

# A Comparative Study on the Systems for Global Climate Governance between China and the United States from the Perspective of Leadership Competition

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**Abstract.** Global climate governance, as a public issue worldwide with mounting concern, faces the dual dilemma of an imperfect governance system and a lack of appropriate leader. Among them, China and the United States, as the main leaders of global climate governance, differ significantly in governance systems, and there is also a clear leadership competition between them in their governance practices. In this context, based on the perspective of leadership competition, this paper examines the specific institutions, characteristics, differences, and prospects of China and the United States in global climate governance practices, and hopefully provides policy proposals for China's future participation in global climate governance.

**Keywords:** China-US Competition; Global Climate Governance; System Contrast; Leadership Competition; Paris Agreement.

## 1. Background Analysis

The climate issue, as is widely acknowledged, is a worldwide public problem. The excessive consumption of traditional energy resources and the knock-on effects of greenhouse gas emissions are contributing to extreme climate and sudden disasters on a large scale, such as global warming, sea level rise, and increased extreme weather. Climate change is causing significant loss and damage which is affecting the economic development and livelihoods of human societies. The period 2011-2020 is the warmest decade in recorded history, and the climate problem is becoming more and more prominent as a warning bell for all peoples on climate governance.

Since the 1990s, the international community has taken numerous measures and contributed institutional solutions to address climate issues, such as the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) and the Kyoto Protocol, etc. In 2015, the Paris Climate Conference was held, and the Paris Agreement (hereinafter referred to as the Agreement) was finally reached upon summing up the experience of climate governance. The Agreement established a new paradigm of climate governance, which encourages the active participation of all parties in climate governance while adhering to the "common but differentiated responsibilities (CBDR)" principle. However, the non-compulsory measures in the Agreement provide countries with the possibility of "free-riding", which makes the climate governance practice difficult and renders the climate governance system of the Agreement incompatible with the challenges brought by the distribution of responsibilities.

At the same time, the frequent incidence of "anti-globalization", the resurgence of statism and nationalism, and the decline in the willingness and ability of countries to participate in global governance have directly led to a decline in leadership and policy implementation in contemporary global climate governance, a trend that peaked in 2019 after Trump announced his withdrawal from the Paris Climate Agreement. Since 2020, the impact of the COVID-19 has resulted in an increase in introversion among countries. The fragmented global climate governance is facing a more serious "leadership deficit", which directly challenges climate governance and has a negative impact on global cooperation. How to improve the global climate governance system and address the serious leadership deficit has become a key factor for effective global climate governance, and is also the goal pursued by the international community.

As the main negotiators of global climate change governance, the institutions and policies of China and the United States deeply influence the efficiency of global climate governance. As for the United

States, it has long played a leading role, with its elites in government dominating the rules-making in global climate governance. The Biden government is planning to reassert its leadership on international climate issues after Trump's withdrawal from the Paris Agreement which has damaged U.S. international credibility. In terms of China, its growing comprehensive power and international discourse power not only provide a realistic basis for Chinese leadership. Moreover, its active participation in climate governance and promotion of climate change has been increasingly valued in recent years as a way for China to strengthen its diplomatic leverage with the EU and neighboring island states. The two together constitute the strategic impetus and strategic basis for China's desire to gain more leadership in governance in this area.

Based on this background, this paper examines the specific situation, characteristics and prospects of the leadership competition between China and the United States in global climate governance from the perspective of the institutional competition between the two countries in the field of climate governance through historical combing and policy comparison.

## **2. Comparative Analysis of the Effectiveness of Global Climate Governance Policies in China and the United States**

### **2.1 The Development of U.S. Engagement in Global Climate Governance**

The United States has long been involved as a leader in the governance of international climate issues. From the 1990s, when the climate entered the international scene as a non-traditional security issue, the United States has established its leadership on it. Clinton's presidency saw the signing of the Kyoto Protocol and the introduction of a domestic U.S. carbon emissions trading mechanism to the world. In this period, the U.S. not only supported the three major emission reduction mechanisms of the Kyoto Protocol, but also insisted on a mechanism that gave priority to market principles for technology transfer to developing countries, a mechanism that allowed developed countries to accomplish their emission reduction targets and meet the needs of all parties at minimal cost.

However, due to the inconsistency of bipartisan politics and the periodical changes of policies in the United States, the attitude of the United States towards international climate issues is often changing periodically, which makes the United States appear more as a "passive leader", and the international community is concerned about its obligations. Bush Jr. announced at the beginning of his presidency that he would not ratify the Kyoto Protocol and that he would adopt a laissez-faire climate policy. Bush Jr. argued that climate change was not necessarily caused by human activity, and that implementing the Kyoto Protocol would affect U.S. employment condition and the economy. This move soon drew criticism from all over the world, halting global climate cooperation for a while. Influenced by international public opinion, Bush Jr. called for attention to climate issues during his second term, but did not take substantive initiatives.

After taking office, Obama quickly adopted a different climate policy from that of George W. Bush Jr. The Obama administration focused on the development of new energy sources, combining climate issues and energy security, and creating "green jobs" first. In international politics, the Obama government supported and promoted multilateral cooperation under the UN climate framework, led and jointed countries to participate in the Paris Climate Conference, and finally reached the Paris Agreement. In terms of carbon emissions, he advocated market-based "cap-and-trade" to reduce greenhouse gas emissions. In addition, Obama put emphasis on reshaping and maintaining the U.S. leadership in international climate government. During his tenure, the U.S. repaired the negative international credibility of the Bush years and once again became a leader in global climate cooperation.

However, Trump's withdrawal from the Paris Agreement was another major blow to cooperation in global climate governance after what Bush Jr. had done by withdrawing from the Kyoto Protocol. The U.S. withdrawal has not only affected the compliance effect of the Agreement, but also caused a leadership vacuum in the climate field and reduced confidence in international climate cooperation.

The decline in credibility brought about by frequent "withdrawals" has directly affected the U.S. leadership in global climate governance.

## **2.2 Divergence and Cooperation between China and the U.S. on Climate Governance**

China became involved in the global climate governance roughly from the beginning of the 21st century, 2007-2009. During this period, the traditional three major groups (the United States, the European Union, and developing countries) were divided and restructured, bringing about changes in the international structure, and the original three groups began to take on a multi-level decentralized umbrella pattern. As an emerging country, China has become the world's second largest economy, and the development of its economic strength has provided a foundation of strength and endogenous momentum for China's participation and pursuit of decision-making power in more global governance issues.

During this period, China has become more involved in international climate governance on behalf of the interests of developing countries. In the international negotiations (especially the Copenhagen Conference), China and the United States differed in many important areas of the negotiations because of the differences in focus between the interests of developed and developing countries. For example, the United States insisted on the liberal market mechanism in the rule-making of the Agreement, while China has always advocated the "CBDR" and believed that developing countries should take the responsibility for response and mitigation according to their own capacity, while developed countries should have more responsibility in terms of finance and technology. The U.S. deliberately proposed during the Paris Agreement process that large developing countries should be subject to the same constraints as developed countries, while China emphasized the flexibility and autonomy of large developing countries.

Even though the two sides were more divided on climate issues, China and the United States during this period still took a cooperative approach on climate governance and jointly promoted the Paris Agreement negotiations, with climate issues remaining as a pillar of U.S.-China cooperation. China and the United States maintained intensive negotiations during this period, and in November 2014, President Obama and Chinese President Xi Jinping issued the historic U.S.-China Joint Statement on Climate Change in Beijing during Obama's visit to China, which paved the way for the signing of the Paris Agreement a year later.

After Trump's withdrawal from the Paris Agreement, the international community was in need of a new leader, and they quickly focused on China, which is actively involved in climate governance. However, China has always been against hegemony and pursued a policy of non-alignment, so it has long avoided defining itself as a leadership role, insisting on being a developing country in the positioning of climate governance and not advocating to be a leader. China prefers to actively participate in climate governance and play a leading role. The question of how to better play its leading role has become a difficulty and concern for China's climate diplomacy and participation in global climate governance. At this stage, influenced by Trump's climate policy, the attitudes of China and the U.S. on climate issues are moving in the opposite direction, and the hostility between China and the U.S. in other areas has "spilled over" to the climate field. In addition to China and the U.S., the traditional climate powers, the European Union, were declining in power and facing multiple internal and external crises. Few other countries have the strength to assume leadership on climate issues. All these facts led to a lack of appropriate leader and imposed a negative effect on global climate governance.

## **3. The Current Leadership Competition between China and the US**

Since taking office, the Biden administration has attempted to reverse the international image of the US in the Trump era with a positive and open stance to regain world leadership. However, many foreign policies of Biden's administration still carry the legacy of Trump's "America First" style. From Trump's unilateralism to Biden's exclusive multilateralism, the administration's differentiated

approaches to international issues that treat countries with and without strategic interests also show that it is difficult to accept China's growing influence on climate issues. At the same time, the Biden administration sees China as its most serious competitor and continues to adopt a hardline policy toward China. As a major issue in the international community, climate has undoubtedly become one of the key points of both sides. With competition over cooperation, the leadership battle between China and the US on climate issues will become one of the main competition forms in the climate field, mainly reflecting in the construction of institutional discourse ("Institutional leadership reflects a country's role and function in the international regime, directly deciding its specific rights such as the representation, the right to speak, and the vote", quoted from Zuo C F., *International Leadership in Global Governance* [N]. Study Times, 2019.11.22. The paper mainly analyzes the rule-making power of China and the US on multilateral occasions.).

On one hand, the United States continuously emphasizes the importance of global carbon reduction and the construction of a global carbon emissions mechanism in multilateral settings. At the Leaders Summit on Climate in April 2021, Biden proposed the goal of a 50% reduction in greenhouse gas emissions by the end of 2030, which echoes China's "dual carbon" goal at the Climate Ambition Summit. Both the US and China show the world their ambition for climate governance. On the other hand, the commitment not only shows the US determination to solve the climate crisis, but also puts pressure on other major powers such as China and Russia. By 2020, China's carbon emissions had reached 102.51 tons, accounting for 27% of the world's total and ranking the highest. It was still rising at a certain rate every year. In response to China's high carbon emissions, the United States has repeatedly criticized it on multilateral occasions.

Compared to the United States which has a relatively well-constructed mechanism, China started late in its carbon reduction system. A national carbon trading market was just established in July 2021, and further reforms were still needed. Therefore, in the short term, the US carbon trading system will still remain the major global one. For China, to reach its emission reduction target, it must reduce industrial energy consumption in a short period of time, which directly affects the economic development of China as a developing country. Although China has started the supply-side structural reform in 2015, the system cannot be built overnight and needs more time to practice.

China's multilateralism, unlike Biden's exclusionary multilateralism, advocates "a Community of Shared Future for Mankind". Based on the development of China, it maintains and improves the existing international system and avoids conflicts with major powers. In addition to this, China is providing more public goods to the international community, such as the response to climate issues. One of the reasons for the difficulty in implementing the Paris Agreement is the inability of developing countries to achieve the balance between their emission reduction targets and efficient economic development. In terms of climate governance, besides market mechanisms' spontaneous regulation, China has provided the world, especially developing countries, with a solution to the climate problem by setting provincial carbon emission control targets based on local conditions and classifications. The top-down mechanism is bound to impact the US free-market emission mechanism and threaten the universality of the US carbon emissions regime. From the perspective of national groups, that is also an essential difference between developing and developed countries in terms of climate governance.

Meanwhile, China is actively transforming its role in climate governance and enhancing its leadership on climate issues. The competition between China and the US in green industries, especially in new energy technologies, is more prominent. At present, China's renewable energy scale is firmly in the world's first position. Relying on different geographical structures, China's solar energy and new energy technologies represented by wind and photovoltaic energy are developing rapidly, accounting for over half of the global wind and photovoltaic new installed capacity. Biden's newly appointed Secretary of Energy Jennifer Granholm will lead the United States to compete with China in electric vehicles, solar energy, wind energy and other projects. For China and the US, new energy is not only a major way to achieve carbon reduction goals, but also an important means to influence global climate cooperation and the world's political landscape. Taking the US as an

example, its long-standing leadership in new energy technologies increases its advantage in energy trade and impacts on geopolitics. The gradual replacement of traditional energy may signal the end of traditional advantages of the Middle East because the US will reduce its strategic demand. In addition, the US can use the new energy exports to strengthen the ties with allies such as the EU, alleviating the EU's energy dependence on Russia and creating a larger global resource space. But if China exports new energy technologies and products to other countries, it will impact the global economic interests of the US. Since the initiative of China's B&R project, China's energy construction projects have impacted US interests in the Asia-Pacific and Central Asia regions. Moreover, Russia and China's energy cooperation on the B&R initiative is not what the US wants to see.

For the US-China relationship, the climate leadership competition will become one of the major manifestations of the US-China competition. Compared to the power competition on traditional issues, the competition for climate leadership is milder, multifaceted, and uncertain. For now, China has formed a significant institutional advantage through its top-down climate governance system and the implementability of long-term planning and design. Over the past few years, China has also gained a certain degree of climate discourse with a series of practices. As for the US, it remains the dominant player on climate issues by virtue of its leadership in science and technology and its comprehensive national power. The US and its allies remain consistent on climate issues. For example, after the visit of John F. Kerry, US Special Climate Envoy, to Europe, the US and Europe soon signed a Joint Statement on Strengthening Cooperation to Address the Climate Crisis. But for many countries that have experienced the Cold War, they will not "choose sides" between China and the United States to avoid going down the old path. Therefore, only the party whose system is designed to meet the interests of most countries might gain an advantage in the competition.

#### 4. Policy Proposals for China

The leadership competition between the US and China centers on global carbon emissions and energy transition issues. Despite the traditional strengths of the United States, China has gained momentum in both areas in recent years, challenging traditional US leadership. To maintain its leadership, the US will respond to China's actions on climate issues. In multilateral settings, the competition mainly lies in the international rule-making.

Currently, China and the US are likely to compete more than cooperate on global climate governance leadership in the long term. Who will finally lead climate governance? And where will global climate governance go? For China, opportunities and risks coexist. Therefore, at this stage, we need to grasp the development trend of the times, make the right strategic decisions, strive to enhance our international influence and discourse power, realizing the transformation in global climate governance and generating positive value for other issues.

Xi Jinping addressed at the Leaders Summit on Climate, "This major strategic decision is made based on our sense of responsibility to build a community with a shared future for mankind and our own need to secure sustainable development.....As a participant, contributor and trailblazer in global ecological conservation, China is firmly committed to putting multilateralism into action and promoting a fair and equitable system of global environmental governance for win-win cooperation." Guided by the principle of a community of shared future for mankind, China should take corresponding measures and make efforts at both domestic and international levels to achieve the goals.

Domestically, China should adhere to the basic goal of carbon emissions while safeguarding the smooth operation in other sectors. The policy implementation should not affect people's livelihood and smooth economic development. Excessive inventory reduction should be carried out in an organized manner, not overnight. In addition, China should stick to the target for a long time without any changes, but it can raise the requirements based on the target achievement to set an example.

At the international level, major suggestions are as follows.

First, China should continue to uphold multilateralism under the UN climate framework. China has always been a supporter of multilateralism and opposes unilateralism. In terms of climate governance, China's increased leadership does not mean that China wants to be the only leader. On the contrary, China insists that all countries actively participate in and improve the international decisions on climate issues. On the other hand, China does not have the capacity to lead climate governance alone. Only by working together and discarding the “free-rider” mentality can we fundamentally solve the fragmentation of the climate regime and truly achieve the goals of climate governance.

Second, China should shoulder the responsibility of international climate governance in a more proactive manner as its inherent need for international influence suggests. China can raise its institutional discourse power and international leadership competence through providing more public goods and strengthening communication with international institutions and organizations.

Third, China should insist on communication with the United States. In terms of the long-term interests, the cooperation between China and the US improves the fundamental interests of the two peoples and the well-being of the global population. China and the US have a lot of consensus on climate issues. Strengthening the cooperation between the two can promote the advancement of global climate governance, enhance mutual understanding between China and the US, and also contribute to the construction of “a Community of Shared Future for Mankind” globally.

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