Ambition at Risk

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In September 2025, the European Union (EU) declared that it was unable to submit a target for the 2035 climate goals to the United Nations (Weise & Guillot, 2025). EU governments, who have to unanimously approve the 2035 plan mandated by the Paris Agreement (PA), are at odds over how to arrive at the target (Weise & Guillot, 2025). As a result, Denmark, which currently holds the EU presidency, suggested to other countries that the EU will merely send a "statement of intent" to the U.N. instead of submitting the required formal plan (Weise & Guillot, 2025). The failure to submit a target and the ongoing difficult negotiations form difficulties regarding the EU's 2040 plans and the upcoming COP30 Summit in November 2025 (Weise & Guillot, 2025). How does the EU's failure to submit a binding 2035 climate

target affect its ability to agree on a 2040 target and maintain credibility in international climate negotiations ahead of COP30?

The EU's climate targets, on the one hand, shape international diplomacy regarding future climate targets, as well as domestic politics within the member states regarding climate policies, legislation, and energy markets (Weise & Guillot, 2025). Firstly, this article will discuss how the EU has been mitigating the effects of climate change in the past decade. Secondly, it will discuss the EU's 2040 target and its policy design. Lastly, it will discuss the risks this delay forms for the upcoming COP30 Summit and 2040 climate goals. And what this means for the EU's credibility in global climate diplomacy. This brief argues that the EU's failure to submit a binding 2035 target weakens its credibility in climate diplomacy, complicates agreement on the 2040 goal, and risks undermining its leadership at international forums like the COP30.

1 How does the EU stand on climate change and carbon mitigation?

The EU has historically set ambitious goals like the Green Deal. Today's struggles over the 2035 and 2040 climate targets illustrate a contrast with the EU's past ambitious stance. The EU, together with China and the United States, is one of the largest emitters, whose combined share of global emissions is near 50% (Skjærseth et al., 2021). Therefore, the EU has set the most ambitious climate targets and policy mixes needed for achieving net zero emissions. The Paris Agreement has contributed to more ambitious targets and policy mixes, mainly in the EU but also in China (Skjærseth et al., 2021). Ambitious EU member states have actively invoked the PA goals to further their interests and legalise the Agreement's dynamic five-year cycles (Skjærseth et al., 2021). Even within more 'climate progressive' nations, the Paris Agreement necessitates a full decarbonisation achieved across all sectors by 2035–40 (Anderson et al., 2020). Following this guideline, the European Green Deal aims to mainstream climate and sustainability concerns into all policy areas and sectors (Anderson et al., 2020; Skjærseth et al., 2021). It has three ambitious goals for 2050: first, no net emissions of greenhouse gases; second, economic growth decoupled from resource use; and third, no person or place left behind. The main EGD initiatives on climate/energy policies have involved raising the 2030 GHG reduction target from 40 to 55% (reduction and uptake) within the EU by 2030 compared to 1990 and proposing a strengthening of the newly adopted climate/energy policies for 2030 to achieve the new target (Skjærseth et al., 2021). All the member states have, in principle, agreed on net-zero emissions for 2050 in line with the Paris Agreement (Skjærseth et al., 2021). This history of ambitious targets highlights the EU's role as a climate leader. Yet, the current deadlock over the 2035 and 2040 targets now threatens to undermine that credibility, raising doubts about whether the EU can continue to lead in global climate diplomacy ahead of COP30.

2 What is the plan for 2040?

The EU's proposed 2040 target of a 90% emissions reduction is designed to show continued climate leadership and provide predictability for investors, but disagreements among member states, intensified by the unresolved 2035 target, threaten to delay or weaken its adoption, undermining the EU's credibility internationally around climate change. Under the 2021 European Climate Law (Regulation (EU) 2021/1119), the European Union is required to establish a binding climate target for 2040 as an intermediate goal between the 2030 target of a 55% emissions reduction (compared to 1990) and the goal of net-zero emissions by 2050 (Heusaff et al., 2024). In February 2024, the European Commission recommended that the 2040 target should be a 90 per cent emissions reduction compared to 1990 levels (Figure 1; European Commission, 2024; Heusaff et al., 2024). The 2040 target is not yet law, but if it is adopted, it would mean almost full decarbonisation of the EU economy within two decades. This would signal continued commitment to European decarbonisation, focusing the efforts of policymakers, industry, investors and civil society (Heusaff et al., 2024). The most important result from the European energy transition will be drastically reduced fossil fuel consumption. To achieve 90% emissions reductions by 2040, European Commission modelling shows a 75% reduction in fossil fuels in primary energy compared to 2019 (Heusaff et al., 2024). Without agreement on the 2035 target, however, this ambitious 2040 plan forms some risks for the EU's future climate target and international performance regarding climate change.

3 EU in climate crisis delayed agreements

Failure to agree on 2035 has direct consequences for the EU in international conferences at the UN and COP30: it compresses negotiations into October and reduces the EU's ability to arrive in Brazil with a binding and credible 2040 goal. While recognising that there is no easy solution to minimise the risks of mitigation, academic and civil society debates have converged on the idea that establishing separate, transparent targets for emission reduction and carbon removal is crucial for limiting mitigation deterrence and critically assessing the credibility and ambition of mitigation plans (Brad & Schneider, 2025). This way, target separation can help ensure that carbon removal supplements rather than substitute emissions reduction and improve political accountability (Brad & Schneider, 2025). While difficult political debates about the rate of green transformation are unfolding, hundreds of billions in clean technology investment are still needed each year to meet the 2030 goals (Heusaff et al., 2024). Strong and sustained policy credibility is essential to reassure investors, sustain carbon prices at effective levels, and reduce regulatory risk in decarbonising Europe's economy (Heusaff et al., 2024). Postponements or rollbacks of core European Green Deal policies should be resisted in the 2024-2029 EU term by members of the European Parliament and by the Commission; otherwise planned investments might be stalled and costs would rise for firms and citizens who have already made investments in clean technologies

(Heusaff et al., 2024). Climate law, therefore, is to be decided at a later date (Bonini, 2025). Leaders will meet in Copenhagen on the first of October 2025 for the informal meeting and then in Brussels on 23 and 24 October 2025 for the formal working session (Bonini, 2025). Europe's ambition to present itself at the UN climate conference (COP30, scheduled to take place in Brazil from 10 to 21 November) with binding targets to 2040 and set itself up as an example of virtuousness risks being thwarted by a suddenly shortened and tightened timetable (Bonini, 2025). EU countries agreed last week to host a debate among national leaders, scheduled for Oct. 23, before agreeing on a 2040 target. That will leave just two weeks to then strike a deal on both goals ahead of the summit in Brazil. Clear and reliable climate targets build investor confidence and lay the groundwork for the climate and energy policies the European Commission must implement in its next five-year term (Heusaff et al., 2024). Without agreement on 2035, the EU risks entering COP30 with only a fragile or delayed 2040 plan, undermining both its credibility in climate diplomacy and its ambitious leader profile.

Conclusion

The EU's inability to submit a binding 2035 target highlights deep divisions that now threaten its climate leadership internationally. The indecisiveness of the EU member states and the delay of concrete climate targets form a contrast with the past ambitions of the EU when it comes to mitigating emissions and driving global sustainability goals. Without consensus on 2035, the EU's proposed 2040 target of a 90% emissions cut risks being delayed or weakened, eroding investor and policy confidence, market competition, and internal cohesion. If the EU cannot finalise a credible 2040 plan before COP30, its image as a climate leader may erode, limiting its leverage in global climate negotiations. To maintain its profile as a climate leader, the EU must resolve internal divisions quickly and arrive in Brazil with clear, credible targets that match its long-standing ambitions.

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