

Feasibility Study on Collaborative Governance of "Minilateralism" in Climate Change

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Abstract: The 28th Conference of the Parties to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (COP28) was held in Dubai from November 30 to December 12, 2023. The inventory results showed that progress in all areas of climate action, from reducing greenhouse gas emissions to strengthening resilience to climate change, and providing financial and technological support to vulnerable countries, has been too slow. In recent years, the world situation has undergone significant changes, and a series of multilateral systems centered around the United Nations have been challenged. To continuously promote climate change governance, it is necessary to leverage the collaborative role between major countries. Minilateralism has higher efficiency in decision-making, incentives, punishment and other mechanisms than multilateralism. Using Minilateralism as a starting point to achieve multilateralism, exploring the feasibility of collaboration among major carbon emitting countries can lead to the emergence of new impetus for multilateralism.

1. Introduction

The issues related to climate change governance, including mitigating climate change, adapting to climate change, providing financial and technological support, the synergistic effects of sustainable development and climate action, international cooperation and partnerships, were emphasized and discussed at the COP28 conference. At the COP28 meeting, all parties expressed their willingness to adhere to true multilateralism, unite and cooperate, and better address the challenges of climate change. However, there is a huge gap between reality and practice. In the international community, multilateralism often becomes a means for certain countries to achieve political goals, and protectionism is practiced under the name of multilateralism. For example, the EU's "pseudo multilateralism" is actually a covert way for the EU to expand its own space of interests.[1]

Although climate change multilateralism is widely accepted by the international community, due to the overly differentiated distribution of responsibilities in emissions reduction and funding under the UNFCCC, Kyoto Protocol, and Paris Agreement, developed countries generally oppose the need for large developing countries to reduce emissions. The United States is also a country with high carbon emissions, and its position is unpredictable, deepening the complexity of climate

change multilateralism. After experiencing difficulties and twists, climate change governance did not make substantial progress until the Paris Agreement achieved phased results.

According to the inventory results of the United Nations Climate Conference in Dubai (COP28), there is still a significant gap in achieving the goals of the agreement, and stakeholders are still engaging in covert games. Due to the large number of contracting parties, it is difficult to fully realize the demands and interests of countries under multilateralism. At this point, if a breakthrough is made in Minilateralism, key carbon emitting countries can reach a consensus agreement on climate change, thereby promoting cooperation and win-win outcomes in climate change, investment, trade, intellectual property, and other areas.

The purpose of promoting the establishment of climate change Minilateralism is to achieve the interests and demands of relevant countries while actively reducing emissions. Incentives, punishments, and other mechanisms should be established within the contracting countries to concretize and enforce legal regulations on emission reduction targets. The construction of Minilateralism still requires more theoretical and practical support. For example, the collaborative intentions and practical actions of key carbon emitting countries or regions such as China, the United States, the European Union, and India greatly affect the development of multilateralism. If these countries or regions deeply integrate climate change with international trade, finance, intellectual property, and other fields, they will inevitably be able to play a positive role in Minilateralism, prompting other economies to emulate them, in order to alleviate the financial difficulties and trust crisis in climate change multilateralism.^[2]

2. Feasibility study

2.1. Minilateralism

The definition of Minilateralism is controversial and inconclusive in the academic community. However, the consensus is that the number of small multilateral countries should be more than two and less than the number of multilateral contracting parties. Small multilateral countries have a common goal and usually cooperate with each other on matters that cannot be achieved through multilateralism. In recent years, Minilateralism has gradually replaced the declining hegemonism and become a new form of cooperation to maintain regional security. Minilateralism cooperation can to some extent compensate for the shortcomings of bilateral or multilateral cooperation.^[3]

2.2. There is a willingness and historical origin for collaborative governance between China and the United States

In recent years, due to political reasons, climate negotiations between China and the United States have been suspended since August 2022. It was not until July 2023, when the US President's climate envoy John Kerry visited China, that dialogue and exchanges on climate negotiations between China and the United States resumed. During this period, China US relations were underestimated, and climate cooperation also stalled for nearly a year. In the complex global political context of delivery, the two countries are able to temporarily set aside political differences and initiate climate cooperation, demonstrating their firm determination to work together to address challenges in the face of human righteousness. In 2023, China and the United States continued to maintain high-level interaction and exchanges, jointly promoting multilateral and bilateral climate change cooperation, sending positive signals that they will continue to uphold the requirements of the Paris Agreement and look forward to the beautiful vision of COP28's success. On that day, China and the United States jointly issued the "Sunshine Hometown Declaration on Strengthening Cooperation to Cope with the Climate Crisis", which reached consensus on many key issues and

provided a reasonable solution for the formation of a cooperative situation in climate negotiations at the later COP28 conference. This collaboration will greatly boost international confidence in climate change multilateralism and demonstrate the willingness of both China and the United States to initiate sincere cooperation and work together with other countries to address the climate crisis. In the statement, China and the United States identified specific forms and plans for cooperation in key areas such as energy transformation, methane, circular economy, and low-carbon cities, promoting the institutionalization, concretization, and pragmatization of cooperation.

The issue of climate change has become the cornerstone of the low point in China US relations, which will have a good demonstration effect on the continued implementation of the Paris Agreement. The issue of climate change is not only related to climate issues, but also closely related to energy, industry, technology, finance, investment, trade, intellectual property, and other fields. As two major countries leading climate change governance, China and the United States, if they can engage in long-term cooperation and dialogue, deepen cooperation in bilateral and multilateral agreements on new energy development, technological innovation, and carbon reduction, such as conducting in-depth exchanges and dialogue, establishing more stable and long-term cooperation mechanisms, etc., they can gradually achieve a benign "climate change Minilateralism". Although this conflicts with the United States' original strategy of establishing "Minilateralism", climate change Minilateralism is reasonable and implementable between China and the United States, which can further promote energy transformation and technology. Jointly promoting the implementation of the Paris Agreement and leading countries around the world in climate governance is the "greatest common divisor" for China and the United States to lead the establishment of a small multilateralism on climate change.

2.3. The foundation of environmental and climate cooperation between China and Europe is profound, and the future is bright

Due to the influence of geopolitical and unilateral protectionism in recent years, although there has been long-term cooperation and exchange between the EU, as an important world organization, and the largest developing country on issues such as climate change and energy transition. It has not changed the fact that the EU regards China as its strongest competitor. The COVID-19 in recent years, the European import of Chinese products, the reduction of European investment in China, the instability caused by the US's second accession to the Paris Agreement, and other facts have brought great risks to China EU cooperation on climate change, and the risk of mutual distrust is also increasing. As is well known to all parties in the world, countries seeking their own development inevitably compete with each other, and benign competition can often bring mutually beneficial effects. However, it is clear that in the context of a world where all humanity is working together to address climate change, collaborative cooperation should become the main tone between China and Europe.

China and Europe have been cooperating in the field of environment and climate since the 1990s, and it is one of the earliest areas to be included in official cooperation between the two governments. In 2005, China and Europe jointly issued the China Europe Joint Declaration on Climate Change, which clarified specific cooperation matters and focused on technical cooperation on improving energy efficiency, low-carbon production, and renewable energy technologies. At the 9th China Europe Summit in 2006, a rolling work plan for the China Europe Climate Change Partnership was formulated. The plan aims to deepen cooperation between the two sides in the field of climate through summit channels, bilateral consultation mechanisms, direct dialogue between the EU Environmental Counsellor Group and relevant Chinese ministries. In 2012, China and Europe once again issued the Joint Declaration on Energy Security, continuing to emphasize the significant

closeness of issues such as climate change and energy security in the China Europe cooperative relationship. The EU China 2020 Cooperation Strategy Agenda, signed between China and Europe in 2013, emphasizes the shared responsibility of promoting global development. The 2015 EU China Joint Declaration on Climate Change indicates that both China and the EU play extremely important roles in addressing the global threat of climate change. The 2018 China Europe Leaders' Statement on Climate Change and Clean Energy pointed out the urgency of sustained, rapid progress and implementation of climate governance actions, and fully recognized the historic achievements and practical value of the Paris Agreement.^[4]

Since 2016, China's climate cooperation with the European Union has become more complex, but it also means that the development of China Europe relations has reached an unprecedented high level and maturity. There may be two reasons for this result: firstly, the entry into force of the Paris Agreement not only integrates global climate governance, but also promotes exchanges and cooperation between China and Europe, two key carbon emitting countries and regions. Secondly, in recent years, the enhancement of China's national strength and breakthroughs in energy transformation technology have caused Europe's positioning of China to waver. The complex international economic and political situation has also brought many variables to the China Europe cooperation relationship. In 2016, the European Union emphasized in its "New Strategic Elements for China" document that the EU is China's "partner for reform". However, in March 2019, the EU released the "EU China Strategic Outlook" document, which gave China multiple identities: "partner country with closely coordinated goals", "negotiating partner with balanced interests", "economic competitor", and "institutional competitor"

Cooperation in the fields of energy and climate has always been a major highlight of China EU relations. At the level of bilateral and multilateral relations, China and Europe have shown enormous potential for shared interests and cooperation in the field of carbon neutrality. As important countries participating in global climate governance, China and EU members have the responsibility, willingness, and ability to become leaders in global climate governance. Achieving carbon neutrality goals is a common aspiration of both sides. China is committed to achieving carbon peak by 2030 and carbon neutrality before 2060.^[5] Achieving this goal requires deep cooperation with European countries in the field of carbon neutrality, which will contribute to the global economic and social systemic transformation process under the carbon neutrality goal and the growth rate of multilateral cooperation in global climate governance.

2.4 Summary

The formation of Minilateralism often manifests as related countries or regions having consistent interests, similar international identities, and a utilitarian approach to contracting. Although multilateralism is a consensus, due to its deep geopolitics, prevalence of protectionism, and proliferation of unilateral mechanisms, multilateralism centered around the United Nations is difficult to achieve its expected effects. Minilateralism naturally has operability in behavior, flexible cooperation methods, simpler intersection of interests among members than multilateralism, and has clear targeted goals, which is equivalent to providing a neutral position for countries under the multilateralism mechanism to reconcile complex interests between them. The initial mechanism of Minilateralism was usually used to maintain regional and national security, and reaching consensus agreements among a few countries inevitably became a tool for powerful countries to safeguard their group interests. But as the strength of all parties has improved this year, the international economic and political order has also shown different development trends. The approach of Minilateralism seems to be able to be well applied in areas such as economy, politics, security, and climate cooperation, in addition to maintaining a so-called "low-level politics". The three sides of

China, the United States, and Europe are no exception in sending signals of seeking climate cooperation, and all regard addressing climate change as their important historical responsibility. This is certainly a good effect.

We can learn that the three parties, China, the United States, and Europe, have overlapping interests in climate change governance, and all three governments have expressed their willingness to cooperate in governance. As key carbon emission countries and important economies in the world, if China, the United States and Europe can lead the establishment of Minilateralism on climate change, give full play to their major country and geopolitical advantages, and systematically and targeted solutions to the issues of independent contribution, climate change mitigation, funding gap and technology gap, etc, to achieve coordinated governance between developed and developing countries, sovereign states and international organizations.

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