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Abstract

This chapter provides a concluding assessment of the role that great powers play in the international politics of climate change. Building on the contributions to this volume, it concludes that a small group of major environmental powers are indeed responsible for a large share of global environmental degradation, with some (US, China) counting as systematically important powers. Power inequality also affects countries' ability to promote global environmental solutions. Great powers play a prominent role in the creation of international environmental rules but have often failed to provide the necessary leadership to make environmental protection work. The chapter also reviews the reasons behind the failure to create a system of great power management for climate change, pointing to the difficulty of matching special responsibilities with great power privileges and profound disagreements among the great powers about their respective responsibilities. The chapter also identifies future securitization of climate change as a potential step towards a greater role for great power management, particularly so if current mitigation efforts fail to keep global warming to below two degrees Celsius. It concludes with an outlook on what steps should be undertaken to strengthen the special responsibilities of the few major environmental powers that hold the future of the planet in their hands.

Keywords

climate change, English School, environmental power, great power, great power management, great power responsibility, international leadership, global environmental politics, securitization, special responsibilities.

Climate change is one of the central global challenges of the twenty-first century. To prevent the devastating consequences for human societies that runaway global warming would cause, international society needs to act decisively to bring greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions down to 'net zero' as soon as possible. In some sense, this is a global problem that requires internationally coordinated action by many actors, within the multilateral framework of the UN climate regime. Keeping future global warming below 2°C, the internationally agreed temperature target of the 2015 Paris Agreement, can only be achieved if all nations work together to set the global economy on a path towards decarbonization. In other words, if we

are to solve the climate conundrum, international society needs an ‘all hands on deck’ approach.

Viewed from another angle, however, climate change also involves profound international inequalities in terms of the responsibility for causing the problem and the ability to find an effective solution. As the contributions to this volume have demonstrated, a small number of mostly economically advanced, populous, and powerful countries have been the driving force behind man-made global warming. They also control most of the economic and technological capabilities that will be critical to enabling the global net zero transition. In the past, most of this climate responsibility and capability was concentrated in the hands of a few, mostly Western, industrialized countries (US, Japan, Germany, France, UK, Russia). More recently, globalization and the dispersion of industrial technology have also turned a handful of emerging economies (China, India, Brazil) into significant climate powers, in the sense of both current responsibilities for large GHG emissions and growing capabilities to contribute towards the net zero goal. Taken together, these powers’ future decisions and actions will largely determine whether the world can avert a climate catastrophe. Climate change is a truly global crisis in terms of its consequences, but in terms of its mitigation, a small number of major climate powers hold the fate of the planet in their hands.

The sharp contrast between the universal ecological threat and the concentration of climate-related responsibilities and capabilities in a small group of environmental powers raises important questions for international relations (IR) scholars and analysts of climate politics. The contributions to this volume have sought to address these:

- How should we think of notions of power and power asymmetry in the field of global environmental politics?
- What countries count as great powers in the environmental field?
- What responsibilities come with the status of an environmental great power? Furthermore, what role does international power asymmetry play in the international politics of climate change? Have the countries that are most responsible for causing man-made global warming also accepted special responsibilities for addressing the global climate problem? And to what extent has the inequality of power and climate responsibility translated into a corresponding system of great power responsibility and management?

The contributors to this volume have examined the specific role played by the world’s leading climate powers—the US, China, European Union, Brazil, India, and Russia. They have explored the (incomplete) securitization of climate change in the context of the UN Security Council (UNSC) and the relationship between notions of great power responsibility and leadership. And they have explored the role of great powers in other environmental regimes as well as in the area of global coal politics. It would go beyond the scope of this concluding chapter to sum up all the main findings of the 11 individual contributions. Instead, we seek to bring together some of the main insights that this volume has generated on three central questions:

1. What makes countries environmental powers, and indeed environmental great powers, and to what extent have these countries provided international leadership for global environmental cooperation?
2. Have the main environmental powers accepted special responsibilities for climate change that are commensurate with their powerful position in global environmental politics (GEP)?
3. To what extent has climate change been securitized at the international level, and thus become a concern for great power management (GPM), and the maintenance of international order and stability in international society?

Environmental Great Powers

Do some countries count as environmental great powers, and have these countries provided international leadership for global environmental and climate cooperation?

GEP, much like other global issue-areas, is characterized by profound international power inequalities. Power in GEP is a function of the impact, both positive and negative, that countries have on global environmental quality and their capacity to act for or against the interest of global environmental protection. In Chapter 2, we distinguished between negative and positive uses of environmental power in international relations: the former refers to a country's control over a significant share of global ecosystems or resources and their ability to produce environmental harm, while the latter signifies a country's ability to advance global environmental protection or promote international environmental cooperation. Environmental power is a neutral concept, though the balance between negative and positive uses of environmental power determines how a specific country's environmental power and conduct is viewed by other members of international society.

The contributors to this volume examined the leading group of environmental great powers, both conventional and emerging, and the power they possess in the environmental field. The contributions revealed just how significant these countries' contribution has been to global environmental degradation. Because of the large size of their population and economy, some countries can count as systemically important in GEP across a wide range of environmental sectors. This is the case with the US, a global power with a historically oversized ecological footprint, and China, an emerging global power with rapidly growing pollution levels and a hunger for natural resources (see chapters by Eckersley and by Yeophantong and Goh). Other major powers may not compare with the US and China's global ecological footprint but control vital large-scale ecosystems of regional and global significance (e.g. Brazil's Amazonian rainforest and biodiversity hotspots in India; see chapters by Hochstetler and by Prys-Hansen). Taken together, a small number of major powers exert a dominant influence on the global use of natural resources and transboundary pollution levels. For example, when it comes to the global supply of coal, one of the most potent sources of GHG emissions, just five countries control over three quarters of currently proven reserves (see chapter by VanDeveer and Boersma). Ten countries alone cause over two-thirds of the

current GHG emissions. Undoubtedly, the ability to imperil the future of the planet is heavily concentrated in the hands of a small number of major environmental powers.

When it comes to the positive use of environmental power and the capacity to promote global environmental solutions, we also find that some countries matter more than others. Indeed, on many global issues, only a small number of countries have the ability to provide leadership across a wide range of environmental issues. As Park notes in Chapter 11, environmental great powers have been at the forefront of creating multilateral environmental agreements, yet none of them have provided consistent international leadership, whether individually or collectively. Instead, individual powers have alternated between being leaders and laggards, or swing states and brokers, in international negotiations. Other contributors also demonstrate that many environmental great powers' record on international leadership is patchy at best. The US is widely considered to have been a pivotal actor in creating the international environmental agenda in the 1970s and 1980s but has more recently retreated from international environmental leadership, especially in the climate regime. Eckersley (Chapter 3) moderates this widespread perception of a decline in US leadership, pointing to important continuities in US foreign environmental policy: successive US administrations have consistently prioritized economic competitiveness over global environmental protection, while the US Senate has been steadfast in its refusal to accept an expansive interpretation of developed countries' special environmental responsibility. Biedenkopf, Dupont, and Torney (Chapter 5) argue that the EU has emerged as an important environmental great power and has achieved some international recognition for its positive role in international forums. Ironically, however, the EU's environmental success in reducing its global ecological footprint has also diminished its negative environmental power, thereby undercutting its influence in international environmental negotiations. Russia, a country with vast natural resources, has only reluctantly embraced its global environmental responsibilities. Having failed to gain international recognition for the reduction in GHG emissions that came with its economic breakdown in the 1990s, Russia has subsequently taken a more passive role in the climate regime and prioritized national economic over global environmental priorities (see chapter by Averchenkova).

Emerging powers in the Global South have only recently faced growing demands to take on greater environmental responsibilities. This is especially so in the climate regime, where their rapidly rising GHG emissions have propelled them into a more prominent and powerful position. By forming the BASIC negotiating group at the Copenhagen climate conference in 2009, China, India, and Brazil (together with South Africa) signalled their preparedness as major emitters to consider taking on greater responsibilities. Yet, in one way or another, all three have continued to defend their developing country status within the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) regime that affords them greater flexibility in meeting the global mitigation challenge (see chapters by Hochstetler and by Prys-Hansen). China has arguably moved furthest in accepting some special climate responsibilities, particularly in the context of its self-portrayal as a responsible great power. However, given its continued defence of North-South differentiation in climate

politics, while it is definitely an environmental great power, as Yeophantong and Goh argue (Chapter 4), China can only be considered a partially responsible one.

Great Powers and Special Environmental Responsibilities

Have the main environmental great powers accepted special responsibilities for climate change that are commensurate with their prominent position in GEP? The expectation that great powers should take on special responsibilities for managing peace and security in international society is well established in international relations. After the Second World War, the Allied powers created a new international security order in which the five permanent powers (P5) of the UNSC were tasked with maintaining international order and stability. The Bretton Woods system also established a special responsibility for leading economies to maintain international monetary stability through the IMF and support post-war reconstruction and later economic development through the World Bank. In both cases, great powers took on special responsibilities for international security and economic management in exchange for a privileged position in these international institutions. The P5 were given a veto right over any decision by the UNSC, thereby protecting their own and their allies' special interests, and the IMF and World Bank both operate on the basis of weighted decision-making that reflects member states' economic size and financial contributions. Traditional GPM has thus relied on a system of special rights and responsibilities that are closely linked in order to both incentivize great powers and legitimate institutionalized power inequality.

As the contributions to this volume have shown, no such system of interconnected great power rights and responsibilities ever came into existence for climate change. The major environmental powers have accepted the need for them to carry a higher climate mitigation burden, but this responsibility applies collectively to all industrialized countries, and not just the small group of major emitters. In line with the principle of common but differentiated responsibilities (CBDR), which is at the heart of the 1992 Rio Declaration, the UNFCCC regime adopted the same North-South division in allocating global responsibilities that can be found in most other international environmental regimes (see chapter by Park). According to the CBDR norm, developed economies are expected to be the first to reduce GHG emissions and to help developing countries with their own climate change mitigation and adaptation challenge.

Given that a small number of major emitters have played an oversized role in causing the global climate problem, it is at least conceivable for a GPM approach to be constructed in which these climate powers accept special responsibilities for managing the climate threat. However, the usual incentives for taking on such managerial responsibility—a set of special rights and privileges to balance special responsibilities—are difficult to construct in the climate area. For one, gaining a privileged position or even a veto right in international decision-making would be poor compensation for taking on a special climate mitigation burden. Furthermore, creating a great power club at the heart of the international climate regime would face significant legitimacy concerns. Developing countries, the main victims of

rising temperatures, have been highly critical of the lack of climate action among leading emitters and have routinely rejected any move towards a more unilateral management approach in the UNFCCC.

As the contributions to this volume have also demonstrated, the main climate powers have never managed to develop a common understanding of their shared special responsibilities. Of all major emitters in the Global North, the EU has been most sympathetic towards the idea of taking on an additional mitigation burden and supporting developing countries financially (see chapter by Biedenkopf, Dupont, and Torney). The US has faced repeated calls to accept 'extra-special responsibilities' due to its particularly large historical emissions, but has been more resistant to an expansive interpretation of the CBDR norm. Various US administrations were also at the forefront of arguing that the future emissions of emerging economies ought to be given greater weight in allocating the mitigation burden (see chapter by Eckersley). Russia tried to claim international environmental leadership, and thus cement its claim to great power status, by playing up the early reductions in GHG emissions that accompanied the implosion of the Soviet Union. However, this line did not gain much traction internationally, and Russia's growing reliance on fossil fuel exports and national economic interests eventually came to dominate its approach to climate mitigation, leading to a more passive role in the UNFCCC (see chapter by Averchenkova).

In the Global South, most climate powers have sought to defend their status as developing countries within the climate regime against greater pressure to take on special responsibilities in line with their rising emissions profile. India has been most resistant to accepting greater climate responsibility for itself (see chapter by Prys-Hansen). By contrast, China, which became the world's leading emitter in 2006 and has sought to project a responsible great power image, has signalled greater willingness to take on special climate responsibilities, particularly in the context of US-Chinese great power relations. However, it has struggled to reconcile its dual self-image as a developing country and as a great power (see chapter by Yeophantong and Goh). Brazil has also displayed some aspiration to take a climate leadership role, particularly in the run-up to the Paris Agreement, but has since retreated from a proactive position that would connect its emerging power status with commensurate positive environmental action (see chapter by Hochstetler).

It is thus clear that the leading GHG emitters have failed to develop a common position on their special international duties as environmental great powers. Faced with a situation that offers special responsibilities but few compensating special rights and privileges, a GPM approach to climate change has proved elusive. If anything, the Paris Agreement's shift towards voluntary and nationally determined mitigation contributions signals great powers' refusal to take on any formal managerial role for the global climate. Their insistence on maximum flexibility in delivering their emission pledges shows their determination to prioritize national sovereignty over global planetary responsibility.

At the same time, however, the discourse of great power responsibility for the global climate has not gone away, in fact it has resurfaced not least in the context of emerging powers' rise to economic and environmental prominence. As the contributions to this volume

show, China, India, and Brazil have at various points had to confront international expectations that they make a greater contribution to international mitigation efforts in line with their rising ecological footprint. This has introduced a certain degree of uncertainty into the existing distribution of special climate responsibilities, beginning to call into question the UNFCCC's strict division of responsibilities along North-South lines. As the global power balance in GEP has shifted, the attribution of special responsibilities and their recognition by the powers concerned is thus becoming more fluid. This is most clearly the case in China. In response to growing external expectations for climate leadership, the country has repeatedly included climate change in its responsible power discourse and even claimed to be offering international climate leadership at a time when the US temporarily withdrew from the Paris Agreement under President Trump. However, the Chinese leadership has been careful not to dilute the North-South division of responsibilities too much. In India and Brazil, where great power aspiration and climate responsibility have also entered national discourses, national elites have similarly defended their developing country status to avoid a further weakening of the CBDR norm. There is not much difference in the irresponsible behaviour of the environmental great powers, whether they are traditional great powers or emerging ones. Thus, even though a formalized system of GPM remains out of reach, great power responsibility very much remains on the agenda of international climate politics.

Securitizing Climate Change

Despite growing calls for the major climate powers to take on greater responsibility for the global environment, the gap between their historical culpability and acceptance of special responsibilities has hardly narrowed. Great powers do not see climate change as a systemic threat to international order, not least because climate change has not been fully securitized (see chapters by Scott and by Kopra). To be sure, climate securitization moves have been underway at least since the late 1980s, involving an expanding number of political and military organizations, including in some of the leading climate powers. Such securitization efforts have engaged both national security and human security framings, with the former identifying global warming as a source of international conflict and the latter focusing on its deleterious effects on the livelihoods of communities and individuals. Some notable progress has been made in this debate, as a large majority of countries now include climate change as part of their national security planning. However, none of the existing securitization moves have produced the kind of political response that would trigger emergency responses to avert further global warming, be it at national or international level. Since, as we argued in Chapter 2, securitization is the key to engaging and legitimizing GPM, this failure could prove critical. So far, successful securitization has been effectively blocked by the divided interests affecting most environmental great powers, whether as developing countries, or as big fossil fuel users and/or exporters. The perception of threat from climate change has not yet risen far enough to outweigh these conflicting interests.

This is not to suggest that the situation could not change in future years. As Scott notes in her contribution (Chapter 9), the UNSC has debated the security implications of climate change with increasing frequency. The first such debate happened in 2007, and the UNSC has considered climate change again in 2011, 2018, 2019, and 2021. Small island developing countries, whose very survival is at risk from rising sea levels, have been particularly keen to push this agenda. At least some of the major climate powers have endorsed such moves to engage the UNSC in international climate action, most notably the European Union. The US has been more lukewarm, oscillating between outright opposition under President Trump to renewed engagement with the climate security agenda under President Biden. Other climate powers, however, have been consistent in their opposition to linking climate change and security at the UN. Both Russia and China are resisting any move to give the UNSC a formal role in this area, preferring to deal with it through the multilateral framework of the UNFCCC. The great powers are clearly not in agreement on the question of whether and how to securitize climate change within the UN system, though the door to a more meaningful role for the UNSC has been opened.

If securitization is indeed the route towards engaging GPM in the international response to climate change (see chapters by Kopra and by Scott), then could a further deterioration of current warming trends lead international society down this path? While the parties to the Paris Agreement have agreed to keep global warming to below 2°C by the end of the century, existing mitigation efforts are woefully inadequate for achieving this target. Current GHG emission trends would most likely lead to global warming scenario of between +3°C to +4°C by 2100, which would accelerate a number of worrying environmental changes and push the planet towards dangerous ecological tipping points. Rising sea levels, more extreme weather events, and the destruction of major ecosystems (e.g., rainforests, coral reefs, permafrost regions) would threaten urban and industrial infrastructures, disrupt energy and transport systems, and lead to a reduction in agricultural yields in many parts of the world. The resulting threats to the livelihoods of hundreds of millions of people could cause mass migration and the destabilization of already fragile states, with dangerous consequences for regional and international security. It is thus conceivable for climate change to grow not only to a point where individual states are threatened with political disintegration or even extinction, but also into a collective existential threat to human civilization, and possibly to humankind itself. The question is when and how such a shared perception of threat would become common to international society as a whole.

For now, this level of catastrophic climate change is only a scenario for the future. The warning signs are there, but global international society has been slow to respond to the accelerating global warming trend. As the contributions to this volume have shown, the main culprits behind the climate crisis—the environmental great powers that have contributed the most to manmade global warming—are still acting mainly as ‘great irresponsibles’. Their efforts to reduce GHG emissions are still well below the level that is required to avert runaway global warming. As the climate crisis escalates, however, the pressure on them to act more responsibly, in the interest of global planetary health and the stability of international society,

is bound to grow. That way of thinking suggests that the problem needs to get worse before there is any hope of fixing it. Perhaps rising sea levels might conveniently cause simultaneous major coastal flooding to the vulnerable parts of the US, China, Russia, the EU, India, and Brazil. Aside from its ethical difficulties as a recommendation, this strategy has the flaw that climate change is prone to tipping points, after which reversals become either vastly more difficult and expensive, or impossible.

Given the obstacles to bringing GPM into action in time, three closely interlinked issues need to be addressed urgently:

First, domestic politics within the leading environmental great powers need to erode the influence of those interests and understandings that continue both to support carbon-fuelled modernity and to prevent more rapid decarbonization. The domestic balance of power is already beginning to shift, away from those that want to preserve existing high-carbon assets and towards those that would benefit from the net zero transition and greater climate protection. This is no easy task, but there are at least growing signs that green industrial strategies and low carbon technologies are beginning to take root in several of the environmental great powers discussed in this book.

Second, there needs to be a further move away from the rigid North-South framing of international responsibilities in GEP, with all of its postcolonial baggage. Global justice claims and support for climate mitigation and adaptation in poorer countries will not lose their relevance, but to accelerate the global net zero transition we need to move towards a set of priorities framed around the idea that we are all in the same boat, and that it is taking on water—literally in the case of low-lying islands, river deltas, and coasts. The closer the world gets to global-warming-induced tipping points, the more urgent it is for global international society to face a shared threat collectively. There is a huge political opportunity here for China, India, and other leading powers from the Global South to take a lead in turning this framing around. They need to speak up for a forward-looking planetary perspective, rather than for the backward-looking postcolonial one they are currently defending, which, despite its valid normative claims, is increasingly ill suited, and indeed dangerous, as a way of pursuing global climate change politics in the current crisis. Taking this initiative would stake their claim to status, and rights, as leading environmental great powers. That said, if this reframing of global collective responsibilities is to succeed, the established powers of the Global North have to make good on past promises that have so far only partially been met. A bargain along these lines would perhaps facilitate greater coordination amongst the diverse group of environmental great powers.

Third, serious thought needs to be given to how to get all environmental great powers to take on a greater share of global environmental responsibilities. Given the deep pluralist social structure of global international society now unfolding around us, as discussed in Chapter 2, such cooperation might seem a utopian hope. But deep pluralism does not preclude specific functional cooperation even amongst powers that might

otherwise see themselves as rivals. The US and the USSR, who were not just rivals but enemies, demonstrated that even in the depths of the Cold War when they managed to pursue significant arms control agreements together. The present problem is not deep pluralism itself, but the fact that, partly because of the North-South framing, GEP is all about responsibilities and not at all about rights. That makes an unattractive package for environmental great powers, among other things exacerbating the problems of turning around domestic politics. Traditional GPM worked by giving both great powers and the rest of international society a reasonable deal: taking on management burdens in exchange for privileged political positions. It does not always work well, but it does offer a deal in which both sides can potentially benefit. It looks to be a necessary, if certainly not a sufficient, condition for generating great power engagement in global management. That principle is embedded very clearly in the P5 group in the UNSC, which is slowly being drawn into addressing climate change. However, reform of the UNSC looks impossible for all the usual reasons. An alternative approach would be to create a minilateral forum with a specific remit to address climate change—a G6 of the environmental great powers discussed in this book, or a G10 of the top emitters. Such a group would give a form of great power status and rights to those now lacking them in the UNSC (India, Brazil, the EU), and like the UNSC might contain additional rotating members to ensure global representation. For this to work, however, the environmental great powers would need to develop a stronger sense of environmental *raison de système*, an ethic of collective responsibility for planetary health. There would be no point in empowering a group of environmental great powers that remained irresponsible. But without the element of GPM being activated, it seems unlikely that the transnational and global governance forces currently in play will be strong enough by themselves to generate changes that are both big enough and quick enough to pre-empt the looming crisis of climate change.

As should be clear from the argument in this book, climate change cannot be adequately addressed without strengthening the special responsibilities of the few major environmental powers that hold the future of the planet in their hands. How to overcome the obstacles to that should thus be a major priority of GEP going forward.