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Multilateralism and Climate Geopolitics: Evaluating the Role of International Cooperation in an Era of Climate Risk and Great-Power Rivalry

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Abstract

This paper examines how the architecture of multilateralism is being challenged and reshaped by the geopolitics of climate change. Against a backdrop of rising great-power competition, overlapping global crises (such as energy transition, climate justice and security), and a deepening climate emergency, we explore how multilateral institutions and frameworks (such as the Paris Agreement, the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC), and multilateral development banks) mediate climate diplomacy, technology transfer, adaptation financing, and global public goods provision. We argue that although multilateralism remains essential for addressing climate change as a global commons, geopolitical tensions and uneven capabilities between Global North and Global South states are creating serious obstacles to effective climate cooperation. The paper uses theoretical perspectives from regime theory, complex interdependence and realism to frame the analysis, and draws on recent empirical literature on transatlantic climate policy, China's climate multilateral behaviour, and multilateral climate governance more generally. We conclude with policy implications for reforming multilateral institutions to better manage climate geopolitics, strengthen climate justice, and enhance system resilience.

Keywords: multilateralism, climate geopolitics, climate diplomacy, global governance, climate justice, international cooperation

Introduction

The climate crisis has moved from the margins of environmental policy into the very centre of international relations; it no longer qualifies solely as a technical or ecological challenge, but rather has emerged as a profound geopolitical issue. The urgency of climate change manifested through extreme weather events, sea-level rise, disrupted supply chains, and forced migration means that states are now bound together through shared vulnerabilities and global public-goods imperatives, while simultaneously being engaged in strategic competition for resources, technology, and influence. At the same time, the multilateral architecture for cooperation that arose in the decades following the Second World War is showing distinct signs of strain. Institutions and norms built in an era of relatively stable power structures are struggling to cope with the scale, speed, and complexity of climate-driven transnational risks.

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Multilateralism, defined here as cooperative relations among three or more states operating through formal institutional frameworks and underpinned by common norms of reciprocity and shared interest, was long seen as the vehicle for managing global challenges. However, in the climate domain, the dynamic interplay of great-power rivalry, rising demands from climate-vulnerable states in the Global South, and the imperative to govern the global climate system as a public good are shifting the terrain of multilateral engagement. As scholars have observed, the current multilateral system is "out-of-step" with contemporary geopolitical and environmental realities, calling for a fundamental re-imagining rather than mere incremental reform.[2]

Within climate geopolitics, which encompasses how climate change shapes strategic interactions among states, competition for low-carbon technologies, alliances around adaptation finance, and norms of burden-sharing and climate justice. Multilateralism is both indispensable and under pressure. On the one hand, no single state can manage the global climate commons alone; international coordination is essential for mitigation, adaptation, technology transfer, and finance. On the other hand, multilateral cooperation is hampered by diverging national interests, power asymmetries (especially between the Global North and Global South), and the politicisation of climate action as a site of strategic rivalry.[3]

This paper explores how multilateralism interacts with climate geopolitics in three major empirical arenas: first, the promise and limits of multilateral climate governance in advancing collective action and climate justice; second, the nature of regional and trans-Atlantic climate cooperation under conditions of geopolitical tension; and third, the evolving role of China and other emerging powers within climate multilateralism. By synthesising theoretical approaches ranging from regime theory and complex interdependence to realist insights on power politics, the analysis seeks to illuminate how multilateral frameworks are adapting (or failing to adapt) to the pressures of climate geopolitics. In conclusion, the paper draws out policy-relevant implications for institutional reform, greater inclusivity, and resilience in the multilateral system.

Through this inquiry, we argue that while multilateralism remains essential for addressing the systemic nature of climate change, it faces serious structural and geopolitical impediments. Unless multilateral frameworks are reformed to reflect power shifts, deepen equitable participation, and integrate climate justice as a core principle, they risk being overtaken by bilateral arrangements, regional blocs, or fragmented coalitions thereby undermining the collective action required to address the climate challenge.

[2]Elliott, Lorraine. "A reflection on the future of international organizations: have they had their day or can we make them fit for purpose?." In *Handbook on Governance in International Organizations*, pp. 343-358. Edward Elgar Publishing, 2023.
[3]Tudoroiu, Theodor. "The Global Security Initiative." In *China's New Global Initiatives*, pp. 119-186. Singapore: Springer Nature Singapore, 2025.

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Theoretical Framework

Multilateralism in the era of climate change represents a critical arena for examining the interaction between international cooperation and geopolitical strategy. As climate change intensifies global interdependence and vulnerability, it also reshapes the landscape of international politics, where environmental degradation intersects with national interest, development priorities, and global governance. Understanding this dynamic requires a blend of theoretical perspectives that include regime theory, realism, and complex interdependence theory. These frameworks provide different, yet complementary, lenses to assess the evolving architecture and politics of climate governance.

Multilateralism, defined as cooperation among three or more states grounded in institutionalized norms such as non-discrimination, diffuse reciprocity, and generalized principles of conduct, serves as a foundational principle in climate diplomacy.[4] In this view, international climate institutions like the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) function as regimes that establish shared rules and expectations for state behavior. From a regime-theory perspective, the UNFCCC is not merely a forum for negotiation but a norm-generating institution that structures global climate action. It creates a platform through which states can coordinate emissions reductions, adaptation strategies, and climate finance while reinforcing common objectives such as keeping global warming below 1.5 degrees Celsius.

However, realism offers a contrasting view, one that centers on the self-interest of states, power asymmetries, and the strategic dimensions of climate negotiations. According to realist logic, states engage in climate diplomacy not necessarily out of normative commitment, but as a function of national interest. The global climate regime is thus an arena where major powers seek to project influence, secure energy access, and shape the distributional outcomes of climate policy. For instance, the competition over green technologies, such as electric vehicles, hydrogen energy, and solar manufacturing is often framed in terms of economic competitiveness and geopolitical leverage. Countries like China, the United States, and members of the European Union have incorporated climate strategy into industrial policy, reflecting how climate action can align with broader power-based objectives.

Complex interdependence theory provides a more integrative framework for analyzing climate governance, highlighting the multiplicity of actors and channels involved. It recognizes that states are embedded in webs of economic, environmental, and social interconnections, where power is not solely measured in military terms but also through institutional influence, market access, and technological capabilities. Climate change illustrates a form of shared vulnerability that binds states and non-state actors alike, necessitating cooperation that spans governments, international organizations, civil society, and the private sector. Within this framework, climate negotiations are not

[4]Dijkstra, Hylke. *Multilateralism amid geopolitics: Rethinking international cooperation in the 21st century*. Maastricht University, 2024.

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zero-sum games but complex bargaining processes shaped by overlapping interests and long-term mutual risks.

Climate geopolitics introduces another critical layer of analysis. It encompasses the strategic implications of climate change across dimensions such as energy security, trade, migration, and the shifting alignments of global power. As countries transition to low-carbon economies, the global demand for critical minerals, renewable infrastructure, and sustainable finance is reshaping traditional geopolitical fault lines. Nations rich in resources like lithium, cobalt, and rare earth elements are becoming strategically significant, potentially altering the global energy hierarchy. Simultaneously, climate-induced stresses such as sea-level rise, droughts, and food insecurity pose risks to stability, sovereignty, and regional cooperation, especially in fragile and conflict-prone areas.

In this geopolitical context, multilateral institutions must navigate a complex terrain of cooperation and competition. On one hand, they facilitate global agreements on emission targets, adaptation support, and technology transfer. On the other hand, they operate within a contested normative space, where principles such as climate justice, historical responsibility, and equitable burden-sharing remain disputed. The debates over differentiated responsibilities between developed and developing nations, and the operationalization of climate finance, such as the Loss and Damage Fund highlight enduring tensions between global solidarity and national interest.

Moreover, the growing influence of emerging economies like India, Brazil, and South Africa in climate diplomacy reflects an evolving multipolarity in global governance. These states challenge the traditional leadership of the Global North and advocate for a more inclusive, equity-based approach to climate action. Their engagement exemplifies how multilateralism is being redefined by new power centers that bring distinct priorities, capabilities, and conceptions of climate justice to the table. As such, climate multilateralism is not static; it is a dynamic process shaped by shifting alliances, technological disruption, and the evolving material conditions of the planet.

Therefore, analyzing climate governance through the lenses of multilateralism, regime theory, realism, and complex interdependence reveals a multilayered and evolving global order. The intersection of environmental necessity and geopolitical calculation means that climate multilateralism is simultaneously a site of collaboration, contestation, and transformation. The challenge ahead lies in reconciling the urgency of collective action with the divergent interests of sovereign states, ensuring that global governance mechanisms remain effective, inclusive, and responsive to the pressing demands of the climate crisis.

Literature Review

Multilateral climate governance remains a vital, though contested, pathway for addressing the global climate crisis. Given the inherently transboundary nature of climate change and the need for coordinated international responses, many

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scholars uphold multilateralism as indispensable. At the same time, literature increasingly acknowledges the structural and political limits embedded in multilateral processes. The complex interplay of geopolitical rivalry, institutional rigidity, uneven capacities, and rising polycentric governance has prompted a substantial body of academic work to evaluate both the promise and limitations of the multilateral approach to climate governance.

A number of scholars emphasise the normative and structural importance of multilateral arrangements. Bulkeley and Newell,[5] for instance, argue that although climate governance increasingly involves a plurality of actors: cities, corporations, NGOs, the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) and related multilateral institutions remain critical for legitimacy and coordination. Their analysis underscores how global governance institutions still provide the scaffolding for climate action across levels. Similarly, the edited volume by Wurzel, Skou Andersen, and Tobin[6]locates global climate governance within a broader leadership-followership framework. It demonstrates how pioneering states use multilateralism to set norms, while others follow or adapt based on domestic and international constraints. Multilateral platforms thus offer spaces for innovation, negotiation, and norm diffusion, even in the face of slow formal progress.

Despite such optimism, a significant portion of the literature highlights deep-seated structural barriers that impede the effectiveness of multilateral climate governance. One persistent issue is the entrenched divide between the Global North and Global South. Ciplet, Roberts, and Khan[7]argue that multilateral negotiations, while inclusive in form, often reproduce inequalities through power imbalances and technocratic decision-making processes that favour developed nations. In a related normative critique, Dietzel[8]highlights how global climate governance frequently falls short of justice principles by failing to account for differentiated historical responsibility and varying capacities among states. These concerns echo in recent scholarship by Baumann,[9] who notes the hardening of North–South divisions and the slowdown of progress within the UN climate regime. Such observations suggest that although the multilateral system aspires to be equitable, it often reinforces existing hierarchies and distributive injustices.

[5]Bulkeley, Harriet, and Peter Newell. *Governing climate change*. Routledge, 2010.
[6]Wurzel, Rüdiger KW, Mikael Skou Andersen, and Paul Tobin. "Introduction: Climate governance across the globe: pioneers, leaders and followers." In *Climate Governance Across the Globe*, pp. 3-20. Routledge, 2020.
[7]Ciplet, David, J. Timmons Roberts, and Mizan R. Khan. *Power in a warming world: The new global politics of climate change and the remaking of environmental inequality*. MIT press, 2015.
[8]Dietzel, Alix. *Global justice and climate governance: Bridging theory and practice*. Edinburgh University Press, 2018.
[9]Baumann, Franz. "Multilateral Climate Governance: Its Promise and Limits." *Global Governance: A Review of Multilateralism and International Organizations* 30, no. 2 (2024): 240-253.

Geopolitical rivalry further complicates collective action. Terhalle and Streck[10] contend that the rise of great-power politics within climate governance has led to a fragmentation of efforts, with powerful states pursuing bilateral or minilateral arrangements that circumvent multilateral venues. Their analysis aligns with the broader findings of Lesage and van de Graaf,[11] who examine how emerging powers like China and India engage multilateral institutions in strategic, and at times contradictory, ways—simultaneously seeking influence within established regimes while creating alternative venues that better reflect their interests. Zhang's[12] analysis of China's evolving role supports this interpretation, highlighting how domestic priorities and international positioning co-evolve and shape China's multilateral posture. Such dynamics suggest that the multilateral system does not exist in a vacuum but is deeply enmeshed in broader power configurations and national interests.

Institutional rigidity also emerges as a recurring limitation in the literature. Hoffman[13]describes how climate governance has shifted away from traditional treaty frameworks like the Kyoto Protocol toward more experimental and fragmented approaches. While this has opened new avenues for innovation, it also poses challenges for coherence and accountability. Heubaum[14]builds on this by analysing how the convergence of climate and energy governance has occurred more through incremental institutional layering than through purposeful design. The result is a fragmented architecture that often lacks the responsiveness and coordination needed to address climate urgency at scale. The limits of this institutional design become particularly apparent in moments of crisis or when transformative action is required but difficult to achieve through consensus-based mechanisms.

In response to these limitations, some scholars explore emerging transformations in climate governance. One prominent trend is the rise of transnational and hybrid governance arrangements that include non-state actors. Bulkeley et al.[15] provide an extensive analysis of how actors beyond the state, such as cities, firms, networks, and NGOs are increasingly shaping climate governance outcomes. Their work illustrates how governance has become polycentric, with authority and capacity diffused across multiple levels and actors. Soraya et al.[16]introduce the concept of "hybrid multilateralism," where non-state actors operate alongside states within multilateral frameworks, blurring traditional lines between domestic and international, public and

[10]Terhalle, Maximilian, and Charlotte Streck, eds. *The new power politics of global climate governance*. London, New York: Routledge, 2017.
[11]Lesage, Dries. *Rising powers and multilateral institutions*. Springer, 2015.
[12]Zhang, Hao. "China and climate multilateralism: A review of theoretical approaches." *Politics and Governance* 10, no. 2 (2022): 50-60.
[13]Hoffmann, Matthew J. *Climate governance at the crossroads: Experimenting with a global response after Kyoto*. Oxford University Press, 2011.
[14]Heubaum, Harald L. *Global climate and energy governance: Towards an integrated architecture*. Routledge, 2021.
[15]Bulkeley, Harriet, and Peter Newell. *Governing climate change*. Routledge, 2010.
[16]Soraya, Ninda, Ali Muhammad, and Sitti Zarina Binti Alimuddin. "Hybrid Multilateralism: Greenpeace in the global climate governance." *AUSTRAL: Brazilian Journal of Strategy & International Relations* 13, no. 26 (2024).

private. Han, Kang, and Tosun[17] further argue that institutions such as multilateral development banks are increasingly embedding justice-based criteria into their frameworks, suggesting that hybrid approaches may offer avenues for normative as well as operational progress.

The role of emerging powers has also attracted sustained scholarly attention, particularly concerning how domestic political considerations shape international engagement. Han et al.,[18]demonstrate that climate governance in developing countries cannot be understood solely through the lens of international negotiations. Instead, they argue for the importance of linking domestic institutions, development priorities, and climate commitments. This emphasis is echoed in Açikalin's[19]edited volume, which provides a multidisciplinary perspective on how Global South actors are crafting new diplomatic tools and rhetorical frames to navigate climate negotiations. These works challenge linear models of international influence and underscore the importance of context-specific governance dynamics. They also illustrate how emerging powers are neither mere rule-takers nor spoilers but increasingly assertive actors in shaping global regimes.

Recent works are also attentive to the practical and regional dimensions of climate governance. Erfani, Rezvaneh[20] focus on Africa, Latin America, and the Caribbean, documenting how national-level experiences and constraints shape participation in multilateral forums. They argue that while multilateral frameworks offer a common stage, the scripts vary significantly depending on institutional capacity, vulnerability, and political will. Similarly, Ali and Kamraju[21] explore how multilateral institutions can be made more effective through reforms in governance structure, negotiation practice, and implementation strategy. These practical analyses highlight the need to move beyond high-level principles toward grounded, contextually sensitive approaches to climate governance.

Across the literature, several common themes and tensions emerge. Multilateralism continues to be seen as indispensable for global climate action. It provides a normative and legal framework for cooperation, creates opportunities for dialogue and norm diffusion, and serves as a foundation for global legitimacy. However, its effectiveness is constrained by deep-rooted structural inequalities, conflicting national interests, and institutional inertia. The architecture of climate governance often struggles to keep pace with the

[17]Han, Songhee, Minah Kang, and Jale Tosun. "Multilateralism and Climate Justice." In *Emerging Trends in International Development and Climate Policy: A Focus on Korea and Germany*, pp. 97-110. Cham: Springer Nature Switzerland, 2024.
[18]Han, Songhee, Minah Kang, and Jale Tosun. "Multilateralism and Climate Justice." In *Emerging Trends in International Development and Climate Policy: A Focus on Korea and Germany*, pp. 97-110. Cham: Springer Nature Switzerland, 2024.
[19]Açikalin, SuayNilhan. "Climate Diplomacy at the Crossroads: A Multidisciplinary Perspective." (2026): 1-288.
[20]Erfani, Rezvaneh. "Climate Activism in Our Part of The World and Methodological Insights on How to Study It." *Youth* 5, no. 3 (2025): 80.
[21]Ali, Mohd Akhter, and M. Kamraju. *Global Climate Governance: Strategies for Effective Management*. Springer Nature, 2025.

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urgency of the climate crisis, and its capacity to deliver ambitious outcomes is frequently undermined by fragmentation and power asymmetries.

At the same time, multilateralism is not static. It is being reconfigured through new forms of hybrid and transnational governance, driven by the growing involvement of non-state actors and subnational entities. The agency of emerging powers, as well as the shifting role of regional organisations and coalitions, suggests that climate multilateralism is undergoing a gradual transformation. These developments raise important questions about effectiveness, legitimacy, and justice in the evolving governance landscape.

Despite this rich and evolving literature, several gaps remain. One significant area concerns the implementation effects of multilateral commitments—how agreements are translated into action, particularly in developing contexts. Another concerns the interaction between multilateral and transnational governance: whether these are complementary or potentially conflicting modes. There is also a need for greater empirical analysis of middle powers beyond the usual focus on China and India, as well as research into how multilateralism intersects with digital governance, data infrastructure, and new technologies. Additionally, future work could better address the temporal dynamics of institutional reform, asking not only whether multilateralism can adapt, but how and under what conditions such adaptation occurs.

In conclusion, the literature paints a complex but instructive picture. Multilateral climate governance is essential but insufficient on its own. Its promise lies in providing a shared framework for collective action, but its limits stem from embedded inequalities, political rivalry, and institutional fragmentation. Recent shifts—such as hybrid multilateralism, rising non-state involvement, and the assertiveness of emerging powers—may offer new pathways, but they also introduce new tensions. Scholars and practitioners alike are thus challenged to re-imagine how global cooperation can be made more just, inclusive, and effective in the face of an accelerating climate crisis.

Promise and Limits of Multilateral Climate Governance

Multilateral governance structures have indisputably enabled major global achievements in climate policy, most notably the Paris Agreement adopted under the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) framework and the mobilisation of multilateral development banks (MDBs) to channel finance and support for mitigation, adaptation and technology-transfer efforts in developing countries. These structures provide the formal architecture for global coordination: states gather, commit, negotiate and set shared frameworks of ambition, transparency and review. For instance, multilateral institutions set the goal of mobilising USD 100 billion annually for climate finance to support developing countries, established under UNFCCC discussions in 2009 and reaffirmed in the Paris Agreement. (see e.g., Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development [OECD] data referenced in Turner et al.).

Yet despite this promise, empirical evidence increasingly suggests that the multilateral architecture is under severe strain and its performance in achieving the scale of mitigation, adaptation and technology-transfer needed is inadequate. In a recent account, Franz Baumann[22]argues that after three lost decades, greenhouse-gas emissions continue to rise, the climate crisis and inequality have become more extreme, and status-quo interests remain entrenched—so while the institutional framework is intact, the actual capacity to deliver has been compromised.

One key empirical axis of analysis is the **climate finance gap**. Despite the formal pledge of USD 100 billion annually for climate finance, evidence shows considerable shortfall and contestation over definitions, flows, and adequacy. In the chapter on "Multilateralism and Climate Justice," authors show that the USD 100 billion goal has been extended to 2025, but actual delivered amounts fall short of the scale needed. Another study, Bergsvik, Gupta & Weikmans[23] show that transparency mechanisms under the UNFCCC do not clearly map the flows of climate finance from donor to recipient, because of heterogeneous definitions ("new and additional" vs. regular development assistance), lack of standardisation, and limited international review.This lack of clarity undermines trust in the multilateral system and complicates assessment of whether the finance target is being met in meaningful ways.

Another empirical dimension is **technology transfer and adaptation for vulnerable states**. Multilateral regimes include mechanisms and forums for technology cooperation and for adaptation support to small island developing states (SIDS) and least developed countries (LDCs). Nevertheless, the empirical record suggests that many vulnerable states remain under-served: adaptation finance lags mitigation finance, institutional capacities are weak, and the effects of climate change are accelerating faster than planned responses. The justice dimension here is particularly salient—structural inequalities between Global North donors and Global South recipients persist, reinforcing power asymmetries. The chapter on multilateralism and climate justice emphasises how MDBs embed justice-based criteria but also how actual flows and outcomes fall short of transformative expectations.

Empirical data also point to **institutional and geopolitical limits** of multilateral governance. On the one hand, the multilateral process remains the central venue for global climate negotiation, but on the other, fragmentation and competing interests reduce effectiveness. For example, according to the "Tracking international cooperation" report, commitments under global climate governance are well short of required ambition, and performance in the multilateral system is in decline. Isakova et al.,[24]emphasizes that the

[22]Baumann, Franz. "Sounding the climate alarm—scientists and politics." In *Conservation Science and Advocacy for a Planet in Peril*, pp. 41-71. Elsevier, 2021.
[23]Bergsvik, Robert, Aarti Gupta, Romain Weikmans, and Ina Möller. "Is transparency furthering clarity in multilateral climate governance? The case of climate finance." *International Environmental Agreements: Politics, Law and Economics* 24, no. 4 (2024): 565-588.
[24]Isakova, Alina, Malte Neuwinger, Robin Schulze Waltrup, and Oday Uraiqat, eds. *Constructing global challenges in world politics*. Taylor & Francis, 2024.

multilateral regime now faces entrenched oppositional interests, slow decision-making cycles and weakened momentum—creating a mismatch between institutional promise and actual climate outcomes.

A further empirical challenge relates to **accountability, transparency and definitional clarity**. The Bergsvik et al.[25]study found that despite transparency arrangements under the UNFCCC, country reports vary significantly in definition of what constitutes climate finance, whether it is grants or loans, whether it is new and additional, and whether it is aimed at mitigation or adaptation. These definitional and audit-framework weaknesses mean that the multilateral governance system has difficulty establishing credible data to assess performance.

From this empirical evidence several patterns emerge. The promise side is clear: multilateral frameworks provide legitimacy, coordination, common goals, and the potential for large-scale mobilisation. The limits side is equally clear: finance flows remain inadequate in size and clarity; adaptation and vulnerable countries are under-served; multilateral institutions are slow, constrained by consensus processes, and shaped by major-power interests; power asymmetries persist between donor and recipient countries; and the architecture is strained by competing bilateral or plurilateral initiatives that bypass or supplement the multilateral core.

In terms of **explanation**, the empirical literature suggests that capacity and equity issues are crucial. Developing countries often lack institutional capacity to absorb and implement finance and technology transfers; domestic political and economic constraints limit participation; and the multilateral process per se cannot resolve all national-level barriers. At the same time, major donors face political and fiscal constraints at home, limiting the scale and nature of their commitments. Geopolitical rivalry—between major emitters, between North and South, between development and climate priorities—also undermines consensus and delay.

While multilateral climate governance remains a necessary component of global climate action, empirical evidence strongly indicates that it alone is insufficient to deliver the scale and speed of mitigation, adaptation and justice required. The gaps in finance, technology transfer and institutional performance reflect deeper structural and geopolitical barriers. Future empirical work should focus on tracing actual outcomes of multilateral commitments at the national and sub-national level, measuring effectiveness of flows in adaptation and technology transfer in vulnerable countries, and analysing how multilateral regimes can be reformed or complemented to overcome the observed limitations.

[25]Bergsvik, Robert, Aarti Gupta, Romain Weikmans, and Ina Möller. "Is transparency furthering clarity in multilateral climate governance? The case of climate finance." *International Environmental Agreements: Politics, Law and Economics* 24, no. 4 (2024): 565-588.

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Regional and transatlantic climate cooperation represent a critical dimension of global climate governance, offering a bridge between global multilateral frameworks and more focused regional or inter-regional initiatives. While multilateral mechanisms such as the Paris Agreement remain central, cooperation between the European Union (EU) and the United States, and more broadly across regions of the Atlantic, helps to reinforce, supplement or in certain cases challenge the multilateral climate regime. The volume edited by Bakker and Francioni[26]titled *The EU, the US and Global Climate Governance*provides a foundational empirical assessment of transatlantic cooperation and divergence in climate policy, tracing how the EU and the US—the two largest economic blocs—addressed climate change, energy technologies, and climate diplomacy. Bakker and Francioni argue that despite shared overall goals of limiting greenhouse-gas emissions, the means, regulatory styles and institutional engagements of the EU and the US diverge, thus complicating true cooperation in global forums (Bakker and Francioni, 2014). In the same vein, the edited volume *Transatlantic Environment and Energy Politics: Comparative and International Perspectives* (Schreurs, Selin and Vandeveer, 2009) offers an earlier and broad collection of case studies examining cooperation and conflict in transatlantic environmental and energy policy, including climate. This work illustrates how the climate agenda is embedded within broader transatlantic relations, and highlights that while cooperation is possible, it remains fragmented and contested (Schreurs et al., 2009). In exploring the geopolitical framing of climate cooperation, Bergamaschi and Sartori (2018) in their report "The Geopolitics of Climate – A Transatlantic Dialogue" locate climate action as both an opportunity and a site of contention for European and U.S. actors. They contend that transatlantic climate cooperation may serve as a vehicle for rule-based international cooperation, yet is simultaneously vulnerable to normative differences (for example, regulation vs laissez-faire), institutional inertia and underlying geopolitical rivalries (Bergamaschi & Sartori, 2018). This framing is particularly pertinent when considering how multilateral climate regimes are increasingly under strain from geopolitical competition and diverging regional agendas.

Empirically, transatlantic cooperation has yielded several positive outcomes. The EU and U.S. have periodically co-led in global climate diplomacy, shared technological development platforms, and supported multilateral finance initiatives. For example, the EU–US relationship contributed to negotiating the Paris Agreement and to joint efforts in the clean-energy transition. Yet the empirical record also shows pronounced limits and recurrent tensions. Differences in regulatory style, climate ambition, institutional capacity, and political economy have hindered deeper cooperation. Bakker and Francioni[27]emphasise that despite converging targets, the EU and U.S. differ in carbon-pricing approaches, sectoral regulation and technological priorities.

[26]Bergamaschi, Luca, and Nicolò Sartori. *Geopolitics of Climate A Transatlantic Dialogue*. Istituto AffariInternazionali (IAI), 2022.
[27]Bakker, Christine, and Francesco Francioni, eds. *The EU, the US and global climate governance*. Farnham/Burlington: Ashgate, 2014.

Schreurs et al.[28]show that divergent national interests—economic competitiveness, energy security, and domestic political pressure—often drive discrepancies in transatlantic climate policy. Bergamaschi and Sartori's [29]geopolitical analysis indicates that while both parties support multilateralism in principle, they sometimes prefer bilateral or minilateral arrangements that enhance their strategic autonomy. These empirical findings reflect the broader challenge of translating regional cooperation into sustained multilateral leadership.

Another important empirical dimension concerns the role of sub-state, city and regional actors in transatlantic climate cooperation. Barichella's[30]*Can Cities, States and Regions Save Our Planet? – Transatlantic Perspectives on Multilevel Climate Governance* explores how municipal and regional actors on both sides of the Atlantic (for example, in the U.S. and France) engage in climate governance, creating cross-Atlantic networks, sharing best practices and influencing national policy. Barichella shows how these multilevel governance linkages complement but also complicate traditional state-centred multilateral frameworks, by introducing new streams of cooperation outside formal treaties.[31]The involvement of non-state actors in transatlantic networks therefore adds empirical complexity: while they bolster climate action, their relationship to the multilateral regime is often informal, loosely coordinated and difficult to integrate into formal multilateral architectures.

A further empirical strand examines regional cooperation beyond the EU-US sphere how the Atlantic region more broadly engages climate diplomacy and regional partnerships. For example, the open-access book *Climate Change in Regional Perspective: European Union and Latin American Initiatives, Challenges, and Solutions*[32] addresses inter-regional cooperation between the EU and Latin American states. It illustrates how trans-Atlantic (or trans-regional) climate cooperation can arise through sub-regional linkage, technology transfer, finance and mutual learning. While this book does not focus exclusively on EU–US relations, it enriches the empirical picture of how Atlantic-spanning regional networks contribute to climate governance architecture.[33] Empirically, the book shows the uneven geography of cooperation—Latin American states often face capacity constraints, differing institutional settings and divergent priorities

[28]Schreurs, Miranda A., Henrik Selin, and Stacy D. VanDeveer, eds. *Transatlantic environment and energy politics: Comparative and international perspectives*. Ashgate Publishing, Ltd., 2009.
[29]Bergamaschi, Luca, and Nicolò Sartori. *Geopolitics of Climate A Transatlantic Dialogue*. Istituto AffariInternazionali (IAI), 2022.
[30]Barichella, Arnault. *Can Cities, States and Regions Save Our Planet?: Transatlantic Perspectives on Multilevel Climate Governance*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2023.
[31]Barichella, Arnault. *Can Cities, States and Regions Save Our Planet?: Transatlantic Perspectives on Multilevel Climate Governance*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2023.
[32]Ribeiro Hoffmann, Andrea, Paula Sandrin, and Yannis E. Doukas. *Climate change in regional perspective: European Union and Latin American initiatives, challenges, and solutions*. Springer Nature, 2024.
[33]Ribeiro Hoffmann, Andrea, Paula Sandrin, and Yannis E. Doukas. *Climate change in regional perspective: European Union and Latin American initiatives, challenges, and solutions*. Springer Nature, 2024.

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relative to European partners—thus highlighting once more how structural asymmetries limit effectiveness in these trans-regional cooperation modalities.

In synthesising the empirical evidence, several key insights emerge. First, transatlantic climate cooperation operates as both a complement to—but not a substitute for—global multilateral frameworks. Cooperation between the EU and U.S. helps strengthen multilateral regimes by aligning policies, sharing innovations, and presenting joint diplomatic leadership. However, when divergences emerge (regulatory, technological, economic or geopolitical), the impact on global multilateral processes is negative: fragmentation, delays, weakened ambition. Secondly, structural inequalities matter: differences in institutional capacity, regulatory traditions, economic interests and domestic politics between regions limit the depth of cooperation and the extent to which regional cooperation can stabilise or advance multilateral governance. Thirdly, the multilateral architecture itself constrains regional-transatlantic cooperation: consensus-based decision-making, state-centric design and slow negotiation cycles mean that even well-intentioned regional actors may struggle to translate regional cooperation into global outcomes. Fourthly, the evolution of multilevel governance—cities, states, sub-national regions—across the Atlantic offers empirical promise but also raises questions about coherence, legitimacy and integration with multilateral frameworks.

From a geopolitics perspective, the empirical scholarship emphasises how transatlantic climate cooperation is embedded in broader power dynamics. The EU–US axis is shaped by their global ambition, regional leadership claims, and strategic positioning in a changing world order. Regional cooperation is thus neither apolitical nor purely technical: it reflects interests, hierarchical relations, normative contestation, and institutional path-dependence. The diverging regulatory and institutional models of the EU and U.S., as well as different views on burden-sharing, trade, competitiveness and innovation, reproduce the kinds of North–South and East–West frictions that scholars identify in the multilateral climate regime.

Nevertheless, there are important pathways through which regional and transatlantic cooperation may enhance global multilateralism. Joint initiatives on clean technology, carbon markets, and climate finance between the EU and U.S. (and other regional partners) help develop institutional and normative infrastructure that feed into multilateral processes. Sub-national and regional actors create networks of cooperation that may accelerate experimentation, diffusion and scaling of climate solutions. In theory, this could strengthen multilateral governance by providing evidence, tools and momentum for global treaties. However, empirical evidence also suggests that without deliberate coordination and integration with the multilateral system, these regional and transatlantic efforts may remain siloed, fragmented or disconnected from global outcomes.

The empirical literature on regional and transatlantic climate cooperation underscores both promise and limits. On the one hand, cooperation between the EU and U.S., and more broadly across Atlantic regions, provides vital policy alignment, technology exchange, normative leadership and multilevel

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experimentation that supports the multilateral arena. On the other hand, cooperation is often hampered by divergent regulatory systems, institutional heterogeneity, geopolitical competition and limited integration with the global multilateral regime. For researchers of multilateralism and climate geopolitics, then, regional and transatlantic climate cooperation constitute a vital site of analysis: they reflect how multilateralism is mediated through regional webs of cooperation, how power and capacity shape climate governance, and how global agreements are translated (or not) into regional and sub-national action. Understanding this interplay is essential for assessing the future of global climate governance and the possibility of strengthening or reforming the multilateral system through regional partnerships.

China and Emerging Powers in Climate Multilateralism

The global climate crisis demands collective action, which has been organized chiefly through multilateral institutions and agreements. Yet these very institutions operate in a contested geopolitical environment, where rising powers, shifts in global economic weight and persistent inequalities among states complicate collective responses. One of the clearest empirical illustrations of this challenge is the evolving role of China, which has moved from being viewed as a laggard in climate governance to positioning itself as a potential leader in multilateral climate forums. As such, China's trajectory offers rich insight into how the interplay between domestic development ambitions, technology and innovation strategies, and international diplomacy shape the contours of multilateral climate governance in a multipolar (or re-emerging-multipolar) era.

China's climate policy evolution provides a useful lens to analyse how shifts in power, identities and institutional positioning can alter a state's role in global governance. The book *China's Transition on Climate Change Communication and Governance: From Zero to Hero*[34] provides an empirical account of how China transitioned from relative marginalisation to more active global climate engagement. The author traces China's domestic policy shifts (including government–media–civil society cooperation), and its increasing engagement with international governance institutions. Wang[35] shows how China deployed a "two-level game" (domestic and international) approach to climate policy, aligning domestic incentives with global positioning. The work thereby illustrates how meaningful engagement in multilateral climate governance requires not only participation in global institutions but also domestic structural adjustments.[36]

[34]Wang, Binbin. *China's transition on climate change communication and governance*. Springer, 2021.
[35]Wang, Binbin. *China's transition on climate change communication and governance*. Springer, 2021.
[36]Wang, Binbin. *China's transition on climate change communication and governance*. Springer, 2021.

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In the broader literature on emerging powers and multilateral governance, von Allwörden, Laura[37] in *The Powerful Norm for Climate Change Action* examine how rising states such as China and India engage international regimes, sometimes reforming, sometimes bypassing them. A similar work includes a book by Ogwu et al., titled "Hegemony and Climate Governance: Core States, Agreements, and the Limits of Multilateralism",[38] which articulates how emerging powers engage both formal multilateral institutions and alternative or parallel governance architectures. This work emphasises that the shift in material capabilities of emerging powers places pressure on the historically western-dominated multilateral system, requiring adaptation. Further, the book 'The Transitional Order of Climate Governance'[39] directly addresses how great powers (both established and rising) shape climate governance. The volume argues that "today's geopolitics are about who gets how much in the fiercely competitive race over the available 'carbon space'". This phrasing captures both the material and normative dimensions of climate geopolitics, competition for emissions, access to technology, influence in negotiation and the distribution of climate-finance burdens.

Turning specifically to China's changing posture, the title "*Power Play Along Rivers of the Mekong*"[40] examines how China increasingly envisions itself as a major actor in climate governance while still facing constraints associated with its development status and structural conditions. The authors argue that China's evolving identity – from developing country to major actor – matters for how it engages multilateral climate regimes. Yang[41] in "Understanding China's changing engagement in global climate governance: a struggle for identity" similarly argues that China's strategic use of climate diplomacy is part of its broader identity construction as a leading power, emphasising responsibility, provision of global public goods and cooperation with other developing states. Both works highlight that China's multilateral engagement is shaped not only by external negotiation contexts, but also by internal debates about development, equity, and leadership. For example, China's emphasis on the principle of "common but differentiated responsibilities" (CBDR) reflects its identity as a large developing country, even as it moves into leadership roles.

From a multilateral-governance perspective, China's evolving role presents both opportunities and limits. On the opportunity side, the fact that China now participates more actively in global climate diplomacy, invests heavily in renewable energy, and provides green-technology cooperation (especially

[37]von Allwörden, Laura. "Introduction: Contested International Organizations in Climate and Energy." In *The Powerful Norm for Climate Change Action*, pp. 1-16. Bristol University Press, 2026.
[38]Ogwu, Matthew Chidozie, and Sylvester Chibueze Izah. "Hegemony and Climate Governance: Core States, Agreements, and the Limits of Multilateralism." In *Climate Frontiers and Social Transformation: Socio-Ecological Shifts in the Age of Global Inequality*, pp. 237-266. Cham: Springer Nature Switzerland, 2026.
[39]Mende, Janne. "The Transitional Order of Climate Governance: Transition, Uncertainty, and Urgency." *Global Studies Quarterly* 6, no. 1 (2026): ksaf117.
[40]Choi, Charlton, and Charlton Choi. "Power Play Along Rivers of the Mekong." *Asian Journal of Social Science* 27, no. 1: 55-76.
[41]Yang, Jilong. "Understanding China's changing engagement in global climate governance: a struggle for identity." *Asia Europe Journal* 20, no. 4 (2022): 357-376.

through Fora such as the Belt and Road Initiative) means that multilateral regimes may gain a more robust and broadly based leader, thereby enhancing legitimacy and potential effectiveness. For instance, China's engagement in South–South cooperation on climate change emphasised in its own official statement "Solidarity and Real Action for Global Climate Governance" illustrates how China frames its role as supportive of multilateralism and equity.[42] On the limits side, however, the broader structure of multilateral climate governance is challenged by China's rise: competition over carbon space, divergent priorities between developed and developing states, and institutional designs developed in a prior era may struggle to adapt. The multilateral architecture must thus contend with a shifting distribution of power and changing norms of burden-sharing.

Several implications emerge from this analysis. First, multilateral regimes must adapt to shifting power dynamics among states, especially to integrate emerging powers more effectively. The literature suggests that multilateral institutions designed in a unipolar or western-dominated moment struggle to incorporate the voices, priorities and capacities of rising states. Yang[43] show how institutional reform or opening of governance structures is needed to accommodate these shifts. Second, climate justice must be better integrated into multilateral frameworks in ways that reflect the evolving global order. China's emphasis on CBDR and equity underscores that emerging powers expect multilateral regimes to recognise not only universal goals but also differential responsibilities and capacities. Third, technology transfer and climate finance must be designed to navigate geopolitical rivalry and ensure trust among states. China's dual challenge of meeting its own domestic transition while engaging in global cooperation illustrates the two-level game: domestic development and international leadership must co-evolve. Fourth, institutional reform may be needed to enhance the resilience of multilateral cooperation in an era of climate-geopolitical tension. The work of Bazanni[44] underscores that climate governance is increasingly a site of great-power politics; multilateral institutions must therefore be better equipped to mediate competition, encourage cooperation and adapt to power shifts.

However, the interplay between China (and other emerging powers) and multilateral climate governance reveals a paradox: climate change demands collective, multilateral action, yet the politics of power, competition, identity, and inequality complicate cooperation. China's trajectory from follower to potential leader embodies both promise and constraint for global climate governance. As emerging powers reshape the global order, multilateral climate regimes must evolve in design, normative frame and operational practice to maintain legitimacy and effectiveness. Future research should probe how institutional reforms, global governance innovation (including hybrid and polycentric forms) and deeper integration of emerging powers may bolster

[42]Bazzani, Giacomo. "From organic to climate solidarity: challenges for climate change mitigation." *Globalizations* 21, no. 8 (2024): 1632-1641.
[43]Yang, Jilong. "Understanding China's changing engagement in global climate governance: a struggle for identity." *Asia Europe Journal* 20, no. 4 (2022): 357-376.
[44]Yang, Jilong. "Understanding China's changing engagement in global climate governance: a struggle for identity." *Asia Europe Journal* 20, no. 4 (2022): 357-376.

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multilateral climate governance in the face of escalating climate risks and shifting geopolitics.

Conclusion

Multilateralism continues to serve as the cornerstone of global climate governance. The existential nature of climate change, its borderless impacts, systemic risks, and cumulative emissions necessitates a collective framework built on cooperation, negotiation and reciprocity. As such, multilateral institutions, especially the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC), remain indispensable for orchestrating global ambition, facilitating financial and technological flows, and ensuring a common architecture for review and accountability. However, the architecture of multilateral climate governance is increasingly under strain. Geopolitical competition, diverging national priorities, structural inequalities and institutional inertia have rendered progress slow, fragmented, and in some domains, regressive. These tensions are not merely procedural but stem from deeper issues of global power shifts, economic asymmetries, and contested norms of justice and responsibility.

China's evolving role encapsulates many of these dynamics. Once reluctant to fully engage in global environmental governance, China has become a more assertive actor balancing its identity as a large developing country with its growing geopolitical and technological clout. Its participation has introduced both new momentum and new fault lines. On one hand, China's vast investment in renewable energy, its provision of South–South climate cooperation, and its increasing engagement in global rule-making could invigorate multilateral frameworks. On the other hand, its insistence on differentiated responsibilities and sovereignty norms often reflects deeper contestation over leadership, trust and fairness in the multilateral order . This duality, shared by other emerging powers such as India, Brazil and South Africa, underscores a broader transformation: climate multilateralism can no longer be understood solely through North–South binaries, but must contend with a multipolar landscape marked by differentiated capacities, ambitions and geopolitical alignments.

Transatlantic cooperation further illustrates the paradoxes of climate multilateralism. As leading economies and normative actors, the European Union and the United States have at times aligned on climate diplomacy contributing to key breakthroughs such as the 2015 Paris Agreement. Yet their cooperation has often been fragmented by regulatory divergences, political transitions, and domestic economic interests Regionalism, while providing resilience and innovation, also highlights the limits of formal multilateral consensus. The geopolitics of climate is therefore increasingly shaped not only by what states agree to in UN halls, but by how they align or diverge in their regional, bilateral, or even domestic agendas.

Given these tensions, multilateral climate institutions must undergo deliberate and pragmatic reform. As the literature suggests, future multilateralism must be more inclusive, polycentric and adaptive.It must open space for emerging

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powers, civil society, sub-national actors and regional institutions to shape agendas and share responsibility. Procedural justice, representation and transparency are not only ethical imperatives but functional requirements for building trust and ambition. In particular, climate justice must become central not peripheral to multilateral regimes. This entails not only meeting climate finance commitments (such as the USD 100 billion goal), but redesigning them to reflect clarity, accessibility and justice for vulnerable states and communities.

Technology transfer and innovation cooperation will also need to be decoupled from geopolitical rivalry. As noted above, the race for carbon space and technological dominance can erode trust and stall cooperation. Future frameworks should embed principles of reciprocity, co-development and open access, particularly for low-carbon technologies. Without these, emerging and developing countries may lose faith in multilateral solutions and seek alternatives through national strategies or exclusive blocs.

Institutional reform is critical. The consensus-driven model of UN climate negotiations, while inclusive, often results in lowest-common-denominator outcomes. Scholars have proposed various innovations from smaller high-ambition coalitions, to climate clubs, to hybrid multilateralism that incorporates non-state and private actors more robustly Each of these approaches seeks to supplement not supplant the multilateral core. In doing so, they offer resilience and flexibility in a politically fragmented world. The challenge lies in ensuring these initiatives remain anchored in principles of equity, accountability and coherence with global goals.

Future research should thus explore several key trajectories. First, the operationalisation and effectiveness of climate clubs exclusive or semi-exclusive coalitions of states committed to higher ambition deserve systematic analysis. Can such arrangements incentivise participation through benefits (trade, finance), or will they fragment global governance further? Second, the role of regional cooperation as seen in EU–Africa, EU–Latin America and transatlantic partnerships should be assessed as a complement to formal multilateralism. Third, empirical case studies of how emerging powers such as China, India, or Brazil engage with and reshape multilateral climate frameworks will be critical in understanding the future contours of global climate politics. Finally, there is a need to interrogate how subnational actors, cities, indigenous groups and civil society can be structurally embedded into multilateral decision-making, moving beyond observer status toward meaningful participation.

In summary, multilateralism remains the only framework capable of orchestrating a coherent and just global response to climate change. Yet its efficacy is imperiled by the very geopolitical dynamics it seeks to manage. Reform is not only possible, it is necessary. Whether through deeper regional cooperation, institutional redesign, or a re-centering of justice, the multilateral climate regime must evolve to meet the demands of an increasingly complex, unequal and warming world.

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