The Strategic Duality and Convergence of China’s Transition in the Global Climate Regime: From a Veto to a Leading Country

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Abstract
Since the mid-2010s, China has gradually but explicitly altered its position in the process of global climate negotiations, from a vetoing to a leading nation. Experts in the International Relations field have commented that the main reason is China’s aspiration to become a global power, using the “environment” as one of the effective means to consolidate the nation’s soft power and reinforce multilateral diplomacy. However, a political interpretation (seizing the opportunity to secure hegemonic power in the process of regime strengthening) does not adequately explain the complexity behind China’s changing role in this transitory period. In this regard, a question arises: “Why and how has China undergone such an evolution, particularly in the arena of climate regime?” I suggest broadly five factors along with detailed discussions. The main factors include both external (e.g. regime interplay between climate and development aid, Sino-U.S. relations, global green technology market) and internal (China’s ecological modernization). The paper argues that all those factors interacted with one another in a relatively effective way during the current transitory period of China moving toward an environmentally sustainable society. While each of the above-mentioned factors is driven by different and multi-layered forces behind them, the commonly applicable driver cutting across all factors is “the state’s strategic use of transitory duality.” The paper concludes with a brief discussion on the implications of China’s increasing role in global ecological development.

Keywords
China’s changing status, global climate change regime, ecological development

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INTRODUCTION

This article is to provide a commentary, rather than full-length research, on China’s changing attitudes in its interaction with global environmental governance. It primarily addresses the question of how China altered her position “from a vetoing to a leading nation” in the field of global climate regimes. It provides an analysis on “the state’s strategic use of transitory duality” that led the country to leap toward transformation with a relatively successful convergence. In doing so, this article attempts to answer the question: “Why did China change its attitude, becoming more cooperative in the process of environmental regime strengthening since 2009/2010 especially in the climate change-related field?”

Liberal institutionalists including regime theorists note that, in general, a change in a state’s attitude can occur under the following circumstances: when its own understanding of the problem changes due to new scientific evidence; because its economic interests have changed; due to a change of government; under effective domestic political pressure to change its policy; for fear of negative reactions from other governments or advanced international opinion (Chasek et al 2017; Zhu et al 2016). These factors are to some degree applicable to China’s case also although a more detailed analyses, specifically on China “and” on climate change regime need adding. The term, “regime” is used, employing Max Weber, Shapiro, for example, to explain the “[p]rocess, policies, laws, and institutions that shape social relations and guide public attitudes and behavior” (Shapiro 2014: 19). It can be understood as a kind of loose global entity that has shaped member countries and citizens’ attitudes and their relationships, structured by a set of norms, principles, laws (binding or non-binding), and regulations, and participated in by state actors and non-state actors alike.

Over the last two decades or so since 1997 when the Kyoto Protocol was first adopted, all the subsequent meetings of the Conference of Parties (COP) afterwards suffered a great deal from fierce conflicts of interests among the participating countries. Accordingly, the evolution of the global climate change regime ever since has witnessed a sharp division between so-called historical emitters (western advanced economies), and emerging emitters that had been represented by China with strong support by other major developing countries, notably, India and Brazil.

Nevertheless, since the 2014 meeting (COP20), China has been its attitude, changing diplomatic stance from an outspoken veto to, allegedly a lead nation. Finally in 2015 at the Paris COP21, China became explicitly cooperative, and insinuated that the country will be a responsible partner in resolving global issues especially climate change that has become...