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We need a realist approach to climate cooperation.

The limits of cooperation

Many agree that addressing climate change requires international cooperation. Indeed, COP26 has seen the announcement of several new international frameworks for climate action: The Global Methane Pledge, a commitment to halt deforestation by 2030, amongst others. These join a list of existing international agreements, most notably the 2015 Paris Agreement.

However cooperation is difficult due to two main concerns: Relative-gains, and cheating (Mearsheimer 52). Trump withdrew the United States from the Paris Agreement precisely because of relative-gains concerns, stating that the Agreement was “unfair” and “disadvantages the United States to the exclusive benefit of other countries” (Cama and Henry).

Moreover, cooperation appears to be a lose-lose situation. If other states cooperate, State X is better off cheating (i.e. not reducing its share of emissions) since it can “free ride” other states’ policies. Case in point: Although Canada committed to reducing its greenhouse gas emissions by 6%¹ in the Kyoto Protocol, national emissions instead grew by over 30% (Hrvatín). Worse, if State X implements costly climate policies but other states cheat, it would leave X disadvantaged yet still suffering the impacts of an overheating planet. This leaves states trapped in a Prisoner’s Dilemma.

The failures of the Kyoto Protocol and Paris Agreement also exemplify the weakness of international law under anarchy. Because the United Nations lacks a centralised enforcement mechanism, it is difficult to hold any state accountable (Arend 29). The U.S. faced no tangible consequences for its Paris withdrawal besides international criticism; trade partners and security

¹ Reduction from 1990 levels between 2008 and 2012

allies still continued business-as-usual. There are therefore few, if any, disincentives to discourage states from cheating.

Constructivism has helped, but not enough

Frustrated by these barriers to cooperation, the climate movement has increasingly pressured states to fulfill their joint commitments. Such efforts are led by norm entrepreneurs, including youth activists like Thunberg and celebrities like Leonardo DiCaprio. They repeatedly emphasise the *moral* responsibility that states have to tackle climate change.

This constitutes a constructivist approach, which contends that states' efforts to advance objectives can be restructured in terms of "shared norms rather than relative power" (Wendt 29). Climate activists hope that states will take climate action simply because it is right to do so, as opposed to a strict cost-benefit analysis.

Yet progress today remains slow. Despite activists' condemnation of fossil fuels, states continue to subsidise oil and gas production. Even as COP26 comes to a close, scientists warn that the world is on course to 2.4°C of warming (Ramirez), a far cry from the 1.5°C limit.

It is clear that the current emphasis on liberal institutionalism and constructivism has not - and will not - suffice. Realist theory hence brings important insights as to how we can effectively combine the moral and political spheres to accelerate action.

Overcoming the barriers of cooperation

Mearsheimer argues that "states operating in a self-help world almost always act according to their own self-interest" (33). What we need, then, are cooperation mechanisms that also align with states' narrowly conceived self-interests.

The Montreal Protocol offers an idea: Trade restrictions were imposed on non-signatories as well as states that failed to comply with targets. This had two important effects. First, states could escape the Prisoner's Dilemma through incentives to participate *and* comply, since gains from trade outweighed the economic losses of phasing out CFCs (Barrett 273). Consequently, because of full participation - all 198 UN Member States ratified the Protocol - relative gains concerns were attenuated.

Similarly, bolstering existing agreements with trade restrictions could improve outcomes. Patrick argues that trade rules should be reformed to allow "countries committed to decarbonisation to discriminate against countries that insist on conducting business as usual". This would enable states to take stronger climate action without significantly compromising their relative economic and security power, thereby incentivising cooperation.

Conclusion

In closing, the Montreal Protocol offers important lessons for climate cooperation. While trade sanctions were crucial to its success, it is important to note that liberal and constructivist features were prevalent in the agreement as well. Liberal institutionalism laid the foundation for global cooperation through providing a platform for continued negotiations. Widespread public fear over CFCs pressured states to take more decisive action. Therefore, international agreements and activism are still essential.

Ultimately however, any response to climate change is shaped by realist constraints. As Wohlforth explains, when confronted with trade-offs between collective and self-interest, states tend to choose the latter (36). The optics of optimism we saw in Glasgow will remain just that - optics - without realist enforcement.

Works Cited

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