

# An analysis of the actors, issues, and processes in international relations and the concept of power: a case of the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC)

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**ABSTRACT:** *Climate change has grown into a major contemporary and future threat to international security with the potential of resulting in the extinction of humanity and other living organisms if not addressed as a matter of priority. Efforts towards an international solution to the threat have been made under the framework of the United Nations Climate Change Conferences. However, regardless of the perilous future of a climate polluted the universe the major powers responsible for the major part of the pollution have not been sincerely committed to implementing initiatives towards reducing the environmental pollution. This can be attributed to the prioritization of self-serving national interests at the expense of global security. International relations are a vicious circle permeated by both direct and indirect power politics and the United Nations Climate Change Conferences are not spared. The powerful nations with international influence use power politics to frustrate internationally beneficial initiatives agreed upon during the conferences in order to protect national interests. This paper suggests that the major powers who also happen to be largely responsible for global warming should take a leading role in the implementation of remedial initiatives. The international community should prioritise the realisation of respective net-zero commitments as a matter of urgency.*

**Keywords:** *climate change, international security, power politics.*

## I. Introduction

Climate change includes both human-induced global warming and its large-scale impacts on weather patterns. The current climate change is more rapid than any known occurrence in Earth's history, even though there have been other periods of climate change in the past. The main contributing factor, according to Watson et al (ed), is the emission of greenhouse gases, primarily carbon dioxide. The current warming trend is particularly significant because it is unmistakably caused by human activity dating back to the industrial revolution during the mid-17th century and is now occurring at a rate that is unheard of over millennia.

Unavoidable changes in the atmosphere, ocean, cryosphere, and biosphere have taken place, while human activity has warmed the atmosphere, ocean, and land. According to scientific data, the rate of warming now is around ten times greater than it was during the ice age. Following the previous Ice Age, human activities induced carbon dioxide increased more than 250 times faster as compared to that arising from natural sources. As a result, among other things, the earth's temperature has increased, the oceans have warmed, glaciers have

retreated, there has been less snowfall, sea levels have risen, the Arctic Sea ice has shrunk, and there have been more extreme weather occurrences (NASA: 2012).

## **II. Discussion**

### **2.1. Background to the United Nations Climate Change Conferences**

International concern over the unprecedented levels of climate change and the envisaged resultant catastrophes formed the basis for the birth of the United Nations Climate Change Conferences which are held annually under the framework of the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC). They serve as the official gathering of the UNFCCC Parties (Conference of the Parties, or COP) to review the status of efforts to combat climate change and, starting in the middle of the 1990s, to negotiate the Kyoto Protocol, which imposes binding obligations on developed nations to cut their emissions of greenhouse gases.

The COP has developed into the biggest platform for the discussion of climate change issues at the international level. The conference attracts a wide range of participants comprising of nation states, intergovernmental organisations, nongovernmental organisations, academic think tanks, media houses, influential individuals and pressure groups. This paper is going to discuss the power politics associated with the conferences' activities with the COP25 held in 2019 as a focal point of assessment. It will cover the actors, the issues and the processes that occurred and provide an analysis of the power matrix in play during the conference.

The inaugural UN Climate Change Conference was held in Berlin in 1995. The Conferences now also serve as the "Conference of the Parties Serving as the Meeting of Parties to the Kyoto Protocol" (CMP), and parties to the Convention who are not parties to the Protocol are welcome to attend meetings related to the Protocol as observers. This arrangement was implemented in 2005. As part of the Durban Platform operations from 2011 to its conclusion in 2015, the meetings were also utilized to draft the Paris Agreement, which established a general course for taking action on climate change (UNFCCC: 2016). The Paris Agreement's "rulebook," or the operating manual required when it takes effect in 2020, was to be finalized at the COP25, which was held in the Spanish capital from December 2 to 13. It did this by establishing guidelines for carbon markets and other forms of international cooperation under "Article 6" of the deal. They also wanted to send a message that the UN climate process is still important and that it recognizes the enormous gap between present achievement and the world's warming reduction targets. However, the presence of climate activist Greta Thunberg who made multiple high-profile appearances in the COP25 conference halls, as well as a large protest march through the center of the Spanish capital served to underline this disparity.

In the end, though, the discussions were unable to come to an agreement in many areas, delaying decisions until the next meeting in accordance with "Rule 16" of the UN climate process. Article 6, reporting standards for openness, and "shared deadlines" for climate promises are only a few of the issues that were postponed to a time when nations would be expected to increase the scope of their initiatives. Due to this state of affairs, UN Secretary-General António Guterres expressed his disappointment in the COP25 outcomes by declaring that the international community had wasted a vital opportunity to show enhanced ambition on mitigation, adaptation, & finance to tackle the climate issue (PKMG: December 2019).

### **2.2. Major players**

The major players in the COP conference are state representatives and according to the United Nations, a total of 197 states were represented during the COP25. These can further be classified into two distinct groupings: the developed industrialised first-world nations and the third-world nations. The first world is responsible for the greater percentage of the carbon emissions while the poor nations are the ones who suffer most from the effects of climate change as they lack the resources and technology to protect themselves. Thus, it can be noted that the first world remains at the helm of the COP paying lip service to proceedings but doing nothing to rectify the situation. This is because it is in their national interests to continue with massive industrial production.

According to Figueres (15 December 2012), the pressure groups in attendance were greatly disappointed with the lack of progress on the implementation of previously adopted resolutions. Present were groups such as Climate Justice, Climate Reality, Act Alliance, Extinction Rebellion Scotland, Act for Climate, Indigenous Environmental Network and Save our Future, just to mention a few. Figueres quotes one of the demonstrators who described the COP as “an international level circus where garishly painted and gaily clothed clowns gather around a table chatting, nodding, grunting and clapping to high sounding nothing. At the end of the day everything is neatly folded away into cases to be opened again for the next year’s show”. However, there was nothing that they could do about it except to try and lobby or persuade those with the state players who controlled the power to implement agreed resolutions. Echoing a similar sentiment, Galey 2019 notes that the pressure groups lack the mandate to implement resolutions but can only march, raise placards, shout and sing to no avail. This can be attributed to the fact that in the realistic world national interests supersede everything else.

### **2.3. Power politics**

Power politics has always played a major role in the Kyoto protocol from its inception in 1997. After lengthy negotiations, the 1997 conference adopted the Kyoto Protocol, outlining Annex I countries' obligations to reduce their greenhouse gas emissions and introducing what became known as the Kyoto mechanisms, including emissions trading, the clean development mechanism, and joint implementation. Between the years 2008 and 2012, referred to as the first emissions budget period, the majority of industrialized nations and some central European economies in transition (all defined as Annex B countries) committed to legally binding decreases in the emission of greenhouse gas averaging around 6 to 8% below 1990 levels. Despite the fact that Congress refused to ratify the agreement after Clinton signed it, the United States would have had to lower its overall emissions by an average of 7% below levels as at 1990 (Shishlov, Morel and Bellassen: 2016).

Flexing its international powers, the Bush administration explicitly rejected the protocol in 2001 (Shishlov, Morel and Bellassen: 2016). Thus, it can be deduced that from its inception and running throughout the course of its life the climate change forum had not been able to achieve meaningful practical results in mitigating global warming because of the developed nations who had been taking advantage of their power and influence to refuse cooperation when in fact they are the major environmental polluters. The developing world, most of which relies on the super powers for handouts and patronage had not been able to hold them accountable. Hence the frustration of the nonstate actors, (climate change lobby groups) with the lack of tangible remedial action has been building over time.

During the course of COP 6 the discussions evolved rapidly into a high-level negotiation over major political issues. There were differences of opinion over the consequences for countries that did not meet their emission reduction targets, difficulties in resolving how developing countries could obtain financial assistance to deal with adverse effects of climate change, and perceived political controversy over the United States' proposal to allow credit for carbon "sinks" in forests and agricultural lands that would satisfy a significant portion of the U.S. emissions reductions. Despite certain compromises reached between the United States and several EU nations, most notably the United Kingdom, in the closing hours of COP 6, the EU as a whole, led by Germany and Denmark, rejected the compromise positions, and the negotiations in The Hague came to an end. Without reaching a consensus, COP-6 President Jan Pronk suspended the meeting with the intention of restarting talks later (Hickman and Bartlett: 2001). The first world nations had scuttled the efforts of the house and there was nothing that the other members could do since they lacked the power to reign in the powerful and dominating developed nations which were monopolising the gathering to safeguard self-interests.

According to Levin and Bradley (2010), no progress had been made in resolving the disagreements that had led to a deadlock in The Hague when COP 6 negotiations resumed in Bonn, Germany, on July 17–27, 2001. The United States delegation to this meeting, however, declined to take part in the negotiations related to the Protocol and opted to take on the role of an observer instead because it took place after George W. Bush had become President of the United States and had rejected the Kyoto Protocol in March 2001. To the astonishment

of the majority of onlookers, considering the low expectations that existed prior to the meeting, there was agreement on the majority of the major political concerns as the other parties negotiated the critical topics. The agreements included the "flexibility mechanisms"—emissions trading, joint implementation (JI), and the Clean Development Mechanism (CDM), which enables industrialized nations to finance emissions reduction initiatives in developing nations as an alternative to domestic emission reductions—that the United States had strongly supported when the Protocol was first put together. This was attributed to severe underhand manipulation by the United States.

King et al (2011) states that a general cap on the credit that a country might claim for sinks operations was also agreed upon, but it was also agreed that credit would be awarded for wide activities that absorb carbon from the atmosphere or store it, such as managing forests and croplands and re-vegetating areas. In order to help with needs related to climate change, it was decided to create three new funds: a fund for climate change that supports a number of climate measures; a fund for least-developed countries to support National Adaptation Programs of Action; and a fund for Kyoto Protocol adaptation supported by a CDM levy and voluntary contributions. It can therefore be argued that the meeting recoded progress because the United States, the major super power and also the biggest emitter was not an active participant having decided to attend as an observer.

Negotiators completed the Buenos Aires Plan of Action during the COP 7 conference in Marrakech, settling most of the operational issues and paving the way for countries to ratify the Kyoto Protocol. The Marrakech Accords are the name given to the final set of choices. Once more, the American delegation declined to take an active position in the negotiations and instead continued to observe. Other parties persisted in expressing hope that the United States will re-join the discussion at some time and pushed to have the Kyoto Protocol ratified by the necessary number of nations to make it effective (55 countries needed to ratify it, including those accounting for 55% of developed-country emissions of carbon dioxide in 1990). The main decisions at COP 7 included: Operational rules for international emissions trading among parties to the Protocol and for the CDM and joint implementation, a compliance regime that outlined consequences for failure to meet emissions targets, and accounting procedures for the flexibility mechanisms.(King et al: 2011).

This was followed a year later by COP8 which adopted the Delhi Ministerial Declaration that, amongst others, called for efforts by developed countries to transfer technology and minimize the impact of climate change on developing countries. The COP8 was marked by Russia's hesitation, stating that it needed more time to think it over. The Kyoto Protocol could only enter into force once it was ratified by 55 countries, including countries responsible for 55 per cent of the developed world's 1990 carbon dioxide emissions. With the United States (36.1 per cent share of developed-world carbon dioxide) and Australia refusing ratification, Russia's agreement (17% of global emissions in 1990) was pivotal for the protocol to meet the ratification criteria (Hopkin: 2004). Yet again the power matrix came to play and the forum failed to achieve the expected outcome as the developed world held it at ransom in order to protect their economic interests as the world's industrial giants guilty of massive climate pollution.

The circus was to continue during the next three COP meetings with little to show for it as the major polluters took turns to scuttle the outcomes one way or the other. Of note was COP 12/CMP which took place on 6–17 November 2006 in Nairobi, Kenya. At the meeting, BBC reporter Richard Black coined the phrase "climate tourists" to describe some delegates who attended "to see Africa, take snaps of the wildlife, the poor, dying African children and women". Black also noted that due to delegates' concerns over economic costs and possible losses of competitiveness, the majority of the discussions avoided any mention of reducing emissions. Black concluded that there was a disconnect between the political process and the scientific imperative (Richard: 18 November 2006). Despite such criticism, certain strides were made at COP12, especially in the issues surrounding support for developing countries and clean development mechanisms. The parties decided on the methods and mechanisms for the Adaptation Fund and set a five-year work plan to aid developing nations in adapting to climate change. Additionally, they decided to enhance the clean development method initiatives.

Again, it was more talk with little progress for COP 13 and 14 except to come up with principles for the financing of a fund to help the poorest nations to manage the effects of climate change. They also approved the blueprint for the incorporation of forest protection as an additional initiative towards combating climate change (Goering: 2008-12-13). It is important to highlight the irony of the outcomes in the face of the purported aim of the conference. Instead of coming out with initiatives for the reduction of climate pollution, they came out with means of assisting the poor to cope with the situation while the industrialized nations continued with their pollution activities unrestricted. The poor nations were glad to receive 'attention', however, they did not evaluate the overall value when compared to continued environmental damage by the powerful nations posing as international benefactors.

Cooper (2009-11-14) claims that the main objective of the COP 15 was to create an ambitious global climate accord that would take effect when the first application period under the Kyoto Protocol expired in 2012. However, on 14 November 2009, the New York Times announced that "President Obama and other world leaders have decided to put off the difficult task of reaching a climate change agreement... agreeing instead to make it the mission of the Copenhagen Conference to reach a less specific "politically binding" agreement that would punt the most difficult issues into the future". The Copenhagen meeting had participation from ministers and officials from 192 nations in addition to a sizable contingent from civil society organizations. More developed nations expressed reluctance to uphold Kyoto Protocol obligations. As a result, the meeting failed to provide a legally binding decision for long-term action. About 25 parties, including the US and China, negotiated a 13-paragraph "political pact," but the COP just "noted" it because it was an external document and not worked out as part of the UNFCCC process. The agreement stood out because it made reference to a shared commitment by industrialized nations to invest in forestry and other new resources through international organizations. Even though a large number of civil society organisations participated, they lacked the power to coerce the nations to implement remedial action.

The years passed by as the wealthy nations avoided making the larger and more necessary commitment to reduce pollution, focusing instead on strategies to deal with the current situation. As a result, at the COP 17 summit in 2011, it was decided to commence talks on a binding agreement involving all nations that would be adopted in 2015 and become operational from 2020 onwards. Additionally, the formation of the Green Climate Fund (GCF), for which a management framework was chosen, made some progress. The fund was to disburse \$100 billion annually to assist developing nations in coping with the effects of climate change. While the president of the conference, MaiteNkoana-Mashabane, declared it a success, scientists and environmental groups warned that the deal was not sufficient to avoid global warming beyond 2°C and advocated for more urgent action (Harvey and Vidal: 2011).

The outcome of the COP18 Conference was a raft of documents collectively referred to as The Doha Climate Gateway. An important component of this was an Amendment to the Kyoto Protocol which provided a second commitment period stretching from 2012 to 2020. A lack of commitment by the major powers: Russia, Japan, Ukraine, Belarus, and New Zealand including the United States and Canada, who were not participating parties to the Protocol at that period led to a limit in the scope of the amendment to 15% of the global carbon dioxide emissions. Furthermore, developing countries like China, Brazil and India were not subject to emissions reductions under the Kyoto Protocol. The conference made little progress toward the funding of the Green Climate Fund. (The Globe and Mail: 2012). It can be noted that at this period, the group of developing countries had become the biggest emitters as they sought to develop their economies without due regard to the environment. With that realisation, they joined the group of observers in order to avoid being bound by the resolutions of the conference.

The subsequent yearly gatherings produced little significance except for empty commitments which were not backed by action. These include the adoption of the Paris Agreement during COP 20 governing climate change reduction measures to be implemented from 2020. However, even though it received a majority vote, only about 55% of the world's nations ratified the Agreement. These comprised of the poor economies with

none of the powerful high level greenhouse gas emitters being included. Thus climate-change activist Greta Thunberg when asked during an interview how optimistic she was that the conference could achieve anything, responded "Nothing has changed from previous years really. The leaders will say 'we'll do this and we'll do this, and we will put our forces together and achieve this', and then they will do nothing. Maybe some symbolic things and creative accounting and things that don't really have a big impact. We can have as many COPs as we want, but nothing real will come out of it. (King, D.; et al. July 2020).

### III. Conclusion

This paper serves to summarise the power politics impeding the practical implementation of UNFCCC initiatives to mitigate climate change. It brings to light the self-serving postures adopted by the developed world which happen to be largely responsible for environmental pollution. The UNFCCC COP is the highest international forum designed to address climate change under the auspices of the United Nations. However, the world's leading greenhouse gas emitters are riding on their power to distance themselves from committing to the dictates of the COP conferences even though they are the leading members of the mother body, the United Nations. The first world nations are deliberately disengaging from full commitment in climate change issues in order to safeguard domestic industrial production. Pressure groups and the poor nations do not have the power to hold the first world accountable. Thus, instead of committing to addressing the problem through reduction of toxic gas emissions, the developed world is offering to assist the poor nations increase their capacity in surviving under the circumstances as well as encouraging them to cut down on emissions. It can therefore be deduced that the developed world aims to maintain its status at the expense of the poor nations which bear the brunt of the effects of global warming.

### IV. Suggestion

This paper suggests that the major powers largely responsible for global warming should take a leading role in the implementation of remedial initiatives. They control enough resources and international influence to make an impact once they are committed to actively combat global warming. There is need for selfless cooperation by all stakeholders for the attainment of positive results. The international community should prioritise the realisation of respective net-zero commitments as a matter of urgency.

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