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ADDRESSING CLIMATE CHANGE IN POST-COVID WORLD: IMPLICATIONS OF CHINA-US TENSIONS ON CLIMATE POLITICS

The COVID-19 pandemic has implications for climate politics. Carbon emissions from states are expected to increase rapidly when the states strive to maximize their production in a post-pandemic world. The two countries that are crucial in combating climate change are China and the US, which are respectively the first and second-largest carbon emitters in the world. Nevertheless, the growing tensions between these two countries on several issues are hindering the climate cooperation and the implementation of the Paris Climate Agreement. The objective of this article is to explore the evolution of climate change debate between China and the US and to analyse the factors that are likely to shape the climate responses of these two countries in the future. This article argues that without forging cooperation between China and the US combating climate change would be very difficult. This article analyses that China is unlikely to stick on to its Paris emission reduction commitments without the US re-engagement with the Paris Agreement. This article has employed a qualitative methodology in carrying out research collecting data from the primary and secondary sources.

Keywords: *Climate Change, COVID-19, Abatement Cost, Climate Risk, Realism, Liberalism, Paris Agreement*

Introduction

The impacts of climate change are felt all over the world. The Fifth Assessment Report of the IPCC observes that “the warming of the climate system is unequivocal. The atmosphere and ocean have warmed up, the amounts of snow and ice have diminished and sea level has risen.”¹ The report clearly states that ‘anthropogenic emissions driven by economic and population growth is the dominant cause of global warming.’² It was in this scenario, in order to reduce the overall greenhouse gas emissions, the Paris Agreement was given form in 2015. The Paris Agreement aims to hold down the increase in global average temperature level by 2 degree Celsius and encourages countries to continue their efforts to limit the temperature increase to 1.5 degree Celsius above the pre-industrial level.³ However, the present COVID-19 crisis has posed a major challenge to the efforts of the countries to bring down the overall emission

level.

The threats posed by COVID-19 are multifaceted. The pandemic has shaken the multilateral world order and has intensified the tensions between countries. The US's dominant status in the world politics appears to be shaken, with its apparent failure both in controlling the pandemic and in providing leadership to the world in addressing the crisis.⁴ The US, appears to be in a crisis point like many other countries without knowing how to handle the COVID-19 situation domestically and internationally. While some argue that in the wake of COVID-19 pandemic the US power is waning; others point out that China which is continuously striving to challenge the US dominance sees this as an opportunity to rise as the most dominant power in international politics countering the US hegemony.⁵ In the context of an ongoing political battle between the US and China over a range of issues including trade and technology, how both the countries would respond to the intensifying climate situation in a post-COVID era is crucial to analyse.⁶ At present, both China and the US are in first and second positions respectively in contributing to global carbon emissions. In this scenario, how China-US tensions would affect the course of climate politics, in the long run, requires further examination.

This article analyses the factors that are likely to worsen the present climate crisis in the context of recurring tensions between the US and China and argues why US-China cooperation becomes inevitable in addressing the present climate scenario. The main objective of this article is to examine how the tensions between China and the US are affecting the implementation of international climate agreements. Secondly, this paper attempts to understand the perceptions of China and the US towards climate issue and how the positioning of these countries shape their responses to the global climate politics. This paper has used a qualitative method in carrying out research collecting data from primary and secondary sources. Government documents, international climate change agreements, policy papers, books, articles, internet sources etc. have been widely used for conducting the study. This paper argues that though China and the US are suspicious of each other's actions, China-US climate cooperation is the only alternative at the moment to overcome the current climate crisis. In order to ensure climate cooperation between China and the US, the US needs to re-engage with the Paris Agreement. Thirdly, China and the US considering their overall emissions will no longer be able to stay away from shouldering their responsibility in contributing to climate change. Lastly, climate change is also an opportunity for both China and the US to expand their soft power capabilities.

This paper is organised into eight sections. The first section deals with how realist interests are driving the actions of China and the US thereby reducing the possibility of cooperation between both the countries at global stage. The second section gives a detailed analysis on the evolution of China-US debate over climate change since the Stockholm Conference till date. The

third section is on the vulnerability facing by China and the US owing to the impacts of climate change. While China is having high vulnerability to climate change, the US vulnerability to climate change is relatively low. The fourth section is an account of the US-China debate over the Kyoto Protocol and how the Protocol became the centre of debate between the North and South. The fifth section deals with the responses of China and the US towards the Paris Climate Agreement and the factors that persuaded the US to withdraw from the Paris Agreement. The sixth section provides a detailed analysis of the challenges that COVID-19 is posing to climate change and how it would shape the responses of China and the US towards climate change. This section also examines the future prospects of the Paris Agreement. The final section which is the conclusion argues that without the cooperation between China and the US combating climate change would be difficult in a post-COVID scenario. However, for forging climate cooperation between both the powers, the US re-engagement with the Paris Agreement is an essential condition.

Theoretical Framework

The great power rivalry between China and the US have entered into a new phase now. The competition between both the powers that had started with tensions over trade has now moved beyond the economic realm. China's Belt and Road infrastructure projects, China's supremacy in technology, domination over global supply chains of important sectors have exacerbated the tension between China and the US. US sees China now as a threat to its strategic security. US believe that China is the biggest threat to its Indo-Pacific strategy and the rise of China in the global stage would shatter the liberal international order that the US had nurtured till this time. China's expansionist strategy and hegemonic ambitions have brought the US to a path of confrontation. The China-US relationship is now characterised by political and security issues as well. One of the reasons for the US withdrawal from the Paris Agreement was the emission peaking time fixed for China and India which is till 2030, the US is forced to peak its emissions by 2025. US calculates that this would adversely affect its economic prospects while China benefits out of it.

The present COVID-19 crisis has intensified the China-US rivalry. US blames China over the outbreak of coronavirus. On the other side, China argues that 'it might be the US army that brought the virus to Wuhan.' The US-China rivalry has intensified with the US suspension of aid to WHO alleging that the WHO has become a China centric organisation. This ongoing conflict between the great powers have potential to affect the climate cooperation as well. As of now, it is the typical realist politics that govern the actions of China and the US.

Realist theory in IR assumes that states are the most important actors in international relations and the role of institutions in addressing the crisis

is only secondary. While observing the current climate politics, it is evident that the US and China are the most important state actors whose decisions are crucial in shaping the future of any international agreement. For example, the Kyoto Protocol could not produce expected outcomes because of the US withdrawal. Secondly, realist theory assumes that state actions in international politics are guided by national interest alone. The US decision to withdraw from the Paris Agreement is a reflection of this. Furthermore, it is yet uncertain whether China will be staying in the Agreement sacrificing its economic interest in the context of the US disengagement. Thirdly, the realist theory assumes that international politics is anarchic as there is no world government to govern the actions of states. In such a situation, states would either cooperate or compete with each other in order to maximise their power. In realist politics, military and economic power is leveraged over soft power. Though climate change is acknowledged as a threat to global security, it ranks below in the priority list of most of the nations. Earlier, the withdrawal of many industrialised countries including the US, Russia, Canada and Japan from the Kyoto Protocol reflects that countries prioritise economic growth over climate security.

In a post-COVID world, realist politics is expected to gain more ground as many industrialised countries are going through an economic crisis followed by the pandemic driven lockdown. In a post-pandemic world, the immediate attention of countries would naturally shift to secure economic and health security rather than reducing GHG emissions. In this scenario, it is essential to bring together all nations under one platform to make them commit to combat climate change. The international institutions can play a major role in this. UNFCCC is the best available platform formed by the states to monitor the GHG emission reductions.

Differently from realist theory, theory of liberalism in international relations argues that despite varied national interests, cooperation between states is possible primarily through international institutions. Climate change being a global challenge requires the active participation of states to combat it. The framing of the Kyoto Protocol and the Paris Agreement was the product of liberalism in international politics. Liberal internationalists point out that ‘climate change is an issue area wherein states have a common interest. Hence a co-operative strategy on this issue will lead them to absolute gains for common good.’⁷ By highlighting the role of organizations in international relations, ‘liberal institutionalists place more stress on the soft power and attempts to seek cooperation in all possible means through-diplomacy, international organizations and international law.’⁸ On the other hand, realists are sceptical of climate change cooperation between countries in the international realm as they believe that states’ interests are varied from one another.⁹ Realists argue that relative-gain/loss concerns, differing perceptions and climate of mistrust prevailing among the nation-states would make the possibility for cooperation almost impossible in the international climate politics.¹⁰

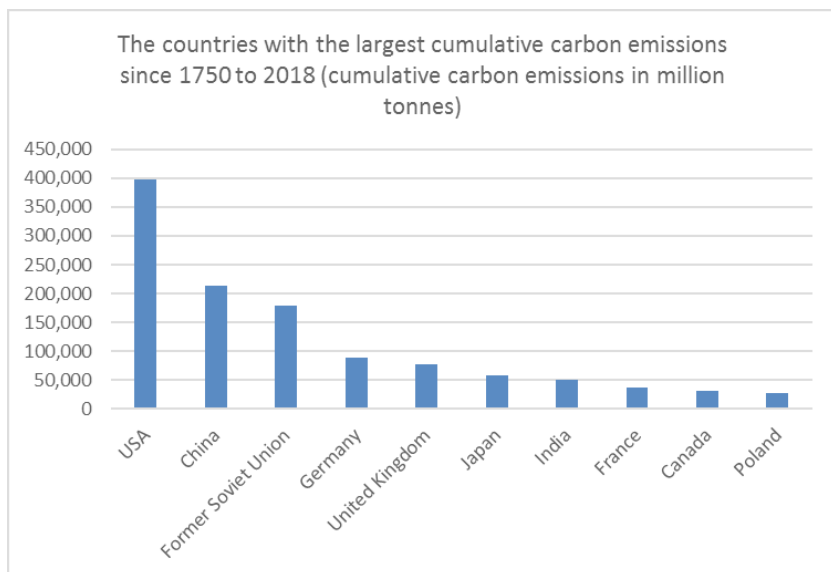
In short, while realists view transactions in climate politics through the lens of suspicion, mistrust and competition, liberalists view climate change as an issue area where all states have a common interest to cooperate as climate change is a global problem that affects everyone's security.¹¹ Liberalists believe that forging cooperation between states on this issue is possible through international agreements. They point out that climate change negotiations and conferences have given a platform for the developed countries and developing countries to come together and discuss their concerns. If realists are pessimistic about the possibility for cooperation between countries in the climate world, liberalists are optimistic about the opportunity for cooperation. However, liberalists have failed to explain how common goals can be actually achieved in a world of mutual suspicion and mistrust.

While observing the current climate politics, it is evident that realist politics has a clear domination over liberalism as states always pursue their self-interest defying international norms and agreements. China has followed a defensive realist strategy in pursuing its goals in the global climate politics. Defensive realism argues that in an anarchic international system a state behaves in a certain way as part of its survival strategy. The two factors that have persuaded China to shift from a reluctant player to an active player in global climate politics are its vulnerability to climate change and the abatement cost of climate action. If the high abatement cost of taking climate action had forced China to remain as a passive player in climate negotiations in the late 1990's, its growing vulnerability to climate change is factored in bringing it to the climate leadership in the recent years. However, the high abatement cost of climate action will discourage China to take more emission reduction responsibility. On the other side, the US has pursued an offensive realist strategy towards ratifying the international climate agreements. US's high abatement cost, low ecological vulnerability, high adaptive capacity, financial and technological resources persuaded it to remain as a reluctant player in shouldering the climate responsibility. US has always prioritised its economic interests over environmental considerations. The withdrawal of the US from the Kyoto Protocol and of late from the Paris Agreement reflects that it is ultimately the realist politics that rule the US interests. If the actions of US and China are continuing to be guided by the realist interests in global climate regime, it will ultimately lead to the collapse of the Paris Agreement, which will replace the Kyoto Protocol from 2021.

Literature Review

Though all countries have contributed to the present climate crisis, their share of contribution is different from one another. Developed countries remain as the most responsible Parties for climate change because of their significant share of carbon emissions into the global atmosphere, while emissions from developing

countries and least developed countries remain relatively low.¹² Among all countries, the US has the highest historical responsibility for contaminating the atmosphere. Figure 1 shows the highest carbon emitter countries in the world and their cumulative carbon emissions from 1750 to 2018 in million tonnes. In between 1750 to 2018, while the US emitted 397,157 million tonnes, China which comes in the second position had emitted relatively less that is 213,843 million tonnes.¹³



(Figure 1, Source: Carbon Brief, 2018)

In per capita emissions also the US is far ahead compared to China. Figure 2 reveals the per capita emissions, carbon emissions and the population of the world’s largest ten emitter countries. According to the 2016 statistics, while the US emitted 15.52 tonnes per capita, China’s per capita emission was 7.38 tonnes. India, which comes in the third position, has emitted only 1.91 tonnes per capita.

CO₂ Per Capita Emissions in tonnes, 2016

Country	CO ₂ emissions per capita in tonnes	CO ₂ emissions in tonnes	Population
China	7.38	10,432,751,400	1,414,049,351
US	15.52	5,011,686,600	323,015,995
India	1.91	2,533,638,100	1,324,517,249
Russia	11.44	1,661,889,300	145,275,383

Japan	9.70	1,239,592,060	127,763,265
Germany	9.44	775,752,190	82,193,768
Canada	18.58	675,918,610	36,382,944
Iran	8.08	642,560,030	79,563,989
South Korea	11.85	604,043,830	50,983,457
Indonesia	2.03	530,035,650	261,556,381

(Figure 2, Source: Worldometer,

<https://www.worldometers.info/co2-emissions/co2-emissions-per-capita/>)

Since the founding of People’s Republic China (PRC) in 1949, its emissions were mainly survival emissions. On the other hand, the US was already an industrialised country by then. It was with the creation of the United Nations Environmental Programme (UNEP), China entered into the international climate table. In the 1972 Stockholm Conference, the PRC delegate argued “environmental pollution is the result of the policy of plunder, aggression and war carried out by imperialist, colonialist and neo-colonialist countries”¹⁴

By 1980’s, the former PRC leader Deng Xiaoping’s economic reforms and its consequent growing demand for energy had enhanced the GHG emissions in China. However ‘GHG emissions from China were still half of the US emissions by 1990.’¹⁵ Towards the end of 1990s, China and India could convince the industrialised nations to take up binding emission reduction commitments under the Kyoto Protocol. However, the US, even after signing the Protocol, withdrew from it pointing out the exemption given to China and India from taking binding commitments. By 2007, China overtook the US to become the largest emitter of carbons in the world. In this scenario, the only option available before China was to take up emission reduction responsibilities. In 2015, the US and China entered into a bilateral climate agreement for reducing GHG emissions. This climate agreement was signed under the initiative of the former US President Barack Obama and the PRC President Xi Jinping. From thereon, both the countries started working collectively for framing the Paris Agreement. At the Paris Conference in 2015, China made an unconditional pledge to reduce its carbon emissions by 60 to 65% from the 2005 level by 2030.¹⁶ The US also pledged that it would reduce its emissions 26 to 28 percent by 2025 from the 2005 level.¹⁷ Compared to the first phase of the China-US dispute over climate burden sharing, this period was more of a period of cooperation between both the players.

The third phase of the China-US debate over climate change began with the assumption of Donald Trump into the US Presidency. The Trump Administration’s decision to withdraw the US from the Paris Agreement disrupted the flow of climate partnership between both the countries. Before assuming office, President Trump had tweeted that ‘global warming itself is a ploy by China to hamper the economic growth of the US.’ He called “climate change a Chinese hoax.”¹⁸ In the Whitehouse speech withdrawing the US

from the Paris deal, President Trump stated that ‘Paris Agreement is an unfair Agreement to the US because it favours China and India more.’¹⁹ At present, China-US relationship over climate change has moved from a cooperative framework to a confrontational path. Paul G. Harris argues “the concept of international equity has only limited acceptance in the US. National interests-environmental, economic and security interests-require that the US find means to bring about international environmental cooperation.”²⁰ On the other hand, China is gradually improving its image in the climate world. Lisa Williams argues “despite China’s reputation for being a climate change laggard, the country is putting real effort into reducing carbon emissions.”²¹

The China-US tension has increased dramatically in the past few years especially with the trade war politics between both the countries.²² This has implications for climate politics as well. There are three main issues that bring China and the US to a confrontational path over climate change issue.²³ First, the US argues for setting up robust rules in the climate regime to account emissions from all countries, including from developing countries. However, China has expressed its dissent to this proposal and argue that it will not allow any outside scrutiny of its carbon emissions. Second, China wants to hold the US accountable for climate change related loss and damage. Now, with the withdrawal of the US from the Paris Agreement, developing countries would face the challenge of mobilizing financial and technological resources. Third, China would be forced to shoulder more climate burden in the absence of the US from the Paris Agreement. This would reduce the carbon space for China. In this scenario, without the re-engagement of the US with the Paris Agreement, the issues between both China and the US are likely to remain unresolved. Christine Loh and Robert Gottlieb note “the US worries that China has become a political and economic threat. China worries that the US is attempting to constrain it. These concerns increasingly resemble a classic Cold War conflict.”²⁴ They argue that ‘trade war, technology dispute and national rhetoric are creating a Cold War environment which stall climate cooperation between both the countries.’²⁵

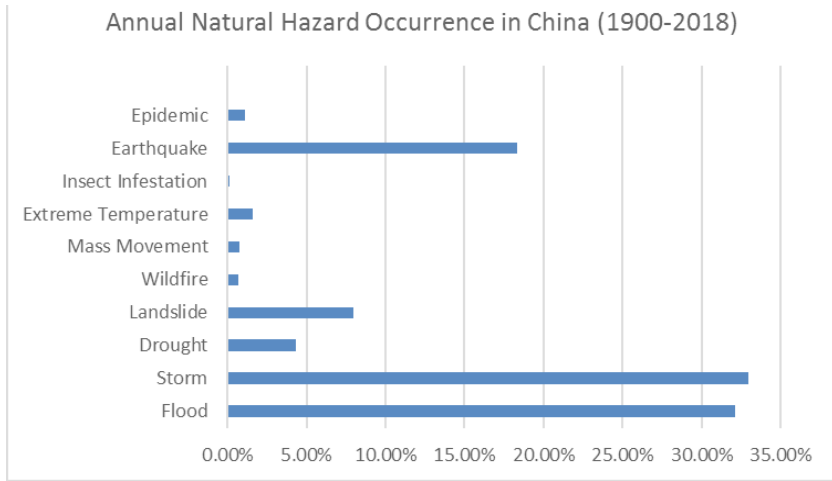
COVID-19 pandemic has a significant influence on the conduct of international relations.²⁶ Realist and liberal theories of IR have different predictions about the evolution of a post-COVID world. While liberalists argue that the COVID-19 pandemic has reinforced the spirit of multilateralism by forcing states to unite behind the international institutions as many of these issues are global and beyond the individual control of nation-states, realists point out that the COVID-19 situation has proved it is the state responses which ultimately matter in international politics and not the international institutions.²⁷ While realists uphold the primacy of states in resolving the dilemmas of international politics, liberalists believe that international institutions have a significant role to play in crises by warranting cooperation between even conflicting parties.²⁸ In a post-COVID world, the first priority of

countries would be to strengthen their economies. Attaining economic growth would lead to more emissions as well. In such a scenario, whether China would be able to keep its Paris pledge is doubtful. Other industrialised countries which have already submitted their emission reduction commitments under the Paris Agreement would also face the similar dilemma. As the Paris Agreement does not impose any penalty on those countries that are non-complying with the emission reduction commitments, there is a possibility that the countries may delay or postpone their emission reduction.

Climate Change Vulnerability Index of China and the US

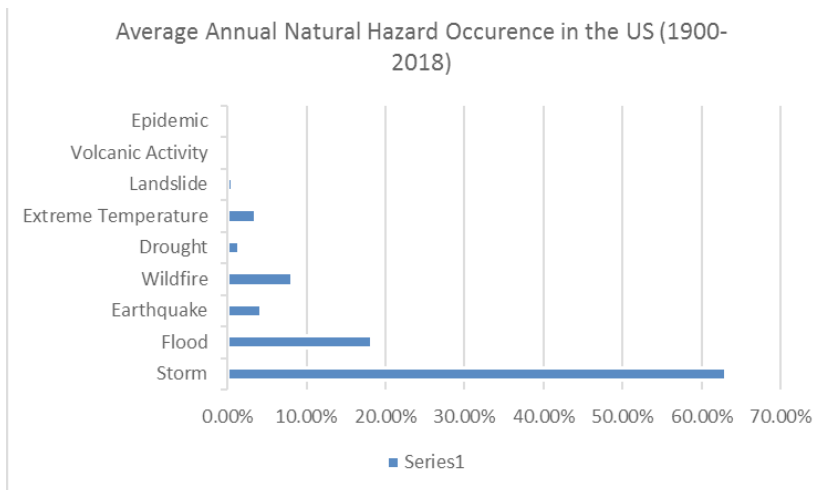
Like any other country, China and the US are vulnerable to the impacts of climate change. In the US, between 1901 and 2016, the annual average temperature had increased by 1.86 degrees Fahrenheit, and it is expected to rise in the coming years as well. Hurricanes, changing weather patterns, and melting of glaciers are posing increasing security risks to the US in the past few years. In the case of China, frequent flooding, tropical cyclones, earthquakes, landslides etc are posing risks to economic and human security. However, the climate vulnerability level of China and the US is different from one another.

China is more vulnerable to the impacts of climate change compared to the US. According to the Inform Index for Risk Management, China is ranked 71 out of 194 countries in terms of disaster risk level.²⁹ China is identified as a country which faces 'medium' risk from climate impacts. China's Third Assessment Report on Climate Change published in 2015 clearly shows that China is facing the threats of sea level rise, melting of glaciers, extreme weather events, increasing atmospheric pollution etc.³⁰ Out of 654 largest cities in China, 641 cities are now experiencing regular flooding.³¹ Now, climate change is a high priority issue area for China. This shift is evident in the PRC's foreign policy as well. Increasing domestic support for climate action has persuaded China to consider climate change as one among its foreign policy priority areas. Figure 3 shows the annual natural hazard occurrence in China from 1900 to 2018.



(Figure 3 Source: <https://climateknowledgeportal.worldbank.org/country/china/vulnerability>) Compared to China, the US has relatively low risk from climate change.

According to Inform for Risk Management, the US is ranked 102 among 194 countries in terms of climate vulnerability.³² Figure 4 shows the annual average hazard occurrence in the US from 1900 to 2018.



(Figure 4, Source: <https://climateknowledgeportal.worldbank.org/country/united-states/vulnerability>)

According to Sprinz and Vaahtoranta, US's relatively low ecological vulnerability and the high abatement cost makes it a 'dragger state' in ratifying the international climate agreements.³³ As long as the US vulnerability to climate change remains low, the US would remain as a reluctant power in ratifying the international emission reduction agreements.

US-China Debate over the Kyoto Protocol

The beginning of the US-China debate over climate change can be traced back to the Kyoto Protocol years.³⁴ The Kyoto Protocol, was framed in 1997.³⁵ The principle of 'historical responsibility' was one of the deciding factors in fixing the emission reduction target under the Kyoto Protocol. However, the US failed to ratify the Protocol stating that the US is not ready yet to commit to any binding agreement which invites economic burden on it and exempts large developing countries especially China from taking binding emission reduction commitments under the Protocol.³⁶ Being the biggest emitter of carbon dioxide emissions in 1997, the US's reluctance to bear the responsibility for historical emissions had persuaded other emitter states such as Japan, Canada and Russia to back out from the Kyoto Protocol. The withdrawal of the major developed countries from the Kyoto Protocol was the main factor that ultimately led to the partial failure of the Kyoto treaty.

The Kyoto Protocol came into form centring on the principle of 'common but differentiated responsibility' (hereafter CBDR). The CBDR principle means that while all countries share the collective responsibility for combating climate change, some countries namely the developed countries have more responsibility for emission reduction due to their enormous past emissions compared to the developing countries.³⁷ China's stance in the international climate forums since the 1990s was based on this CBDR principle.³⁸ During the first phase of the Kyoto Protocol, climate change was an issue of low-priority for the PRC policymakers, and it had not even figured among the foreign policy priorities of the country. It was not the environmental issues that mattered to China in the first phase of the Kyoto Protocol, but the economic competitiveness of the country.³⁹ Though the US had failed to ratify the Kyoto Protocol, in 2002, China ratified the Kyoto Protocol without taking any binding commitments. However, the emissions from China started to grow exponentially after the year 2006. If China had emitted only 73,406 million tonnes during the years from 1750 to 2000, the cumulative emissions from China witnessed an exponential growth touching 213,843 million tonnes in 2018.⁴⁰ Now, China is no more in a position to invoke the 'common but differentiated responsibility' principle as it has already become the largest emitter of carbons in the world. When the Paris Agreement was framed in 2015, China had no option but to join the Agreement for reducing global emissions.

China, US Responses to the Paris Agreement

The non-compliance of the developed countries to the Kyoto Protocol provisions, the rapidly growing global emissions from major economies such as China and India and increasing vulnerability of countries to climate impacts are the factors that have influenced the framing of a new Agreement which can regulate global emissions at the conference held in the Paris in 2015. In the 2015 Paris Conference, it was decided to limit the global temperature rise well below 2 degree Celsius above the pre-industrial level and to continue the efforts to limit the increase in temperature to 1.5 degree Celsius. The Paris Agreement opened for signature on 22nd April 2016 and finally entered into force on 4th November 2016 receiving nationally determined emission reduction commitments from countries. As of now, 189 countries have ratified the Paris Agreement.

China and the US have ratified the Paris Climate Agreement in 2016 accepting voluntary emission reduction commitments. However, in 2017, the US President Donald Trump declared the unilateral withdrawal of the US from the Paris Agreement pointing out the economic implications the Agreement has on the US. This was a massive setback to the till then held international climate negotiations. It was the US fear of losing its economic competitiveness to China that persuaded the Trump Administration to declare the pulling out of the US from the Paris Agreement. China's economic rise, US's ongoing trade war with China, US suspicion of China's domestic emission reduction programmes and the US fear of losing its national sovereignty were factored in the US decision to back out from the Paris Agreement. Even after the US decision to withdraw from the Paris Agreement came out, China and India have stated that they would stick on to their emission reduction promises under the Paris Agreement. However, to what extent China would be keeping its Paris promise in the context of the US disengagement from the Paris Agreement is doubtful.

US is relatively less vulnerable to climate change. However, climate change is posing a strategically significant risk to the US national security in the past few years. Therefore, some realists argue that it is essential for the US to address the climate problem from its national security perspective.⁴¹ However, realists suggest that taking domestic climate action is the most viable solution for the US than being part of international agreements that imposes a heavy economic burden on the country. The US believes that even if it is taking international commitments, whether China would be taking any substantial domestic emission reduction is doubtful in the current scenario because China is still reluctant to undergo the international monitoring and verification of its emission reduction. In the absence of sufficient evidence to prove that China is taking emission reduction, it is unlikely that the US would undertake adequate measures to cut emissions domestically.

COVID-19 and its Effect on China-US Relations

COVID-19 has already given way to a set of heated arguments between China and the US. The US President Donald Trump called COVID 19 a ‘Chinese Virus’.⁴² US believe that China deliberately hid the news about the outbreak of the virus in Wuhan and underreported the actual number of death cases happened in the country.⁴³ The US alleges that the World Health Organisation (WHO) is biased towards China and has failed to warn the world about the outbreak of the Coronavirus.⁴⁴ On the other hand, China argues that it is the US that brought the virus to Wuhan and therefore the US owes an explanation to China on this matter.⁴⁵ This mutual blame game and conspiracy theories behind the creation of the virus have given way to scepticism and pessimism in the international system. Moreover, tensions between these two big powers-U.S. and China may push the global order to a new power struggle on many vital issues. Climate change is definitely one among them.

As the US and China are concerned about their national image, finding fault with each other for spreading the pandemic would make the global system more unpredictable. As of now, the trade war between China and the US is going on unabatedly. In this uncertain situation, any additional factors to the prevailing tensions will make the international system more chaotic. While China opened its national borders after a prolonged shutdown followed by the pandemic, the US was imposing severe restrictions on visa processing and migration to the US. The US is worried whether China which nurtures hegemonic ambitions would subvert the international system challenging the US dominance. This fear and mutual suspicion between these two big players in international politics is threatening the security of other states as well.

Many argue that China will be challenging the US image as a global leader in the near future as the US has failed to provide an effective leadership to this global crisis.⁴⁶ During the pandemic, the US was not willing even to relax the economic sanctions imposed on Iran while Iran was struggling with the COVID-19 threat. Campbell and Doshi note that ‘the US position as a global leader over the past seven decades was not just the product of its wealth and power but was built on the legitimacy that flows from the US domestic governance, provision of global public goods and the ability to coordinate a global response to crises. The Coronavirus is testing all these three elements of the US leadership.’⁴⁷ On the other side, China’s ‘Belt and Road Initiative’, increasing footprints in the Asia-Pacific Region, leadership to combat climate change and worldwide supply chains are matters of concern to the U.S. Richard Haass argues “if waning American leadership, faltering global cooperation, great-power discord were the characteristics of the international environment before the arrival of COVID-19, these features are likely to sharpen in a post COVID world.”⁴⁸ Lucchese and Pianta point out that “with the retreat of America and the paralysis of Europe, the West has no project for the world

order, in stark contrast to the dynamism of Asia and China.”⁴⁹

COVID-19 raises the question if the concept of globalization is in crisis point.⁵⁰ There is no doubt that globalization has reached a new turning point now. If open markets, open borders, cultural assimilation, migration etc. were the characteristics of globalization, COVID-19 has altered this scenario. With the outbreak of COVID-19, border controls, migration rules, regulations on the import of goods, market supplies etc. have been tightened by different countries. This protectionist policy is a massive setback to the ideas that globalization is advocating. French Foreign Minister Jean-Yves-Le-Drian says “the COVID-19 outbreak is exacerbating threats to the multilateral world order. What we are seeing is the continuation of the struggle between powers”, referring to the tension between China and the US.⁵¹ In the wake of COVID-19, the declining trend of multilateralism is expected to have ramifications on international climate change initiatives as well.

Many argue that the COVID-19 pandemic has dramatically reduced the global greenhouse gas emissions.⁵² However, the emissions are likely to proliferate when countries increase their production and economic growth in a post-pandemic world. The greenhouse gas emissions and climate crisis is likely to worsen in a post-COVID scenario if strict measures are not taken to regulate the emissions. The US has already announced its withdrawal from the Paris Agreement in 2017.⁵³ This will worsen the present climate scenario. At present, the Paris Agreement is the only existing international climate agreement which is ratified by the majority of countries to regulate emissions. In the absence of the US from the Paris Agreement, combating climate change would be a huge challenge in a post-COVID world.

In fact, the COVID-19 pandemic is reshaping the prevailing multilateral world order.⁵⁴ The ‘America First’ policy of the US, the growth of nationalist sentiments in Brazil and Britain’s European Union exit are reflections that nationalism is gaining momentum over globalism. In a post-COVID world, if aggressive nationalism thrives, that would indeed intensify the inequality prevailing in the climate world. Developing countries would find it hard to combat climate challenges due to their scarcity of resources while the developed countries which have surplus resources find it relatively easy to combat the crisis. Climate change negotiations between the countries would happen only in a multilateral world order. Only under the banner of international organizations, climate change agreements can sustain momentum and secure climate cooperation. Hence, the present challenge that COVID-19 posing to the spirit of multilateralism is likely to affect adversely the global climate change combating initiatives as well. Secondly, in a post-COVID world, there is high possibility that the climate change issue may take a back seat while the economic issues are prioritized.⁵⁵ In the efforts to regain economic growth, states may relax their environmental norms in a post-COVID era.⁵⁶ Any dilution of the environmental norms for securing economic growth would

exacerbate the existing climate problem.

In a post-pandemic world, it is less likely that the US would continue with its climate funding for developing countries.⁵⁷ With the withdrawal of the US from the Paris Agreement, climate funding from the US would be stalled. Many developing countries and least developed countries have set their Paris emission reduction goals eyeing on the funding from the developed world. In the present scenario, if developed countries are not transferring adequate financial resources to the developing countries which are already struggling hard financially due to the pandemic imposed economic slowdown, meeting the Paris climate promises would remain as a major challenge.

Climate change negotiations have almost lost their continuity with the outbreak of the COVID-19. This year's Glasgow Climate Change Conference has been postponed to 2021. It is unlikely that climate change conferences would happen this year due to the pandemic situation. Climate conferences were always a platform for the countries to voice their opinion and concerns on climate matters. With the suspension of climate change conferences this year, discussing the Paris emission reduction goals is facing a setback.

Amidst the challenges that COVID-19 poses, it is uncertain, how the US and China would be responding to the climate challenge. However, it is certain that the immediate priority of both the countries in a post-COVID world would be to boost their economies. Combating climate change problem in a post-COVID world depend on the nature of the relationship shared between the US and China. As of now, China and the US are in a confrontational path on several issues. US-China trade war politics, China's expansionist ambitions, China's One Belt and One Road Initiative, US's desire to maintain its hegemony in the international order and of late, the debates over the origin of Coronavirus have brought the relationship between both the countries to a new low. Lieberthal and Sandalow point out that the mutual distrust, different expectations on technology, finance and shared expectations of high costs are the factors that influence the US-China cooperation on climate change.⁵⁸ Being the highest contributors to global emissions, the cooperation between China and the US is inevitable for the successful implementation of any new international climate agreement and the effective conduct of international climate negotiations. Small Island Countries are looking up to the US and China for leading the climate change initiatives that are going on internationally.⁵⁹

The US Response

Though there is a growing demand for the US re-engagement with the Paris Agreement, it is unlikely that the US would consider this call to re-join the Agreement due to various reasons. Firstly, the US has cited economic reasons as the most important reason for its disengagement from the Paris Agreement.⁶⁰ Secondly, the US calculates that if it is re-entering the Paris Agreement, it will

damage not only the US economic prospects but also will cause losing out to China in the ongoing trade war. Thirdly, the political divergences within the US over the climate issue and the opposition from a large section of Republicans are also persuading the US not to ratify any international emission reduction agreement. The strong influence of pressure groups within the US, especially the fossil fuel industries, have also played a role in dissuading the US presidents from ratifying the international climate change agreements.⁶¹ It is reported that the Exxon Oil Mobile Company in the US had influenced the former US President George Bush to withdraw the US from the Kyoto Protocol.⁶²

Undoubtedly, the US rejection of these international agreements after doing a cost-benefit analysis is a typical realist strategy. It is the economic interests that have guided the US policy on climate change so far. The idea of collective security has given way to vested national interests when it came to the ratification of the Kyoto Protocol and the Paris Agreement by the US. The US decision on these international agreements could be seen as an extension of its domestic interests. Realists argue that a state frames its foreign policy based on its national interest. Implementation of any international emission reduction agreement without active engagement of the US is meaningless in the current scenario as the US is the second largest carbon emitter in the world.

The decision of the US to withdraw from the two most important international climate change agreements have indeed undermined its image in the climate world. If the US has to maintain its hegemony in international politics, the country must come out of its hard-liner image in climate negotiations. The US influence would shrink further in a post-COVID scenario if it continues to act as a reluctant power in addressing the issues that are threatening the global climate security. In reality, climate change is an opportunity for the US to expand its dominance in the international politics. If the US leads the initiatives to address climate change that would not only enhance its image and prestige in the international arena but also would encourage other states as well which are reluctant to initiate climate action to enter the climate mainstream. Climate change issue is a challenge and an opportunity for the US. Substantive engagement with the climate issue would help the US to enhance its soft power capability and to ignore the debates that are emerging now claiming that the US influence is waning.

The PRC Response

It was from Wuhan in China that the COVID-19 pandemic spread across the world. Though China was severely affected by the pandemic, the country did not take much time to recover from this tragedy compared to the US. However, emissions in China which touched the lowest in the recent decades due to lockdown have gotten back to normal once the restrictions are relaxed.⁶³ This

hints that emissions in other countries also including India, would grow at an alarming rate once the lockdown restrictions are completely withdrawn. In the efforts to recover from the economic slowdown, one may suspect whether China would be taking climate action seriously. Currently, air pollution is the primary concern of China. China is also suffering from extreme weather impacts emanating from climate change such as the melting of glaciers. In this scenario, taking domestic action on climate change is extremely important for China as well. However, many are doubtful whether China would be willing to reduce its emissions keeping the Paris emission reduction pledge intact in a Post-COVID period in the context of the current economic slowdown and the ongoing trade war with the US.

Till 1990s, China was a hard-liner in climate negotiations. However, China's growing vulnerability to climate change, low-carbon opportunities, increasing emissions, hegemonic ambitions and expansionist strategy have forced it to shed its climate reluctant position and to engage proactively with the climate negotiations.⁶⁴ Engaging with climate negotiations at the international level has indeed enhanced China's international image especially among the G77 countries.⁶⁵ Now climate change has become an inevitable part of China's foreign policy agenda. China's strong presence in the international climate bodies has benefitted it in raising the issues of inequity and injustice happening with the developing countries in the climate world. This has earned a special place for it among the G-77 countries. Addressing the climate change issue is an opportunity for China as well to challenge the US dominance. Already China is the second-largest economy in the world and the largest trading partner of the US. China has a clear dominance in the global supply chains too. If China is deciding to tactfully handle the climate change issue by bringing developing countries and small island states together under one umbrella that will create a moral dilemma for the US in the context of its climate inaction.

The Future of the Paris Agreement

The Paris Agreement, which came into form in 2015, would collapse if the political climate is getting worse due to the existing tensions between the US and China. It is a fact that the withdrawal of the US has already undermined the efficacy of the Paris Agreement. Secondly, how long China would be single-handedly leading the Paris Agreement is also uncertain. In 2015, US-China leadership was the catalyst in framing the Paris Agreement. The US and China together are responsible for more than 40% of the global carbon emissions.⁶⁶ Though the per capita emission gap between the US and China is vast, both the countries cannot move away from their responsibility for polluting the global atmosphere in the past years. Hence, it is essential for both the actors to rework on their climate change strategy and to find out areas where both can engage, cooperate and collaborate.

In the year 2020, the United Nations is celebrating its 75th anniversary invoking the theme that “multilateralism is not an option but a necessity.” In its ‘Future Possibilities Report’, the UN has identified climate change as a major threat which requires immediate attention of all states. If the US-China cooperation is not getting materialized in climate change, the Paris Agreement would undoubtedly face the similar fate that of the Kyoto Protocol. Climate diplomacy is the need of the hour. Both countries must think about collaborating in the renewable energy sector. If security is the thrust area of focus, climate security must be prioritized by both the countries. The COVID-19 world has now brought the China and the US to a new cold war environment. Apart from political tensions, trade and technology disputes are preventing both the countries from forming a strong alliance in combating climate change. If the US is not taking climate leadership in a post-pandemic world, there is no doubt that this would lead to the collapse of the Paris Agreement. Therefore the future of the Paris Agreement is wholly dependent on the US position and the US-China collective leadership. If the US and China collectively take global leadership of climate change regime it will not only help the humanity to attain the goals enshrined in the Paris Agreement but also will encourage other countries which are to reduce their emissions significantly.

Conclusion

There are many obstacles in realising China-US cooperation on climate change at the moment. Varied perceptions of both the countries towards climate issue, mistrust about each other’s actions, economic and political compulsions, trade issues are some of the significant challenges in forging climate cooperation between China and the US. While analysing the climate tensions between both the countries, it is visible that the approach of both the countries towards climate change is based upon typical realist principles. For both the countries, it is the economic dimensions that have mattered in their overall approach to climate change. China and the US take their climate decisions based on a cost-benefit analysis. This stance, based purely on realism, will mar the possibilities for cooperation in the climate politics. China and the US must move towards a more liberalist framework in handling the climate issue. China and the US are the most significant actors in global politics, which have the political influence, financial and technological capacity to persuade other countries to take strong action against climate change. The US decision to disengage from the Paris Agreement is nothing less than an offensive realist move. The continuous absence of the US from the global climate regime would only undermine the US hegemony in global politics and worsen the present climate crisis. At present, only through the US re-engagement with the Paris Agreement, China-US climate cooperation can be revived. In a post-pandemic world, as carbon emissions are expected to see an exponential growth, it is crucial that the US

re-engage with the Paris Agreement to force China remain committed with the Agreement. Climate change is a transnational challenge. The bilateral issues between the US and China should not prevent both the countries from collaborating with each other and in forming alliances for the collective good.

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