The Opportunity and Challenge of a Global Market Based Measure for Aviation

As it does every three years, this September the General Assembly of the United Nation’s International Civil Aviation Organization (ICAO) will meet in Montreal. A key item on the agenda will be a vote on whether to introduce a Global Market Based Measure to achieve carbon-neutral growth in international aviation emissions from 2020. It has taken many years to get to this point and following last year’s Paris Agreement the vote represents a defining moment not only for the aviation industry but for addressing climate change more generally.

With air passenger numbers forecast to double by 2034 time is of the essence. Aviation has always been at the cutting edge of technology and if the vote is successful, the agreement would represent a real milestone in tackling climate change by a major global industry – the international aviation industry would be the first global sector with a market based cap on its emissions and could lead the way for other industries to take similar measures. Such an agreement could provide the aviation industry with the framework to forge a way ahead on new climate change technology and set an example for other industries.

This is an opportune time to publish this Special Issue on Aviation and Climate Change. The articles highlight the complex issue of the impacts of aviation on climate change and conversely the impacts of climate change on aviation. It provides valuable insights into the challenges faced in designing and implementing a Global Market Based Measure for aviation. In so doing, the articles remind us of some of the reasons why it is has taken so long to reach an agreement on aviation emissions.

Over the last few years, representatives from States, the aviation industry and environmental NGOs have invested time, expertise and effort, working side-by-side in expert groups and committees to identify the issues, raise understanding and reach consensus on measures necessary to combat the impact of aviation emissions. Many of the authors of the articles in this Special Issue have contributed to the process and know very well the issues at stake. This co-operation between the parties has provided the momentum which has brought us to the verge of an agreement in ICAO. The time now seems ripe for such an agreement.

Reaching agreement on the Global Market Based Measure will be a huge achievement, but we cannot underestimate the challenges faced in implementing this system. These articles usefully explore various options for consideration and demonstrate that it will not be easy. As always, the devil will be in the details and the signatories to the agreement and the wider aviation industry will need strong resolve to make it work.

International aviation is highly regulated and is founded on clear principles, standards and legal agreements. States and industry have worked together for years to implement safety and security standards in aviation to the benefit of passengers, aviation industry and the wider economy – the aviation industry provides a fantastic example of how to get things done when it sets its mind to it and works co-operatively. Implementing a Global Market Based Measure should be no different. When it puts its collective expertise, experience and will into delivering the measures to do that, the aviation industry and ICAO member States can produce a win-win result for all concerned. I hope that this thought provoking Special Issue will stimulate discussion, and more importantly serve as a reminder to those responsible for negotiating the Global Market Based Measure in ICAO what the real goal
is. We have much to gain but even more to lose. ICAO as an institution risks undermining its credibility if it cannot secure agreement from its member states to an MBM this year. Failure to reach agreement would represent a very real step backwards for an industry that has always been at the forefront of initiative and endeavour.

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