

China and International Climate Leadership

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The world is looking up to the leadership of China in combating climate change with the decision of the United States (US) to withdraw from the Paris Agreement in 2017. If China was seen as a hard-liner in climate change negotiations that led up to the framing of the Kyoto Protocol in 1997, its shift in stance toward an active player in addressing climate change was visible in the negotiations that led to the 2015 Paris Climate Change Agreement. Being the largest emitter of carbons globally, China will no longer be able to shy away from taking up the responsibility for addressing the climate problem. China's rapidly growing emissions, its vulnerability to natural hazards caused by climate change, and hegemonic ambitions are the driving factors that persuade China to engage with the climate change negotiations proactively. This shift is also seen as part of a Chinese strategy to enhance its international image and thereby to achieve its foreign policy goals. In a post-pandemic world, China's handling of the climate change issue would be crucial in influencing the US position on the Paris Agreement. This paper analyses the factors that make China's participation inevitable in the Paris Agreement. The paper also deals with how China's engagement with the climate issue will benefit it ultimately in enhancing its soft power strategy.

Keywords China, Climate Change, Climate Leadership, Kyoto Protocol, Paris Agreement, US

Climate change has become an intensely debated topic in international politics since it affects almost all countries, from the least developed countries to the developed countries. 'Security' which was earlier perceived in military and economic terms alone, has been shifted to accommodate health and environmental security as well in its new paradigm. In a pandemic-stricken world, security indeed is an interdependent and interlinked concept, and no country alone can ensure the safety and security of its citizens without the cooperation of other states. Climate change is also an interlinked security threat that can be addressed only with the active engagement and collaboration of all nation-states. From the 1992 Rio Earth Summit to the 2019 Madrid Climate Change Conference, several negotiations have been held at the international level to break the deadlock around some of the critical issues in climate change, ranging from finance and technology transfer to the transparency mechanisms for scrutinising climate action. While developing countries demand the transfer of financial and technological resources from developed countries to meet their commitments, developed countries call for more transparency and verification of emission reduction actions undertaken by developing countries, especially by China. China maintains that developing countries should be allowed to have more flexibility over the transparency rules due to their varied capabilities and argues that what is needed at the moment is to 'pay their debts' to developing countries in terms of financial and technological assistance ("China Demands...Climate Change", 13th December 2018). China and the United States (US), which are the first and second-largest carbon emitter countries in the world respectively, are at loggerheads with each other on these key issue areas. In 2017, with the decision of the US to withdraw from the 2015 Paris Climate Agreement which is the only existing international treaty to reduce the level of greenhouse gas emissions, the survival of the agreement itself was facing a huge crisis. In this scenario, developing countries and small island countries are looking up to China to take the leadership role in combating climate change (Engels, 2018). This paper attempts to analyse why China must take up the climate leadership in the context of non-engagement of the US with the international climate change agreements and how it would benefit China in gaining more legitimacy in international relations. However, to what extent China would be willing to lead the global climate regime in the absence of the US would remain a critical question.

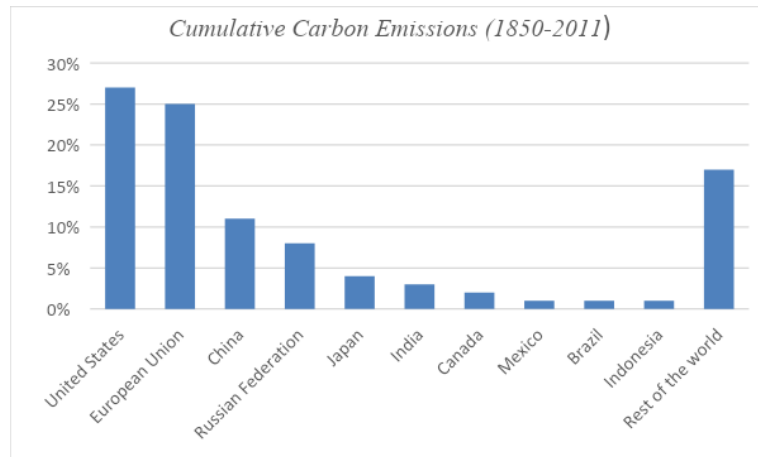
Methodology

This paper has employed a qualitative research method to analyse China's climate change journey so far and to understand further China's role in the evolving global climate politics. The paper approaches the whole climate change debate from a liberalist perspective, arguing for Chinese cooperation and leadership on the climate issue in the context of the US withdrawal from the Paris Agreement. The liberal view holds that cooperation is possible in international climate change politics and it is ultimately in the states' national interest to cooperate rather than disengage. Liberalism strongly favours the existence of various institutions and agreements for advancing the collective interests of states. This paper analyses multiple factors that necessitate China's participation inevitable in the global climate change regime. For analysing China's climate change policy, the paper has employed official climate policy documents of China and the US, newspaper reports, journal articles, magazines and books. Along with qualitative analysis, quantitative data has also been employed wherever relevant to substantiate the arguments. This paper is structured into three parts. The first part is the literature review in which China's positioning in global climate politics has been analysed in detail, reviewing the works of various authors who have contributed to climate politics. The second part is a brief account of China's climate change journey so far. The third part is the analytical part which deals with the factors that necessitate China's participation and leadership in combating climate change. The last part is the conclusion.

Review of Literature

Climate change is a global problem, and resolving it requires transnational cooperation. However, what guides states in global climate change politics is their national interests. States are placed in a unique social setting wherein they have to constantly engage with the non-state actors as well, such as NGOs and business groups, while framing specific strategies. However, ultimately it is the nation-state actors that decide the agenda. This is true in the case of global climate politics as well. Harris (2013) notes, "what is wrong with climate politics at the international level is the continuing preoccupation with the nation-state." International organisations have failed to ensure cooperation between nation-states due to the varied interests and aspirations of states. In order to maximise their economic growth, states have polluted the atmosphere. The following graph represents the cumulative carbon emissions from countries. From 1850 to 2011, the US is responsible for 27 per cent of cumulative global carbon emissions, while the European Union accounts for 25 per cent of emissions and China is responsible for 11 per cent of emissions. This shows that the US has more responsibility than any other state in polluting the atmosphere in terms of historical emissions.

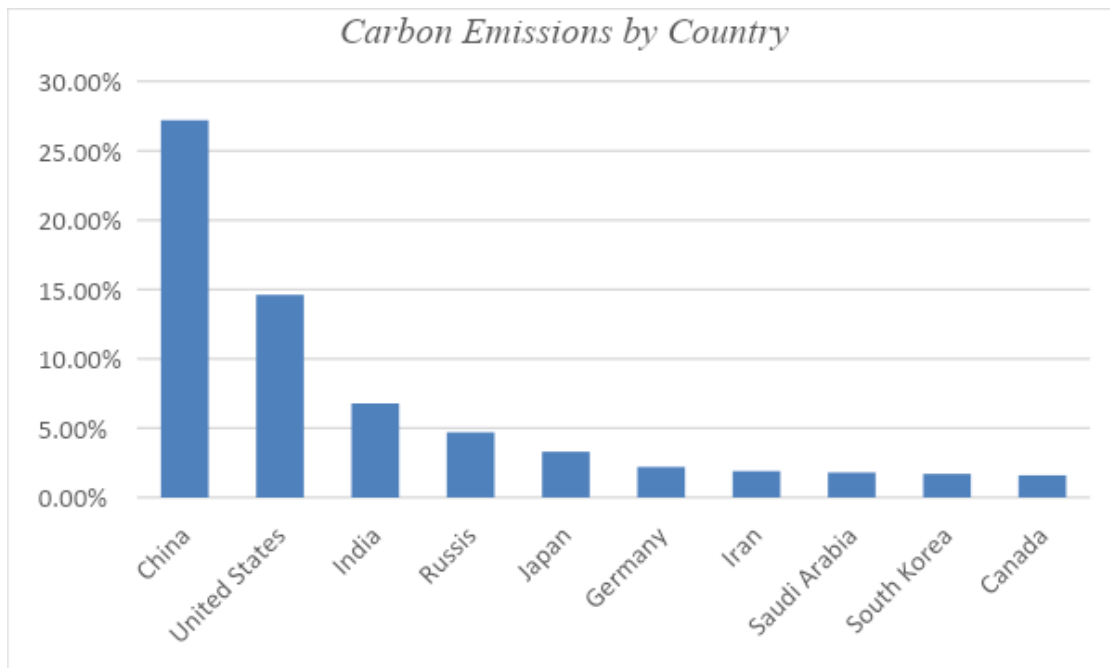
FIGURE 1. Cumulative Carbon Emissions (1850-2011)



Source: World Resource Institute

However, China tops the list when it comes to the current carbon emissions by country. The following graph (figure 2) is a representation of carbon emissions by country. In 2017, while China contributed 27.2 per cent of global carbon emissions, emissions from the US which comes in the second position, were relatively low, that is 14.6 per cent. India, which stands at the third place in terms of current carbon emissions, has contributed only 6.8 per cent of total emissions.

FIGURE 2. Carbon Emissions by Country



Source: Global Carbon Atlas, 2017

As emissions from China are growing, China can no longer move away from taking up the responsibility for emission reduction. Undoubtedly, China is one of the strategic and most significant players in global climate change negotiations (Xiao, 2018). As the world's largest developing country and the highest emitter of carbons globally, any climate agreement without the substantive engagement of China would not be efficacious. China's domestic interests, global hegemonic ambitions and the concerns about its international image have played a role in ensuring its active participation in the hitherto global climate change negotiations. If China was a denier in taking climate action during the framing of the Kyoto

Protocol in 1997, which was the first legally binding international treaty on greenhouse gas emission reduction, China has graduated to become a proactive player in the negotiations that led up to the Paris Agreement. In 2015 (He: 2010). One of the most important reasons behind this shift and active involvement was the international pressure on China from different quarters, especially from the US, reflecting on the rapidly growing emissions from China. In 1997, China's carbon dioxide emissions were 3528.02 million tonnes; but now it stands at 213,843 million tonnes (Liu, 2015; Carbon Brief, 2019). The industrial development, rapid urbanisation and the economic growth that China has achieved in the last two decades have made China surpass the US in 2006 to become the largest emitter of carbons in the world. China's excessive dependence on fossil fuels, especially on the coal power plants for energy generation and thereby the efforts to bolster its own economic competitiveness have given China the tag of the biggest polluter globally.

The COVID-19 pandemic has slowed down the economies of all countries. Poverty, unemployment and restrictions on migration are impacting the socio-economic stability of many countries in the world. China once again is being viewed with suspicion by the developed countries, especially by the US, as Wuhan in China is believed to be the epicentre of Coronavirus. US President Donald Trump has already named COVID-19 a 'Chinese virus' and blamed China for the late reporting of the virus outbreak. In this scenario, China is very much concerned about its declining international image and thereby may not miss any opportunity to improve its image on the international stage. In this scenario, addressing the climate change issue provides an opportunity for China to fill the political void left with the withdrawal of the US from the Paris Agreement. However, whether China would be utilising this opportunity is uncertain even now as it is engaged in an intense trade war with the US and is involved in the efforts to recover from the economic loss that the pandemic had imposed on China's economy.

China's Climate Change Journey so far

China's engagement with environmental issues dates back to the 1972 Stockholm Conference. However, it was from the 1990's China started to address the climate change issue at the international level. China was an active participant in the 1992 Rio Earth Summit and was an instrumental force in forming the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC). The first UNFCCC held at Berlin in 1995 was a landmark event in the trajectory of the whole climate change negotiations as it was the pioneering conference that had led to the framing of the first international emission reduction Protocol at Kyoto in 1997. Throughout the negotiations up to the 1997 Kyoto Protocol, China and India were of the stance that the climate change problem is ultimately the creation of the western world, and it is the emissions from developed countries that have contributed to global warming. Therefore, developing countries argued that it is the responsibility of the developed countries to take up emission reduction commitments under the Kyoto Protocol, exempting developing countries from taking up binding commitments. China and India championed the 'Common but Differentiated Responsibility (CBDR)The principle at the Kyoto Conference in 1997 (Kyoto Protocol, 1997). The CBDR principle meant that while all countries share the responsibility for addressing the climate change problem, some countries, namely the developed countries, would have more responsibility than developing countries and least developed countries in resolving the issue due to their historical emissions. The group of G77 and China were successful in persuading the developed countries to commit to binding emission reduction targets under the Kyoto Protocol. The historical responsibility of the developed countries for emissions and their financial and technological ability to combat the challenges were crucial in this decision making.

However, the Kyoto Protocol faced a significant blow when the US, which had earlier signed the Kyoto Protocol, decided to withdraw from the Protocol later on, pointing out the exemption given to China and India from taking up commitments. The Byrd-Hagel

Resolution (Senate Resolution 98) passed in the US Senate made it clear that 'the US would not be a party to a Protocol that hampers its economic growth and exempts India and China, the world's two largest developing countries, from ensuring meaningful participation under the Agreement .' The economic imperatives and the lack of 'meaningful participation' of China and India were the driving factors that had led to the US withdrawal from the Kyoto Protocol. In the case of China, its lack of historical responsibility for climate change, national sovereignty and national interest to boost economic competitiveness were the moving factors that had guided its policymaking at the international level in the late 1990s (Zhang: 2003:66). Since the Rio Conference to the Kyoto Protocol, China has vehemently argued that the US holds the moral responsibility to combat climate change being the highest GHG emitter country in the world which has contributed the maximum towards past emissions. In 2001, the US openly rejected the Kyoto Protocol. However, China ratified the Kyoto Protocol in 2002 without any commitments. Initially, though China was sceptical of the flexibility mechanisms envisaged under the Kyoto Protocol for earning carbon credits. Later on China became one of the biggest beneficiaries of these flexibility mechanisms (Sandalow, 2019). China also received financial and technological aid from the developed countries, especially from the US, for implementing emission reduction projects in its territory (Sandalow, 2019). In all these years, China was more or less acting as a reluctant player in taking up any form of responsibility or commitment to emission reduction under the Kyoto Protocol. The withdrawal of not only the US but also Russia and Canada from the Protocol made the Kyoto Protocol almost ineffective in its first phase itself.

Gradual shifts in China's approach and attitude to climate change negotiations were visible after China surpassed the US to become the largest emitter of carbon dioxide in the world in 2006. In 2008, the Chinese Government issued the first White Paper (2008) on Climate Change. Mounting international pressure on China to reduce the intensity of its emissions, China's climate change vulnerability in the form of sea-level rise, melting of glaciers, drought and flood necessitated a shift in the earlier Chinese position on climate change (White Paper, 2008; Sandalow, 2019). Till that time, China was keeping itself aloof from taking any form of commitment referring to its low per capita income and development needs. The tag of the largest carbon emitter in the world and the call for climate action from least developed countries left China without any option but to actively engage in the global climate change negotiations with the US. With the failure of the Kyoto Protocol, it became almost sure that the US will not be a party to an agreement which exempts China and India. Ineffective implementation of the Kyoto Protocol in the absence of the engagement from major countries in the world finally necessitated the framing of a new agreement. The 2009 Copenhagen Climate Conference discussed the possibility of reaching into a new agreement that involves all major countries in emission reduction. Though China had continued to blame the developed countries for their historical responsibility for climate change and high per capita emissions even in Copenhagen, this time it could not neglect the fact that emissions from China were increasing drastically. At the Copenhagen Conference, China promised that it would cut its carbon emissions 40 per cent to 45 per cent from the 2005 level by 2020, succumbing to the pressure from other countries (Pierson and Tankersley; 27th November 2009). China claims that it has met this target in 2017 itself (United Nations Climate Change, 2018). China's Copenhagen pledge was a significant departure from the earlier Chinese stance. This was the first time China made concrete commitments to reduce its emissions on an international platform. However, the Copenhagen summit could not reach consensus regarding the nature of the new agreement to be framed, especially due to the opposition from China for committing to a binding Agreement. Moreover, China's opposition to international monitoring and verification of its domestic emission cuts had also led to the failure of the Copenhagen Conference.

In 2011, at the Durban Conference, China, the US, and India finally reached a consensus on framing a new legally binding agreement adopting voluntary emission reduction targets from all countries. It was at the Durban conference that finally, China expressed its willingness to

be part of a partially legally binding emission reduction agreement which it had evaded for a long time. China also demanded the creation of a Green Climate Fund to assist the least developed countries in their emission reduction programmes at Durban, and this proposal was also accepted. In 2015, China submitted its Intended Nationally Determined Contributions (INDC) to the UNFCCC. In that year itself at the Paris Conference, the Conference of Parties gave form to the Paris Climate Change Agreement taking up voluntary emission reduction pledges from all countries. In the opening ceremony of the Paris Conference, Chinese President XI Jinping declared that climate change is a "shared mission for mankind" (Lan and Jing, 1st December 2015). In the Paris Agreement, China officially reaffirmed that it would reduce its carbon emissions by 60 to 65 per cent from the 2005 level by 2030 (Dept. of Climate Change, National Development and Reform Commission of China, 2015). However, this INDC has been termed as 'highly insufficient' (Climate Action Tracker, 2019). As of now, China is the largest consumer of coal in the world (Climate Action Tracker, 2019).

In 2017, with the decision of the US to withdraw from the Paris Agreement, once again the international climate change negotiations are facing a deadlock concerning how to ensure the effective implementation of the agreement in the absence of the US. While the US, from the Kyoto Protocol to the Paris Agreement, acted like a 'dragger state' in taking up climate change commitments pointing out the economic implications of the agreements on its economy, China was shifting from its conventional role of a reluctant player to a proactive player in all these years by taking up commitments. If climate change was a foreign policy issue for China in the initial years of climate negotiations, it is now a domestic priority due to its own vulnerability to climate change (Hung and Tsai, 2012; Li, 2016). However, economic considerations are still the driving force guiding the foreign policy considerations of the US and China, while environmental issues take a backseat.

Factors necessitating China's International Climate Leadership

The shift in the stance of China in climate change negotiations from that of a 'hard-liner' to an active player is taking into account its deteriorating international image as well (Haibin, 2013). China's rapidly growing carbon footprints, US's attempts to tamper the image of China at the international level by projecting it as a climate reluctant actor, excessive pressure from developing and least developed countries on China to initiate climate change action, and China's own strategic interests have played a role in this policy shift. The 2011 Durban Conference was the main event that signalled a change in the Chinese position. It was the first time China agreed to submit its emission reduction pledges under an International Agreement. China was one of the first countries to ratify the Paris Agreement in 2016. While the US backed out from the Paris Agreement later in 2017, China stated that it would continue with its Paris pledge. In 2018 China made it clear that "the Chinese Government would fulfil its own obligations under the UNFCCC based on equity and in accordance with the common but differentiated responsibilities and respective capabilities" (The People's Republic of China, 2018). Nevertheless, whether China would be taking up climate leadership by compromising its economic aspirations is still doubtful, especially in the absence of US engagement from the climate regime. Following are the main factors that necessitate China's leadership in the global climate regime.

China's Rapidly Growing Emissions

In the initial years of climate negotiations, China was aloof from committing to any form of emission reductions, arguing that it was the historical emissions from the developed countries that had caused global warming. However, after 2006 China had to slowly move away from this position when it became the largest emitter of CO₂ in the world ("China Now No.1....Position"). Between the years 1750 to 2000, if China's cumulative emissions were only

73,406 million tonnes; by 2018, the cumulative emissions grew to touch 213,843 million tonnes (Carbon Brief, 2019). Meanwhile, US emissions from 1750 through to 2018 were 397,157 million tonnes (“Countries with Largest Cumulative...1750”, 2019). China’s greenhouse gas emissions are also projected to rise at least till 2030 (Climate Action Tracker, 2019). On the other side, US emissions are expected to remain relatively constant in the next decade (Climate Action Tracker, 2009).

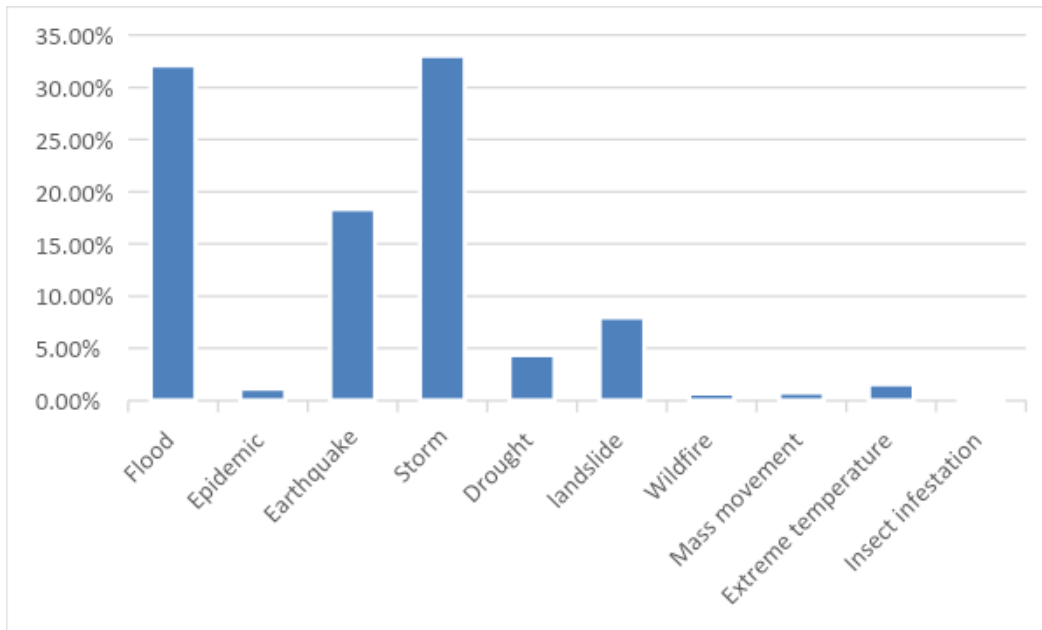
In 2018, China's fossil CO₂ emissions were 28 per cent of the total global emissions, while the US's was relatively less than 15 per cent (Global Carbon Budget, 2019). In the year 2019, while the fossil CO₂ emissions from China marked a growth of 0.26 per cent, US emissions marked a negative growth that is –0.09 per cent (Global Carbon Budget, 2019). Moreover, China's emissions are still dominated by coal use, while the US emissions which were earlier dominated by coal, marked a shift towards various renewable energy sources after the year 2007 (Global Carbon Budget, 2019). In this context, China no longer would be able to keep itself away from taking up commitments and stick on to the conventional historical emission argument. Nevertheless, it is pertinent to note that China's per capita emissions are still very low compared to the US. In the year 2018, US's per capita emissions in tonnes were 16.6, while that of China was only 7.0 tonnes (Global Carbon Budget, 2019).

China’s Vulnerability to Climate Change

China's vulnerability to climate change is escalating every year. In the initial years of framing the Kyoto Protocol, China was sceptical about the science of climate change. Some of the Chinese climate scholars were of the opinion that climate change itself is a ploy by the developed countries to restrict the survival emissions of developing countries (Dembicki, 31st May 2017). Scholars like Liu (2015) however points out that 'climate change science is not the battleground, but the power game between the developed and developing countries regarding how much one can emit is the root cause of climate scepticism.' He points out that "some people are reluctant to acknowledge climate change because they believe that either it is a product of foreign science or assume that its political ramifications may hurt China. In reality, the suspicion and mistrust between China and the western world is the fuel for doubting climate science and actions" (Liu, 2015:10).

China's Third National Assessment Report on Climate Change shows that the impacts of climate change are adversely impacting almost all sectors of the Chinese economy. On average, the economic loss due to climate change would be around 3 per cent of China's G.D.P. (Deloitte Economics Institute, 2021). By the year 2070, it is calculated that China would lose about 6 per cent of its G.D.P. due to the impacts of climate change (Deloitte Economics Initiative, 2021). Climate change-related disasters account for more than 70 per cent of China's natural disasters (The People's Republic of China, 2018). Ever-increasing air pollution, smog, sea-level rise, drought and recurring floods are making the country more vulnerable to climate change (“China's Vulnerability to Climate Change”, 2019). The following graph represents China's climate change vulnerability. 33 per cent of total natural hazards are caused by storms. 32.10 per cent of natural hazards are floods, and 18.34 per cent of natural hazards are caused by earthquakes. Graph also shows that 7.94 per cent of natural hazards occur by landslide and 4.36 per cent of natural hazards are caused by drought.

FIGURE 3. China’s vulnerability to natural hazards



Source: Climate Change Knowledge Portal

In this scenario, considering its own domestic vulnerability and responsibility for current carbon emissions, China is forced to lead the climate change combating activities and negotiations at the international level (Marechal, 2018).

The Absence of Global Climate Leadership

The political vacuum created due to the disengagement of the US from the Paris Agreement is a political opportunity for China to lead the climate negotiations at the international level and expand its soft power strategy ("For China, Climate Change...Political Opportunity", 7th December, 2016). According to Nye (2004), a country's soft power rests on three important sources: the cultural appeal that country holds at the international level, the attractiveness of its political values, and, most importantly, the country's foreign policy. As far as the acknowledgement to cultural and political values are concerned, China has had many difficulties in the past in boosting its soft power at the international level (Adrian, Schafer and Mike, 2018). Hence, the third remaining alternative for China at the moment is to advance its soft power strategy by proposing a forward-looking foreign policy which can persuade other states to do what it initially wants without exerting any coercion. The vacuum left by the US in the climate politics with its withdrawal from the Paris Agreement actually opens up a window of opportunity' for China to set up a cooperative multilateral climate change combatting framework at the international level and in framing new rules that advance the climate interests of developing countries as well. Leading the global climate regime in the absence of the US, would repair China's earlier image as a 'reluctant player' in global climate politics to a 'proactive player' not only among the developed countries but also among the developing and least developed countries. China is already trying to expand its footprints across Asia and Africa through its 'Belt and Road Initiative'. China's growing maritime presence in strategic points, increasing military expenditure and economic investments are the signs of its aspirations to challenge the existing international system. China wants to project itself as a global hegemon. The US sees the rise of China as a significant threat to its current dominance in international politics. In this scenario, leading the global efforts to combat climate change with the support of other major powers would be an opportunity for China to gain more legitimacy and acceptance for its big power ambitions. Already China's widespread infrastructural and technological investments in various parts of the world are in line with its hegemonic aspirations. In addition to that, engaging with climate change as a soft power tool would help China advance its global presence.

Secondly, if China agrees to lead the international efforts to combat climate change, it would not only disturb the existing power balance between the US and China in the international system but also would pose ethical and moral questions to the legitimacy of the US decision to withdraw from the Paris Agreement. The US's current dominance in the global system was not merely the output of its economic, military and political clout, but also has stemmed out from the leadership role it had played in the international system. Nevertheless, the COVID-19 crisis and the US failure to handle it pose numerous questions to its claimed legitimacy and ability to govern the international system so far. The US's inability to reduce the number of COVID-19 death cases in the country and its absolute failure in handling the pandemic situation at the international level are challenging the claims of US legitimacy. On the other side, China from where the virus spread across countries is trying to fill the vacuum left by the US with the support of international organisations like W.H.O. While the US decided to suspend the financial assistance it used to provide to W.H.O. pointing out the failure of the W.H.O. in issuing early warnings regarding the virus outbreak to countries, on the other side, China was coming closer to W.H.O. by enhancing its financial contributions to it. In the post COVID world, addressing issues like global health pandemics and climate change which affect the existence of all countries in the world would be a real opportunity for China to further its global agenda. Thirdly, China's leadership to the global climate change programmes may persuade the US to reconsider its decision on the Paris Agreement. The US President Donald Trump stated in 2017: "the Paris Accord would undermine our economy, hamstring our workers, weaken our sovereignty, impose unacceptable legal risks and put us at a permanent disadvantage to the other countries of the world" (The Whitehouse, 2017). The US withdrawal process from the Paris Agreement started in 2017 would be completed by 4th November 2020, which is one day after the scheduled US Presidential election. Some believe that, if a new administration assumes office, replacing the current Trump Administration after the election in 2020, there is a possibility that the US would re-enter the Paris Agreement as long as China remains as an integral part of it.

A survey conducted by the 'Yale Programme on Climate Change Communication' in 2018 among the Independent, Democratic and Republican registered voters in the US reveals that 77 per cent of the registered voters favour the Paris Agreement. Apart from that, 66 per cent of the total registered voters oppose President Trump's decision to pull out the US from the Paris Agreement, including 91 per cent of Democrats and 63 per cent of Independents; while 36 per cent of Republicans opposed the same decision (Leiserowitz, Maibach, Roser-Renouf, Rosenthal, Cutler & Kotcher, 2018). In this scenario, as the majority of the registered voters do not favour President Trump's decision to withdraw the US from the Paris Agreement, no one can rule out entirely the possibility for the US re-entry into the Paris Agreement if a new Administration is coming into place. Some claim that if the US is re-entering the agreement, that would restore 'America's credibility on the world stage' (Farand, 2019). Moreover, China's engagement with the world countries through climate change platforms and the efforts to enhance its international image through climate diplomacy would ultimately hamper the US strategic interests and force the US to reconsider its decision on the Paris Agreement. Nevertheless, the US decision on this matter, to a great extent, is dependent on the engagement of China in the global climate change regime. In case China expresses its reluctance to lead the international efforts to combat climate change, it is less likely that the US would reconsider its present position on the Paris Agreement. However, as long as China remains an active player in the climate discourses, the US would face a legitimacy crisis due to its aloofness from the climate regime.

The 'ping-pong' game between the US and China adversely impacts global efforts to address climate change (Harris, 2013). The US President Donald Trump had tweeted earlier that 'global warming itself is a creation of the Chinese to make the US manufacturing non-competitive' (Wong, 2016). Though President Trump diluted this position later, China's economic boom and infrastructural investments in different parts of the world and the US's

fear of China's economic and political interests reduce the possibilities for resolving the crisis. Harris argues that "the deadlock in climate negotiations is largely a consequence of the US and Chinese obsession with the Westphalian norms. It leads them to focus on their individual perceived national interests above the interests of people everywhere and to fixate on their legal sovereignty to the exclusion of the welfare of the natural environment." (2013, p. 81).

China's Capability for Climate Action

China no longer would be able to claim the benefits of CBDR and Respective capability (R.C.) principles, which have guided the Chinese position during the Kyoto Protocol. R.C. implies the financial and technological capacity of a country to combat climate change. The R.C. principle was developed, taking into account the varied economic circumstances and abatement cost of countries for taking climate action. Though China was categorised as a developing country based on this principle under the Kyoto Protocol, the US argues that China is no longer eligible for this privilege and it has graduated to become a developed country as of now. The US President Donald Trump commented that "if China is a developing country, make the US too one" (The Economic Times, 2020). Meanwhile, China sticks on to its developing country status, pointing out that "373 million Chinese are still living below the upper-middle-income poverty line of US\$ 5.50 a day". China's per capita emissions are also only about a quarter of that of the developed countries (The World Bank in China, 2020). However, as of now, China has emerged to become the second-largest economy in the world, with high economic growth and high emissions. It can no longer shy away from taking responsibility for emissions as it is the biggest polluter of carbons in the world. China has become the manufacturing hub of the world with substantial investments in different countries across Asia, Africa and Europe. Economically China is in a much better position compared to many other developing countries, including India. Being a permanent member in the U.N. Security Council, China is a regular contributor not only to the U.N. but also to other international institutions, including the W.H.O. China is the leader of the heterogeneous G77 bloc and is an inevitable part of the BASIC group of countries which engage with the climate change negotiations. China has the institutional strength and political clout to influence the action and behaviour of other nation-states (Bjorkum, 2005). In this scenario, what the world expects from China is to take stringent emission reduction measures domestically and internationally in order to combat climate change.

Conclusion

With the disengagement of the US from the Paris Agreement, developing countries are looking up to the leadership of China as the only alternative for leading the international climate change initiatives. Being the largest emitter of carbons globally, China has the responsibility to lead the Paris Agreement and fill the vacuum left by the US. China's active participation in the agreement may force the US even to rethink its stance on the Paris Agreement. The Paris Agreement, which has been weakened with the US withdrawal, can sustain its momentum only if China decides to actively take part in it. Secondly, China's domestic political compulsions also favour the country taking stringent action against climate change domestically and internationally. China's own vulnerability to climate change impacts is a driving factor that forces China to take up the mantle of climate leadership at the global level. Moreover, G77 countries and small island countries are looking up to China for providing them with a leadership role in combatting climate change. Leading the climate initiatives at the international level is an opportunity for China as well to enhance its soft power capabilities and global hegemonic ambitions. In a post-pandemic world, the future of the Paris Agreement will be decided based on how China is responding to the agreement.

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