

Nation-States' Rivalry and Climate Change

Kwai-Cheung Lo

A planetary issue like climate change seems too challenging to tackle with the world divided into nation-states. The power of these nation-states is delimited by their defined territorial jurisdiction, and they primarily care about their own national interest under their territorial sovereignty. At the same time, any effective actions to adapt to, if not mitigate, climate change have to be carried out at local, regional, and national levels, indicating that planet-wide management or solutions are meaningless if they cannot be enforced by a nation-state. In reality, whether we like it or not, human beings are presently living within the modern world system that has the capitalist world economy as its base, and the interstate system composed of nation-states as its superstructure. It is this world system that drives severe competition among nation-states to relentlessly pursue the kind of environmentally destructive developmental policies and practices that have resulted in the climate crisis, even though not every nation-state throughout modern histories shares the same responsibility.

China and the United States, the two countries currently producing the most carbon dioxide, are engaged in an increasingly hostile and bitter competition for economic dominance and technological innovation, especially in the areas of artificial intelligence, cloud computing, robotics, renewable energies, and biotechnology. While climate change is an existential and security threat to all states, there should be strong motivation for the two great powers to cooperate on this issue. But mutual suspicion and rivalry prevent the parties from making any significant binding commitments to achieving climate cooperation and averting the crisis. The war in Ukraine, no matter its consequences, is making it tougher for the two countries to work together. The US-led alliance's move toward a new cold war with Russia and China is diminishing the possibility of ideological détente and creating a simplistic dichotomy of democracy versus autocracy. The threat of climate change has a chance to be mitigated if the opposing parties would prioritize resolving their short-term national security and immediate geopolitical differences, including putting resources into environmental governance instead of engaging in proxy wars with each other.

While aspiring to a utopian sociopolitical handling of climate change labeled “Climate X”—an anticapitalist approach embracing equality, solidarity, and justice—Geoff Mann and Joel Wainwright in their book actually come to terms with a more possible form of global governance that they call “Climate Leviathan.” Built upon Thomas Hobbes's notion of Leviathan to designate the monstrous sovereign power, Mann and Wainwright believe that a planetary regime is “a political and geographical

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extension of the rule of the extant hegemonic bloc: the capitalist global North (working with its allies and sometimes, China) [but e]nsuring China's support for any binding climate regulation complicates the role of capital in Leviathan" (2018:31). They believe that the United States–China cooperation is a necessity, although the economic decoupling may have already started and China shows signs of turning its system into an autarky in order to avoid being subjected to US influence and interference.

Unlike Mann and Wainwright, who still envisage climate change as a crisis as well as an opportunity to bring structural transformation to global politics, Anatol Lieven looks at the relationship between climate problems and the world's great powers from a more realistic perspective. He comments rather bluntly: "[t]alk of the need for nation states to disappear and be replaced by international governance is utterly pointless. It isn't going to happen. If action against climate change depends on the abolition of nation states then there will be no action" (2020:xxii). Although realists emphasize the competitive hegemonic tendencies in interstate relations, a self-proclaimed climate realist like Lieven who would not be interested in changing the world for a perfect future precisely argues how contending great powers may grasp combating anthropogenic climate change as a means to (re-)build global leadership and hence harness nationalism in the fight against such a threat. In an increasingly nationalistic world, the United States–China cooperation on climate change may require a clear separation of the issue from other areas that heighten their geopolitical tensions. Yet, it would not be surprising to see how each side would seek every opportunity to leverage the climate issue in negotiating policies in other realms and use every trick to ensure they give up less than their rival. If international governance or collaboration is not plausible, competition between great powers to deal with climate change, in Lieven's view, could be something good, since a decent dose of nationalism may make people think in terms of a collective, national cause and be more willing to sacrifice.

After having gone through the pandemic with the ugly manifestations of vaccine nationalism, it is very likely that nation-states will become the most decisive actors in a global crisis as long as their power continues to expand rather than shrink. While nation-states may succeed tentatively in appropriating nationalist ideology to mobilize their citizens to do more about climate change, the state as a hierarchical command structure manipulated by political elites among the governed population is by no means equivalent to nationalism. When ethno-nationalism has taken hold, it may become thoughtlessly aggressive jingoism that even the Leviathan state can no longer control. Beijing's "wolf warrior" strategy in its diplomatic assertions (Martin 2021), being counterproductive to the "peaceful rise" (Zheng 2005) China has tried to promote internationally, may further stimulate ultranationalistic passions from its own civil society. As the top Chinese leaders encourage confrontational rhetoric in international relations, many junior bureaucrats tend to make aggressive comments or responses on social media in order to bring attention to themselves and please their bosses. The jingoistic expressions of Chinese diplomats are largely performative. As power grows more concentrated in China, in the person of Xi Jinping, sycophancy also spreads—with expressive radical nationalism as a continuous performance. These performances of nationalism no longer have to be based in truth, which may define the emerging superpower still searching for its world position. However, eliminating truth as a criterion for official gestures wrecks international relationships and deters any possible interstate cooperation in an increasingly challenging environment.

The state is good at staging the love of nation for and from its governed mass. It is not an issue of faking or putting on a mask, because neither the state nor the national community can tell fact from personal beliefs in terms of displaying nationalist passions; the performers' feelings and the emotions they succeed in arousing can be real. Putting nationalism on display, however, does not imply malleability. Rather, performing nationalism mainly for the party bosses only doubles down on the state's aggressive tone and leaves the state with no flexibility in its foreign policy, potentially dragging the entire nation into a dangerous trap. An authoritarian state is more determined and even more capable of prescribing how nationalism should be displayed and performed. As said, the "wolf warrior" diplomats come up front on the international stage with ultranationalistic rhetoric

to primarily ingratiate their national leaders. But as the state script of restoring China to its natural place in the world—i.e., as the world's dominant power—continues to be written and proclaimed, it has not led to a harmonious performance; with such a complicated bureaucratic system, it is unlikely, if not impossible for Chinese agents in power at different levels to deliver the same message in their performance of nationalism. Even if all performers manage to produce a unified refrain, the effects generated are not predictable. For instance, in order to assert China's superiority in handling the pandemic, the government is still resolutely doubling down on its zero-Covid policy despite its critics and the easing of restrictions in most of the rest of the world. As the rhetoric about Covid-19 in China has become increasingly militarized, the only acceptable line is enthusiastic support for Xi's decisions as the top agent in power. As Xi succeeded in eliminating all his competitors in the Standing Committee (the highest authority in China), every decision became Xi's decision. Along with the repeated closure of Shanghai, China's biggest financial hub, many Chinese cities have implemented even harsher Covid rules than those implemented in the early outbreak, resulting in about 400 million people under some form of lockdown (Rivero 2022). That puts China in a no-win situation because the strict measures have shackled the economy (Hale 2022); but going back on the zero-Covid policy also risks devastating outbreaks as well as political damage to the top leader's resolute commitment. However, the Chinese Leviathan's unpopular lockdown practices may unintentionally improve air quality and bring blue skies in many cities.

Nation-states are probably the most powerful apparatus for reducing the harm of climate change, but they themselves are not invulnerable. An authoritarian state like China whose ruling elites are not held accountable by the populace could still be constrained in implementing ecological policy when their sustainability objectives have to succumb to their political mission to maintain the regime's iron grip on power and to preserve national security. After all, the regime's legitimacy primarily depends on its economic performance. Hence, even though China has pledged to reduce emissions after they peak in 2030 and to then become carbon neutral, the central government has reopened dozens of coal mines and allowed coal-fired power plants to run at full capacity in order to meet industrial and residential demand after the power crunch and general electricity shortage in 2021. Some environmentalists in the developed democratic countries erroneously perpetuated a fantasy about the effectiveness of China's environmental authoritarianism. Even if coercive environmental policies can be efficiently implemented in a society monopolized by the one-party state, a top-down policy without any significant civic participation may generate unexpected consequences and second-order problems.

Deep ecological thinking emphasizes worldwide interconnectivity. But geopolitics and the pandemic have intensified China's inward turn and its strategic ambitions to carve the world into spheres of influence. With its sheer size of the domestic market and the official swaggering show of confidence in its centralized governance, China's rulers really believe that they can construct an insulated world immune to any unwanted outside infiltration. While the political elites stress that China's development can prevent the country from repeating the mistakes of the West, justifying their alternative model, they do not necessarily intend to universalize their values by promoting such a model to the world. Rather they ridicule the West's hypocrisy and double standard in order to blunt criticism of the Chinese autocratic system as well as its disregard for human rights.

Can climate change be managed and even mitigated without adopting universal values of saving humanity and saving the planet? The realists would concur that the appeal to universal humanitarianism is unable to produce any effective action from nation-states to fight climate change. If proactive responses to climate change are largely motivated by self-interest, can an increasingly inward-looking China that plans to invest in a future geared toward self-sufficiency handle extreme climate threats by itself? The Chinese state has written the script for the China Dream to rejuvenate the nation, Ecological Civilization to maintain the balance between development and environmental conservation, Common Prosperity to alleviate systemic inequalities, and the Belt & Road Initiative to build a world network in which China becomes a central hub—all in order to play the long game and promise its people a rosy future. However, as climate change is always unpredictable, it is

uncertain if the scripts promoted by the state can produce the best response and outcome in the face of harsh ecological challenges. Even if the state blueprint works well within the national borders, climate change would require a vision beyond sovereign territorial boundaries.

The emerging duel of a new cold war between the West and the Eastern authoritarian powers is looming on the horizon, and all other countries are being forced to choose sides. Confrontations are projected to be more frequent than cooperation between the two major camps. Each side has its own rationality for its judgment of the misconduct of the opposing side. Each side considers its actions, though appearing aggressive, as defensive reactions to perceived threats, whereas similar actions by the opposing side are ostensibly totally voluntary indicators of their bad intention or nature. In this atmosphere, mutual understanding or common ground would be extremely difficult to reach. But to rely on nation-states to deal with the climate threat does not require a common understanding among these rivals. The entrenched differences and opposing positions should be sustained as irreducible as long as the “truth” of one side is not privileged as more legitimate than that of the other. In other words, disagreement among nation-states in the current world system is deemed irreducible; it is not cooperation but competition that brings states together tentatively and temporarily for certain projects. Conflict, divergence, or dispute is indeed constitutive of the world system of nation-states in the modern era; there has never been any all-encompassing global unity or sense of community as the fundamental platform for worldwide collaboration. The emergence of interstate concerted moments take place only in the interstices of nationalist ideologies and national identification.

Despite rising tensions during the old Cold War period, Moscow has generally found ways to cooperate with the United States and its Western allies on a variety of issues, from efforts to curtail the proliferation of nuclear weapons to the oversight of peace initiatives in different parts of the world. The interstate hostility during the old Cold War also enabled the dual movement between the self-regulating market and state intervention, and prompted many nation-states to be agents of redistribution and regulation to ensure a relatively egalitarian society in order to avoid their citizens being drawn toward the opposing camp. It is without any doubt that nation-states and their political elites are faced with an insecure and uncertain world where each country will compete with others more consistently, prioritize its own selfish interests, and pursue relative advantages whenever there is any opportunity. While the hawks in the great powers will pursue economic decoupling so as to avoid offering opponents opportunities to weaponize their economies, competing nation-states will continue to seek benefits if economic opportunities arise in the adversaries’ markets. At the same time, economic interconnectedness cannot prevent interstate contention. Only intense interstate competition can urge nation-states to vow (via performing nationalism to drum up their citizens) to make a nationwide push for climate-friendly action, such as making the difficult transition from oil and gas to clean energy sources and technologies, for the sake of national security.

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