



## THE U.S. APPROACH TOWARDS CLIMATE DIPLOMACY IN A MULTIPOLAR WORLD ORDER

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### **Abstract**

*Analyzing the current scenario of interstate relations pertaining to climate diplomacy, the United States of America (USA) has undergone turbulent phases of alignment. Being the designated superpower, its policies have both direct and indirect influences on interstate relations, especially the Paris Agreement, whose primary goal is to hold “the increase the global average temperature to well below 2°C above pre-industrial levels” and pursue efforts “to limit the temperature increase to 1.5°C above pre-industrial levels.” The US stance on this agreement serves as the main purpose of this research as we can navigate the influence that it has in international relations, not just in power politics but even in climate diplomacy. Such an impact transcends the intricacies of world and internal state politics with the transition of governments from red to blue when Biden assumed office. Through this research, a brief inference can be assessed on how a superpower’s stance on such a monumental agreement can shape and alter the dynamics of inter-state relations.*

**Keywords:** *Climate Diplomacy; The US; Global Warming; Paris Agreement; The UN; Multipolarity.*

### **Introduction**

Diplomacy, through the ages, has evolved and shaped itself significantly through the various lenses of international relations. Keeping aside the traditional view of a power struggle between nations, we now see the rise of Climate Diplomacy, which transcends borders and shapes the policies of nations. Climate diplomacy is the practice and process of creating the international climate change regime and ensuring its practical operation. The evolution of climate diplomacy, therefore, precedes and shapes the construction of the climate regime.<sup>i</sup> Similarly, Mastroiello et al. (2016) argue that effective climate diplomacy requires coherence among domestic policies and international commitments<sup>ii</sup>. International cooperation and coherence are essential in ensuring that countries are well-equipped to tackle climate change issues. Reports by the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change make clear that avoiding the worst impacts of climate change will require limiting the increase in global average temperature to 1.5°C above pre-industrial levels.<sup>iii</sup>

Climate change is an issue often regarded as of utmost priority at numerous world forums, such as the United Nations (U.N.), where numerous agreements and treaties are signed. This research is thus aimed at analyzing America's standpoint on the Paris Agreement (2015) and how its position shifted during the transitions of governments from red to blue. This fluctuation, in turn, creates an implication in America’s relation with other states and creates a change in the power dynamics at various bilateral and



multilateral levels, often influencing the creation of new climate policies which are bound to be prioritized as it relates to the very existence of life on earth and the availability of natural resources.

### **Background of the U.S. in the realm of International Relations and its evolution**

The United States of America has predominantly observed a position of isolation when it comes to inter-state relations and conflicts, often keeping a distance. This is reflected in the policy of Isolationism held by President Woodrow Wilson during his term of office from 1913 to 1921. However, with its increased influence and shift in power dynamics, the country headed into a new territory of international relations. As George L. Rives remarked, "It is plain that the country is now entering into a period in its history in which it will necessarily be brought into far closer and more complex relations with all the other great Powers of the world. We shall now and henceforth be looked upon as having cast aside our traditional attitude of isolation."

Consequently, it has emerged as a key player in the power dynamics of interstate relations with its active role in the Second World War, the Cold War with the Erstwhile USSR and finally, today, it has emerged as a superpower in the economic and political context. This research, however, is not centred around power politics but on its position in the sphere of Climate Diplomacy and the influences it has on other nation-states. Climate change and environmental degradation are emerging as critical concerns in the very existence of humanity. Nations are rounding up and raising their specific concerns and deducing solutions.

### **United Nations, UNFCCC and Paris Agreement**

The United Nations in 1992 introduced the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC), which is the U.N. process for negotiating an agreement to limit dangerous climate change. The 198 countries party to the UNFCCC meet on a yearly basis as a Conference of Parties (COP) to measure progress and negotiate multi-directional responses to climate change. Since entering into force in 1994, the UNFCCC has provided the basis for international climate negotiations, including landmark agreements such as the Kyoto Protocol (1997) and the Paris Agreement (2015). The Paris Agreement was a monumental document that paved the way for climate diplomacy and the way nation-states interacted with each other at bilateral and multilateral levels. The Paris Agreement was adopted by 196 Parties at COP 21 in Paris on December 12, 2015, and entered into force on 4 November 2016. Its goal is to limit global warming to well below 2, preferably to 1.5 degrees Celsius, compared to pre-industrial levels. To achieve this long-term temperature goal, countries aim to reach global peaking of greenhouse gas emissions to achieve a climate-neutral world by mid-century<sup>iv</sup>. Some of the key aspects of the Agreement are set out below: Long-term temperature goal (Art. 2), Global peaking and "climate neutrality" (Art. 4), Mitigation (Art. 4), Sinks and reservoirs (Art. 5), Voluntary cooperation/Market- and non-market-based approaches (Art. 6), Adaptation (Art. 7), Loss and damage (Art. 8), Finance, technology and capacity building support (Art. 9, 10 and 11), Climate change education, training, public awareness, public participation and public access to information (Art 12), Transparency (Art. 13), implementation and compliance (Art. 15), Global stocktake (Art. 14) and Decision 1/CP.2.<sup>v</sup>



The Paris Agreement is a landmark in the multilateral climate change process because, for the first time, a binding agreement brings all nations into a common cause to undertake efforts to combat climate change and adapt to its effects. The Paris Agreement provides a framework for technical, financial and capacity-building support to the countries.

### **Implications of the Paris Agreement and the U.S.: Obama, Trump and Biden**

The U.S., under Obama's government, played a crucial role in drafting the various policies of the Paris Agreement. As an ardent advocate for the agreement, Obama pledged to reduce emissions and support developing countries through the Green Climate Fund.<sup>vi</sup> (Sengupta 19). The Obama administration envisioned a strong climate-focused policy-oriented future; it aimed to be at the forefront of climate diplomacy. However, U.S. climate policy underwent a turbulent turn when Donald Trump assumed office as President. His policies reflect clear-cut differences from that of his predecessor, to the point where Trump made the controversial move to officially withdraw the U.S. from the Paris Agreement in November 2020. Some of his other radical moves included putting up the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge (ANWR), known as 'America's Last Great Wilderness', up for sale for oil and gas exploration.<sup>vii</sup> A top scientist, Michael Mann, commented that a second term for Trump would be 'game over' for the climate<sup>viii</sup>. As Skocpol et al. (2019) commented, the Trump administration's view of climate change as a political issue rather than a global crisis hindered effective diplomacy<sup>ix</sup>. Thus, the Trump administration viewed climate diplomacy as just another political phenomenon rather than an actual natural predicament that threatens the very existence of humanity. What implication does this have on relations between states? Such radical moves are bound to be frowned upon in the global context. Tensed reactions were witnessed from various traditional allies and non-state actors as well. Critics such as Donnelly (202) laid down that this backing diminished the U.S.'s ability to shape global climate policy and foster collaboration among other nations.<sup>x</sup> Key allies, including Germany, France and Italy, issued a joint statement expressing their discontent with Trump's statement of restructuring the agreement. They stood by the agreement and their commitment, with German Chancellor Angela Merkel referring to Trump's decision as "regrettable" and Emmanuel Macron, France's President, asserting "Make our planet great again," signalling that the U.S. decision secluded and isolated them.<sup>xi</sup>. Despite being at the front of the economic and political world, the U.S. became one of the three countries (Syria and Nicaragua) that were not party to the agreement at that point in time. This isolation severed several diplomatic ties with various nations who questioned the U.S. leadership on matters of global importance.

Climate activists and experts sighed in relief when Biden assumed office in 2021. Biden adopted a hands-on approach towards international climate diplomacy by proceeding to re-enter the Paris Agreement on his first day of office in January 2021. Biden's office aims to restructure America's climate policy, and as Gina McCarthy, Biden's top climate adviser, said Biden will reverse "more than 100" climate-related policies enacted by Trump.<sup>xii</sup> "The Biden-Harris victory ushers in desperately needed new leadership at the top and a welcome sense of urgency for developing real solutions for achieving environmental and climate justice"<sup>xiii</sup> Such a pivotal move in a multipolar world signalled the



return of the U.S. being at the forefront of the restoration of multilateralism and fulfilling the need for international cooperation at various levels to address climate change. The US has once again become a leader in global climate policies, influencing and shaping the way climate policies are formulated. Biden's administration laid emphasis on ambitious reduced emissions. This move by Biden is aimed at fulfilling his pledge to make U.S. electricity production carbon-free by 2035 and to have the country achieve net zero CO<sub>2</sub> emissions by 2050.<sup>xiv</sup>

Such a move may have been praised as it restored the U.S.'s role in multilateral climate diplomacy<sup>xv</sup> (Stevenson 97). But at the same time, it was widely criticized domestically, especially by Republican lawmakers, industrialists and labour unions, among the others who expressed their discontent with Biden's unrealistic outlook, whose livelihood and industry solely depend on traditional natural energy resources like coal and petroleum<sup>xvi</sup> (Jones 132)

### **Multipolar Analysis: E.U., China and India**

Analysing the situation from a multipolar order lens, other nations and blocks, like the European Union (E.U.), China and India, have gained immense momentum in the sphere of Climate Diplomacy and are actively taking on more significant roles in advancing international climate action.<sup>xvii</sup> (Lee 147). The E.U., for instance, has stepped into the arena of climate diplomacy and gained quite a stride. Its principle of "leading by good example" through the effect of domestic actions<sup>xviii</sup>. Moreover, an initiative of the E.U. under its flagship programme, the European Green Deal, which aims to reach climate neutrality by 2050, has provided a credible platform for Europe to be at the front of climate negotiations and, at the same time, ensure that the energy transition has an impact on economic development and job creation.<sup>xix</sup>

China, the country with an identity of being the largest emitter of Greenhouse gases, has emerged as a critical player in climate negotiations and agreements.<sup>xx</sup> The US-China climate relationship has been subjected to both competition and cooperation. There have been initiatives like the 2014 U.S.-China Joint Announcement on Climate Change (Lynas 243)<sup>xxi</sup> More recently, China's announcement that it will seek to achieve carbon neutrality by 2060 is another crucial step towards such cooperation.<sup>xxii</sup> The most promising potential areas for US-China cooperation fall into three broad categories: renewing a shared commitment to global climate governance under the Paris Agreement; building trust to enable renewed bilateral cooperation, such as on technology innovation and investments; and supporting subnational leaders' progress in both countries through platforms where they can productively convene.<sup>xxiii</sup>

India is another powerhouse when it comes to climate diplomacy. Although it faces its fair share of hardships when it comes to economic growth, the country has been able to have a stronghold over various climate policies, often being at the forefront in its region. As the third-largest emitter, India's energy demands continue to grow, driven by its expanding population and industrialization.<sup>xxiv</sup> (Gupta and Dubash 112) India and the U.S. have been engaging in numerous bilateral agreements, such as the U.S.-India Climate and Clean Energy Agenda 2030 Partnership, aimed at enhancing renewable energy cooperation (Haley 109).<sup>xxv</sup>



## Conclusion

With every passing year, climate change has come to pose a threat to humanity. The intensity of its effects has been seen to have increased at levels often threatening to life. Calamities caused by climate change, like floods, droughts, heatwaves and wildfires, have created devastation both to life and to the economy of nations. The report by WMO has clearly confirmed that 2023 2023 was the warmest year on record, with the global average near-surface temperature at 1.45 °Celsius (with a margin of uncertainty of  $\pm 0.12$  °C) above the pre-industrial baseline, it was the warmest ten-year period on record.<sup>xxvi</sup>. Keeping in mind the data and the various reports by stalwarts in the field, nations of the world must ensure that necessary safeguards and precautions are taken. More agreements should be made, more treaties should be signed, and countries with the available resources and tools like the U.S., with its vast arraying influence even in a multipolar world order, should exercise its influence.

The research analysis conducted on the U.S. approach to climate diplomacy on the Paris Agreement has revealed a wide variety of implications ranging from the conflict of ideologies that exist among the internal politics of nations which often influences the way a country handles its Climate relations. Another observation that can be made is that stark differences can be seen in the way the two parties function, i.e. The Republicans and the Democrats. The former is primarily focused on economic growth, while the latter prioritizes climate policies. As we all know, the U.S. is still at the front, possessing maximum political and economic dominance. However, despite the overarching reach of the U.S. government, it was gathered through this research conducted that the world as it is today is heading towards a Multipolar order with emerging blocs and nations like China and India playing a significant role, if not leading such diplomatic relations.

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