**Global Climate Efforts Need Superpower Coercion**

**By Max Bergmann**

The global effort to combat climate change has been missing a critical piece: the coercive diplomatic might of a superpower. To accelerate climate action, not only will major industrialized powers (those responsible for global emissions) need to take domestic action but they will also need to act globally. This requires not simply creating incentives and aid to accelerate the green transition in the “global south.” But it will also inevitably mean pushing, pressuring, and at times coercing other countries to act to lower emissions or prevent environmental damage. For this to occur, addressing climate change must become a top foreign foreign policy priority of the United States.

The push for global climate action has been focused on big multilateral summits. The annual multilateral meetings of the “Conference of Parties” (COP) have been crucial in focusing the world’s attention, pressuring major emitters, forging narrow but concrete deliverables, and providing a venue for the hardest hit and most vulnerable countries to make their case and be heard. Global multilateralism has achieved real climate progress. Yet, climate activists are also rightly nervous about follow through. After all, there is no mechanism to force countries to actually meet what are often vague national pledges connected to distant targets. What is missing is the coercive power to ensure compliance with international climate accords, which the United Nations lacks the ability to enforce. Like it, or not, what global climate efforts need is the willingness of strong global powers to enforce international climate accords.

The effort to contain nuclear proliferation is instructive. In the 1950s and 60s, seeing the potential danger of widespread nuclear proliferation, the US and Soviet Union, not wanting other countries to follow their example, pushed for a global multilateral agreement, resulting in the 1970 Nonproliferation Treaty (NPT). To get the world to sign on, they had to strike a bargain. The nuclear powers agreed to reduce their nuclear weapons stockpiles and stop proliferating themselves and in exchange countries would forgo nuclear weapons but potentially gain access to peaceful nuclear power. What followed in the subsequent decades was a flurry of arms control agreements between the US and USSR and clear efforts by major powers to control proliferation and the expansion of nuclear power globally.

But there remained a tricky question: how could the world ensure international compliance with the NPT? While the UN had the International Atomic Energy Agency, it wasn’t equipped to effectively monitor nuclear weapons development and lacked coercive tools. This meant most enforcement pressure came from the big powers, namely the United States and Soviet Union.

Nonproliferation also became a major US foreign policy priority. The United States devoted massive intelligence resources to monitoring proliferation, created an entire bureau at the State Department (the International Security and Nonproliferation Bureau), sanctioned companies and countries, deployed military assets to cajole compliance, created assistance programs to strengthen other countries border controls and monitoring capabilities, and devoted substantial presidential energy and attention to addressing proliferation threats. On a daily basis the US monitors and notifies countries of potential proliferation - telling countries which ships to stop in ports, the factories to inspect, and smugglers to arrest. In general, US prioritization of nonproliferation has helped stem the proliferation tide. When a country has developed nuclear weapons, such as North Korea, that has led to isolation and economic ruin that few want to emulate. In short, the nonproliferation treaty has held largely because the world’s leading superpower has willed it so.

The global climate effort will likely need a similar effort from the US, as well as other global powers, such as China and the European Union. Yet it has been impossible for the US to take on this role until it has made dramatic strides to reduce its own emissions. While the Biden administration has sought to make climate a core US foreign policy priority, the reality is that until the US is seen as a global leader on climate, it will lack the credibility to push others internationally.

Climate may now be making the agenda of topics the Secretary of State and other senior officials discuss in bilateral meetings. But in practice, climate remains pretty far down the agenda. Few countries believe that their lack of climate action will negatively impact their relationship with the United States. Currently, the United States is largely unwilling to upset bilateral relations with countries over lack of action to curb emissions. The appointment of former Secretary of State John Kerry to the role of Special Presidential Envoy for Climate has brought some heft to climate diplomacy. But as a “special envoy” Kerry’s office also exists outside the regular State Department structures. While that can have its benefits, it also makes the issue feel temporary within the department and means climate operates as a seemingly unique issue outside of the normal bureaucratic chain of authority. Most US diplomats are thus largely insulated from grappling with climate issues and are therefore not fully fluent when it comes to the subject.

The significance of the climate provisions in the Inflation Reduction Act, which should dramatically accelerate the climate transition, are therefore more important than just the provisions themselves. The legislation could potentially position the US to finally play the role of global climate monitor and enforcer. Should the legislation succeed in dramatically accelerating the green transition, as well as develop a clean tech industrial base, it could have a substantial impact on US foreign policy in two critical ways. First, it could give the US enough international credibility to make climate a top national security priority, since the US can say “we decarbonized and so can you.” And second, with a vibrant clean industrial sector US foreign policy will also have the commercial incentives to advance global climate action, as it will be good for American businesses. The IRA could enable the United States to put the full weight of its national security agencies behind climate action.

This could have a massive impact on global climate efforts.

First, countries care about what the US prioritizes. If the US indicates that lack of climate action will negatively impact a country’s relationship with the United States, that can carry significant weight. While the global power of the United States may not be what it was relative to a few decades ago, it is still quite impactful. Few countries want poor relations with the United States. In fact, maintaining positive and productive relations with the US is often a major foreign policy priority for most countries around the world. Thus, if the US skips a diplomatic meeting, sends demarches, visits a neighbor or a rival instead, all because of climate policy - it tends to prompt action.

Second, decarbonizing the US economy will prompt the US to link access to the US market with emissions. If US companies decarbonize they will not want to be undercut by cheaper emissions intensive competitors. The US will likely follow the EU’s lead in some form. The EU has created the Carbon Border Adjustment Mechanism, which will place tariffs on carbon-intensive products entering the EU market. The EU may not view the creation of CBAM as a coercive diplomatic tool but those on the receiving end do. Tying market access to emissions will likely prove an effective way to spur wider decarbonization.

Third, prioritizing climate may prompt the US to consider coercive actions against egregious emitters. In particular, economic sanctions could become a key tool in the fight against climate change. Sanctions have been critiqued for their overuse and for lacking clear and achievable political objectives and goals. But when it comes to climate, economic sanctions are an ideal tool. The goal of a polluter is not to occupy territory, build nuclear weapons, or achieve geopolitical stature but to make money. Therefore, imposing economic costs through sanctions is an ideal means of incentivizing changes in behavior. For instance, should Brazil continue to cut down rainforest for beef cattle, the US could conceivably sanction Brazilian beef exports, or it could target sanctions against the Brazilian companies involved, or even just the Brazilian individuals involved. This would make it unprofitable to destroy the environment or pollute. Economic sanctions in that sense could serve as a de facto global carbon price and a cudgel to use against countries that are failing to meet climate commitments.

Currently, the US has had no grounds to use sanctions against others for climate purposes. And one can easily and sensibly argue that the US use of climate sanctions will always be unfair, given America’s culpability in climate change and environmental devastation. The US will be rightfully critiqued for shifting the burden of the transition to developing countries, forcing them to act, while not doing so in the most just or equitable way. Climate activists are right in demanding increases in global climate assistance to poor countries, which the US should do. Yet the US congress is unlikely to ever devote significant aid funding to meet the challenge. The US will also always be criticized for hypocrisy on climate, given its responsibility for a considerable share of historic emissions and its deep climate denialism. However, accusations of hypocrisy should not stop the US from prioritizing climate in its foreign policy. The US sanctions countries for human rights abuses without having addressed all of its own internal issues. The US sanctions countries for developing nuclear weapons when the US possesses its own nuclear weapons. While, unlike the NPT, there is no global climate treaty with the force of international law - in large part because of the United States - the United States could still simply declare that it will seek to compel countries to adhere to their COP commitments. What should matter most is what prompts climate action.

Lastly, strong US domestic and global action will crucially allow it to put pressure on Beijing. China is now the world’s largest emitter by far, which means addressing the climate crisis requires China. This may necessitate engagement and cooperation with China, akin to US-Soviet arms control cooperation during the Cold War. But it also means putting China under intense pressure to act. Special Envoy Kerry’s efforts to engage China in a cooperative dialogue have yielded little thus far and appear unlikely to make significant gains. Strong US action could enable the US to develop an intense public diplomacy campaign to highlight to the world Chinese emissions and its expanded use of coal. Just as the US and Soviet Union competed during the Cold War over which economic system was best, Sino-American competition today could center around who is doing the most to save the planet.

Ultimately, to address the global climate crisis the world needs the United States not just to take domestic action but for the US to use its global power and influence; its diplomatic reach and energy, on behalf of the climate.