

BARRIERS TO GLOBAL CLIMATE CHANGE POLICY: A COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS

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Climate change is the global challenge of the twenty-first century, a threat that carries dire environmental, social, security, and economic implications for every region of the world. According to the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, the primary driver of climate change is the increase in greenhouse gas emissions attributed to human activities. Although climate change must be met with a comprehensive global response in order to effectively address the effects of harmful greenhouse gases (GHG), these efforts depend on the actions taking place within nations.

The United States, the greatest per-capita emitter of GHG, and China, that produces the largest amount of GHG overall, bear a good deal of responsibility for the problem. The United States, in particular, with its rejection of the Kyoto Protocol and its inability to craft a viable climate change agenda, has failed to offer the leadership needed to secure meaningful reductions in GHG.

This essay seeks to establish perspective by profiling the political, social, and economic circumstances within six nations (three advanced industrial countries and three newly modernizing countries) and the European Union (EU) in order to better understand the dynamics involved in achieving a global solution to climate change.

Case Studies

1.- European Union

The European Union has led the push for climate change regulation to curb emissions 30% by 2030 and 80%-95% by 2050. To reach that goal, it has invested significant funds targeting 20% of the EU budget from 2014-2020 towards climate related measures. The EU believes that climate change policies will not only preserve the planet for generations to come but will also create greater long-term health and economic benefits. This position can be attributed to the lack of politicization of climate change in the EU allowing politicians to advocate forward thinking policies without the constant fear of political or electoral retribution. Furthermore, the close proximity of EU member states

and their relatively small size creates an “all in this together” mentality allowing them to harness their resources to compete with larger world powers.

2.- United Kingdom

Widely acknowledged as one of the foremost countries addressing climate change, the United Kingdom moved definitively to establish a science-based framework for approaching this global phenomenon even prior to the Earth Summit in Rio in 1992. This de-politicizing effort is revealed in the staunch support of conservatives like Margaret Thatcher, whose instrumental leadership set this critical tone and aided in the formation of the UN's Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change in 1990, and Tony Blair, who seized his 2005 G-8 presidential term as an opportunity to promote the reduction of GHG through mitigation technologies, sustainable energy, and adaptation strategies. The UK has fostered domestic integration of climate and energy policies to reduce ill effects at home as well as international cooperation in the form of a post-Kyoto strategy and the ongoing European Union's Emission Trading Scheme (ETS), designed to blend climate change collaborative goals of equity distribution and cost effectiveness.

3.- Canada

Canada's efforts to address climate change can be best described as leaping forward, stepping back and, finally, standing in place. An original early proponent for mitigation since 1975, under the Chrétien administration in the 1990s, the country committed to relatively aggressive reductions - - a 30% decrease over projected 2010 emissions - - as part of the Kyoto Protocol. However, a clear implementation plan proved elusive until 2005, at which time “Project Green” successfully established meaningful initiatives. Although temporarily rolled back the following year under the more business-friendly Harper administration, a brief surge in climate change public awareness subsequently forced the return of some mitigation initiatives. Currently, climate change policy stagnation is largely explained by prioritizing economic growth over environmental concerns particularly in the wake of the 2008 Credit Crisis. It is further complicated by Canada's neighbor to the south - - the administration of President Barack Obama who supports addressing GHG emissions and a clean energy future.

4.- Australia

Australia's international position on climate change reflects its domestic policy agenda. For the first 10-years of the Kyoto Protocol, 1997-2007, Australia was a climate change laggard based on both its refusal to ratify

the agreement and its largely symbolic GHG reduction policies. In 2007, Australia ratified the Protocol and implemented stringent abatement policies but is now reversing course. What caused the shifts Down Under? Two domestic factors, electoral interests and political leadership, are most influential. Compared to economic growth, voters' prioritization of environmental issues rose until 2007 and then declined. The political leadership within the Coalition government (1996-2007, reelected in 2013) favors business and the fossil fuel industry, and is skeptical of climate change. This stands in contrast to the Labor Party (2007-2013) that favors GHG emissions reductions. So, although Australia has committed internationally to a 5% reduction of 2000 level emissions by 2020, it still lacks a consistent domestic policy to achieve this goal.

Russia

Russia experienced massive industrial decline in the immediate aftermath of the Soviet Union's collapse in 1991. Despite the fact that there has been a significant reduction of GHG emissions, Russia still ranks third on the list of the largest greenhouse gas emitters in the world. Problems caused by climate change in recent decades include public health risks, increased recurrence, intensity and duration of droughts in some regions, extreme precipitation patterns, floods, and over-moisturized soil and permafrost degradation in the northern regions. However, the climate change issue does not constitute a priority for Russian authorities. Several internal factors, such as a well-rooted skepticism within the Russian scientific community towards anthropogenic global warming, low environmental awareness among Russian citizens, and the priority given to the country's economic restoration, suggests that Russian climate policy is to a great extent being driven by the pursuit of benefits in areas other than that of environmental policy.

China

One of the best ways to summarize China's approach to climate change is via a domestic politics model. Decisionmakers involved in China's climate change policy belong to the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) and there is little or no foreign influence over them. Among these decision makers, the most influential have managed to frame the issue as one of sovereignty and economic development. These hardliners see climate change as an issue that threatens China's sovereignty and its right to develop economically. As such, it has taken a stance of not joining any multilateral agreement until the U.S. does so. Thus, China's right to develop economically is assured. Domestically, China has made progress developing solar and wind technology for domestic use and for foreign markets. However, it continues to use fossil fuels, especially coal, to ensure that it develops along the lines deemed acceptable to the CCP.

India

India's position on climate change is guided by two priorities - - namely, sustainable development and the elimination of poverty. With a growing economy that demands more energy for growth, there are hundreds of millions of people without access to electricity in India. Energy use and consequently greenhouse gas emissions will grow substantially in the coming decades. As a modernizing country, India is not bound to any GHG emission reduction goals under the Kyoto Protocol. However, it has established a National Action Plan on Climate Change and implemented a combination of mitigation and adaptation policies to reduce the country's contributions to climate change. These policies include energy conservation, promotion of renewable energy, abatement of air pollution among others. While India's development will require growth in energy use, the country must work to reduce the energy intensity of its production processes.

Comparative Analysis

On the basis of political, economic and social factors, a comparative analysis of the case studies reveals three key groupings: supporters of international climate change policy that involves implementing significant carbon mitigation reduction requirements; fickle hesitators who, if cooperative, face major reduction requirements; and unburdened supporters who face little-to-no mitigation requirements. The EU and the UK, as a climate change leader, fall into the first category, politically defined as highly democratic and economically and regionally integrated. The EU and the UK have softened views on sovereignty, have historically utilized the market for political/social ends, and normatively seek international cooperation as a means of reducing risk.

For Canada and Australia, reduced support for international action on climate change is largely based on modern era socio-political attitudes and a perceived threat to their economic viability. Stemming from strong political views on state sovereignty, they are historically less likely to cooperate on international initiatives and, unlike the economically integrated EU and UK, are not willing to constrain markets in the name of political or social ends. These nations traditionally prefer individualistic as opposed to collective responses to major issues and consequently see cooperative action as risky.

The newly modernizing countries of China, India and Russia exhibit different degrees of democracy and are not economically integrated nor fully industrialized. While highly centralized political authority is helpful in making international level commitments, enforcement capacity is hindered domestically. Willingness to cooperate is generally conditional upon gaining financial assistance and technical support needed for development. For China and Russia, the first priority is maintaining state authority and social well-being for the sake of stability. Environmental policy is put forward only when these priorities are not threatened. For India, the focus centers on lifting its population out of poverty that takes precedence over international climate change cooperation.

Conclusion

Overall, countries willing to cooperate internationally and make sacrifices to mitigate the causes of climate change perceive a lower economic and political threat for doing so than countries that refuse. In fact, the supporters of international climate change policy are more likely to view global warming as an all-encompassing economic, political, and social threat rather than as a discrete environmental threat. Having said this, they also see potential opportunities in assuming the role of early adaptors to climate change. Countries reluctant to support international cooperation face domestic political barriers that the comparative analysis above indicates is due primarily to economic perceptions and viability. Some countries that have rejected a commitment to international cooperation have, in fact, implemented national or sub-state abatement policies. At the same time, others ignore the threat entirely.

In short, differences in behavior toward climate change indicates that not all countries perceive the threat the same. The task for climate change leaders, therefore, is to maintain their resolve to educate global populations such that perceptions of economic risk become less significant than perceptions of climate change risk. At the same time, they must offer best practices of reducing compliance costs and sharing knowledge to build a clean energy agenda in order to ensure a sustainable global solution to climate change.

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