protection and sustainability. The UNFCCC’s regime includes annual meetings called Conference of the Parties (COP). The COP 3 negotiated the Kyoto Protocol to the UNFCCC in 1997. This international instrument, however, fell short of expectations regarding the need for stringent commitments by all nations to cut their greenhouse gases emissions and mitigate climate change. COP 15, held in Copenhagen in 2009, attracted enormous attention because it aspired to bring a new Protocol to the UNFCCC to replace the one negotiated in Kyoto.

I requested the UNFCCC the possibility for Northeastern University to obtain accreditation to observe the negotiations in Copenhagen. After a long process, Northeastern was granted observer status to all UNFCCC negotiations and attended the historic Copenhagen summit with a fifteen person delegation of students and alumni. I became the focal point of UNFCCC at Northeastern. We participated in a few COPs after Copenhagen, including alumni (most prominently Michael Green). Other universities that also have the prestigious access include, Harvard, Stanford, and Yale.

Paris, COP 21, was the culmination of twenty years of negotiations under the UNFCCC framework. Paris was extraordinary for a few reasons: first, long time acrimony existent between the developing and the developed countries, between China and the United States, gave way to unprecedented global cooperation in the halls of the COP 21. The bilateral agreement between China and the United States the year before paved the way for the realization that every 195 of the countries present had to have political and legal obligations towards the solutions to the most complex problem in the 21st century. Second, the art of French diplomacy paid dividends after the COP 20 in Lima, Peru, throughout the year leading up to Paris. The charismatic leaders of the Peruvian delegation and the French delegation, under Laurent Fabius, and the UNFCCC secretariat, Cristiana Figueres, travelled around the world visiting every capital to be sure that everyone was on the same page. This harmony could be felt in Paris and that was a major departure from the environment of dissent and accusations that reigned during Copenhagen. Third, Paris marks the beginning of a new era: the clean economy has begun and the investment in clean energy is the international norm now. These ingredients were essential for the Paris summit to come up with a 32 page landmark international law document, that is a watershed in the history of humanity. It inaugurates a new phase in which 195 nations agreed to do the right thing for the future of planet Earth.
Denise Garcia is the Sadeleer Research Faculty and associate professor in the Department of Political Science and the International Affairs program at Northeastern University in Boston. She teaches International Law and Global Governance in Boston and at the United Nations in Geneva, every year. She is the author of *Small Arms and Security - New Emerging International Norms*, and *Disarmament Diplomacy and Human Security - Norms, Regimes, and Moral Progress in International Relations*. Her articles have appeared in Foreign Affairs, the European Journal of International Security, International Affairs, Ethics & International Affairs, Third World Quarterly, Global Policy Journal, International Relations, International Studies Perspectives, the African Security Review, and elsewhere. Prior to joining the faculty of Northeastern University in 2006 (tenured in 2012), Garcia held a three year appointment at Harvard, and lived for several years in Geneva. She is a member of the Academic Council of the United Nations and vice-chair of the International Committee for Robot Arms Control. A native of Brazil, Garcia is a devoted yogi, her hobbies include travel and surfing.
Professor Mai’a Cross

Prof. Mai’a Cross attended the UN climate summit (COP 21) as part of the Northeastern University observer delegation. The summit took place from November 30, 2015 to December 12, 2015 in Paris. Prof. Cross engaged in participant observation as research for three upcoming publications focused on the role of the EU in pushing for a global agreement on climate. The first is a co-authored book chapter with Dr. Diarmuid Torney, Lecturer in International Relations in the School of Law and Government at Dublin City University. This chapter will be published in the forthcoming book, *The External Dimension of European Union Environmental Policy* (Palgrave). The second publication is an article with the working title, “EU Climate Diplomacy,” which will examine the EU’s diplomatic role in the lead-up to and during the UN climate summit in Paris. The final publication, which Prof. Cross will write after conducting upcoming field research, will address the role of European diplomats in persuading governments in Brazil, Russia, China, and India to abide by stricter climate goals. As part of a research team based at the ARENA Centre for European Studies in Oslo, Prof. Cross will be traveling to these countries to conduct interviews of key climate policymakers. This final round of research will be published in an academic journal and then submitted to the European Union as part of a major research initiative examining the EU’s efforts in contributing to global justice.

It is well known that the largest carbon emitters in the world have self-interested reasons for not complying with stricter standards. To the extent that there is leadership in this area, the EU is often recognized as playing a central role, largely because it has long been the strongest and most committed supporter of the creation of a legally binding, international climate regime. The EU is also ahead of other states in pursuing drastic carbon reductions and forward-looking climate goals, such as when it led the implementation of the Kyoto Protocol and launched the world’s first emissions trading system. EU leaders are committed to reducing emissions by at least 40% compared to 1990 by 2030.

Thus, in the lead up to the Paris summit, the EU and member states played a strong role in setting the stage for the negotiations. One of the most significant aspects of agreement in the lead up to COP21 was that nearly all of the countries submitted Intended Nationally Determined Contributions (INDCs) – essentially a promise from each country to reduce carbon emissions by a certain percentage. This was described by many at the summit as “revolutionary” in nature, bringing this negotiation to a level far beyond Kyoto. Moreover, the EU played a significant role in ensuring that it was encouraging and facilitating the creation of INDCs, which was actually a very technical and complex procedure to fulfill, especially among developing countries.

At the outset, the EU itself put forward an ambitious INDC (individual member states did not submit separate INDCs), and used this as leverage to challenge the US and China to do the same. This was more of a broad-level tactic to spur other states into action. However, the EU followed this up with careful and intensive work in dozens of third countries to help them prepare and submit their INDCs before the start of the climate
Alongside the EU, France and Germany had significant numbers of experts aiding in the effort. The impetus to really go through with the INDCs, came rather late in the game – less than a year before the summit – and it was quite a challenge to ensure that as many as possible were submitted before the start of the summit in Paris.

At the Paris climate summit, EU diplomats were the driving force behind the negotiations on many levels. It is important to note that all 28 EU member states spoke with one voice throughout the negotiations. In other words, each diplomat from an EU member state represented the EU as a whole, creating a formidable European influence throughout the summit venue. In particular, the EU conveyed a central and consistent message: that from 1990 to 2014 the EU reduced its emissions by 27% percent while still growing its economy by 43% during the same period. In doing so, the EU was trying to counter the widespread assumption on the part of developing countries at the summit that emissions reductions meant sacrificing economic growth. Each EU representative ensured that this fact – economic growth and emissions reduction go hand-in-hand – was part of each official statement, at high-level and low-level meetings.

Moreover, with the French delegation in charge of procedure for the entire summit, EU diplomats were able to achieve an effective combination of both flexibility in terms of diplomatic protocol, and efficiency in terms of reaching the final agreement. Many diplomats and world leaders praised the French for their highly effective negotiating procedure, especially compared to the previously failed summit at Copenhagen.

In the final days of the summit, the EU created what became known on the ground as the “high-ambition coalition.” This coalition included the EU (and its 28 member states) as well as 79 African, Caribbean, and Pacific countries. While the United States hesitated to join this coalition, these countries announced their commitment to have:

- A legally binding and fair agreement
- Long-term ambition that responds to science
- A review mechanism to examine progress every five years
- Transparency and accountability in following through with carbon reduction commitment

As EU Commissioner Miguel Arias Cañete said, “These negotiations are not about ‘them’ and ‘us’. These negotiations are about all of us, both developed and developing countries, finding common ground and solutions together. This is why the EU and the African, Caribbean, and Pacific countries have agreed to join forces for an ambitious outcome here in Paris. We urge other countries to join us. Together we can do it. The EU stands shoulder to shoulder with its long term partners in the African, Caribbean, and Pacific regions.”

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1 Panel at EU pavilion, December 8, 2015.
2 Participant observation, December 7-11, 2015 COP 21, Plenary and EU pavilion events.
Two days after the announcement of the high-ambition coalition, the US was persuade
to join, along with Norway, Mexico, Columbia, and others. Well over 100 countries
added their names to this coalition, and this paved the way to the first universal climate
agreement.

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