

POTENTIAL STATE RESPONSES TO CLIMATE CHANGE IN POST-COVID WORLD

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ABSTRACT

COVID-19 followed lockdown in countries have significantly reduced the level of global carbon emissions. However, this reduction in emissions is evaluated as a temporary phenomenon as emissions from countries are expecting to grow rapidly once the pandemic imposed restrictions are fully withdrawn. If emissions from countries are growing unabatedly in a post pandemic world that would adversely impact the implementation of the international climate change agreements, particularly the Paris Climate Agreement. Paris Climate Change Agreement which came into form in 2015 is the only international climate change agreement existing today to regulate global carbon emissions from all major economies. Majority of the nation-states have ratified the Paris Climate Agreement. However, the climate leadership vacuum that has created with the decision of the US to withdraw from the Paris Agreement and the current challenges that COVID-19 is posing to world multilateral order are adversely influencing the course of global climate change negotiations and thereby worsening the climate crisis.

Keywords: Climate change, Post-COVID world, Paris Agreement, US, China

INTRODUCTION

The threats posed by COVID-19 are looming large and there is not even a single sector which remains unaffected from the impacts of COVID-19. With the outbreak of this pandemic, the world has started to realise that the concept of security needs to be reviewed in a broader paradigm accounting health and environmental security as well, along with traditional forms of security. COVID-19 pandemic has reaffirmed the fact that security of states is interdependent, and no state can ensure its own security singlehandedly without the cooperation of other states in a globalised world. During this pandemic, some states were trying to reverse the trend of globalisation by shutting down their borders to restrict the inflow of floating population and thereby containing the epidemic from spreading further. The states' response to COVID-19 is posing several questions to the survival of a multilateral world order. The states' handling of COVID-19 crisis has implications for international climate politics as well, as combatting health and climate risks are now beyond the capacity of individual states.

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POTENTIAL CHALLENGES IN COMBATting CLIMATE CHANGE IN POST-PANDEMIC WORLD

Carbon emissions are likely to rise

The COVID-19 pandemic has slowed down the economies. The economic growth of countries has suffered a significant setback, giving rise to unemployment and poverty. Hence, the priority of countries in a post-COVID world would be to overcome this economic crisis by increasing production rapidly and letting the industries to pollute as they wish. This would adversely impact the momentum of global emission reduction programmes that are currently ongoing. While countries engage in efforts to revive their economies, combatting climate change naturally would be a low priority. Small Island Countries (SICs) which are already suffering from the effects of climate change would be the first victims of this approach.

Countries may not comply with their Paris pledges

In a post-COVID world, it is less likely that countries would comply with their emission reduction commitments under the 2015 Paris Climate Agreement which is the only existing global agreement to reduce greenhouse gas emissions. There is a possibility that the priorities of countries would shift - preferring the economic interests over environmental considerations in a post-COVID world. As of now, the Paris Agreement is the only existing internationally binding emission reduction treaty to bring down the overall greenhouse gas emission level. Under the Paris Agreement that came into force in 2016, all major economies including the US, China and India had submitted their emission reduction targets. However, in 2017, the US announced their withdrawal from the Paris Agreement citing the economic cost of climate action on the US. Though China and India have stated that they would remain committed to their Paris emission reduction promises even after the news of the US withdrawal from the Agreement came out, in a post-COVID world, the domestic economic and political compulsions on countries and the US stance would be critical in deciding the course of the Paris Climate Agreement. In a post-COVID scenario, it is unlikely that the US would reconsider its stance on the Paris Agreement, especially because of the economic slowdown caused by the pandemic. In the post-pandemic world, countries would be reluctant to meet their Paris targets as all countries would be engaged in efforts to recover from economic losses that they had suffered during the lockdown due to COVID-19.

Uncertainty over China's climate change initiatives

Now, in the absence of the US from the Paris Agreement, China is leading the global efforts to combat climate change. However, it is uncertain whether China would continue to play this role in a post-COVID world as 'countries are finding the COVID-19 situation as an excuse to abandon their responsibility' (Joshi, 2020). The severe economic loss that China had suffered due to the COVID-19 lockdown may force it to even retreat from its stated commitments under the Paris Agreement in future. If such a scenario arises, that will cause a deadlock in the ongoing climate change negotiations. As of now, China is the largest

emitter of carbons in the world. China's greenhouse gas emissions are projected to rise at least until 2030 (Climate Action Tracker, 2019). In 2018, China's fossil fuel CO₂ emissions were 28 percent of the total global emissions, while emissions by the US were at 15 percent (Global Carbon Project, 2019). In this scenario, if China decides to abandon its responsibility, that would be a massive setback to the international efforts to combat climate change.

Green Climate Fund would be stalled

In the 2009 Copenhagen Climate Conference, a Green Climate Fund was given form, to financially help developing countries in their climate change mitigation and adaptation efforts. Under this Fund, developed countries had promised to transfer USD100 billion to developing countries and least developed countries (Copenhagen Accord 2009). However, developing countries have yet to receive even half of the promised amount. One of the reasons for the US withdrawal from the 2015 Paris Agreement was pointing out this economic burden that the Green Climate Fund had imposed on the US (The Whitehouse 2017). Developing countries have already made it clear that they would not be able to meet their emission reduction targets under the Paris Agreement in the absence of financial and technological aid from the developed world (Timperley 2019). In this scenario, if the Green Climate Fund is stalled, that would make the implementation of the Paris Climate Change Agreement extremely difficult.

The ongoing tensions between China and the US is likely to worsen climate crisis

China and the US are the first and second-largest carbon dioxide emitters in the world respectively (Global Carbon Atlas 2018). Therefore, the tensions between China and the US would have a detrimental influence on the conduct of climate politics as well. The mutual blame game between both the countries over COVID-19 pandemic has created a trust deficit in their relationship. Moreover, the trade war between China and the US is ongoing. The power struggle and mistrust could lead to the disengagement of both the countries from the Paris Climate Agreement and this may result in the collapse of the Agreement itself in future.

Climate change negotiations would lose momentum

As the dangers posed by COVID-19 are looming large, it is almost definite that the climate change negotiations would be adversely impacted (Joshi 2020). The pandemic has already forced the UN to cancel many climate talks. The Glasgow Climate Conference which was supposed to take place in November 2020 in the UK had to be postponed to the next year. If this conference had been held in 2020, countries would have been in a position to uphold their Nationally Determined Commitments (NDCs). Countries were supposed to submit their 2050 plans to the UN in 2020, stating what they were planning to do to align with the Paris Agreement. However, the COVID-19 crisis is delaying several crucial deadlines' (Collins 2020). Losing momentum of climate talks will further delay the climate action by keeping the ongoing climate negotiations at bay.

Challenges to multilateral climate order

The aggressive nationalist discourses are gaining momentum with the outbreak of COVID-19 pandemic. Many states have already shut down their borders restricting the mobility and migration of people. States are not responding to the call of international organisations to help each other. The European Union (EU) and the World Health Organisation (WHO) were not effective in controlling the pandemic. The failure of the regional and international organisations in handling this crisis is considered as a blow to the current multilateral world order. COVID-19 is giving rise to a new world order in which nationalism thrives over multilateralism (Moloney 2020). In such a world order, it is challenging to address and resolve global issues like climate change which require multilateral action. The rise of aggressive nationalism in different parts of the world would definitely weaken the ongoing climate change negotiations. International institutions are the only instruments at the moment through which collective action of states can be warranted (Mattoo and Narlikar 2020).

Climate Inequality may exacerbate

In a post-COVID world, it is assured that climate inequality would aggravate. The countries which have financial and technological resources would be able to adapt and mitigate the effects of climate change compared to the less developed countries by shifting to a low carbon path without disrupting the economic growth. On the other side, developing and least developed countries which have contributed minimum to the climate change problem but are more vulnerable to the effects of climate change would be struggling hard to adapt to the impacts of climate change amid their efforts to recover from the economic loss caused by the pandemic. Moreover, an unequal climate world would also create a new set of climate refugees. In the absence of the transferring of adequate resources from the developed world, climate inequality is poised to exacerbate further in an unequal world system.

CONCLUSION

COVID-19 is posing several challenges to the nation-states. If the pandemic is to last for a long time, this would have critical impacts on the socio-economic stability of countries and even on the budget allocation of states for climate action. As of now, COVID-19 pandemic has rearranged the priorities of states in international politics. In a post COVID world, it is evaluated that the priority of states would be to compensate the economic loss that they had experienced due to prolonged shutdown of economies. In the drive to boost economic growth, whether climate challenge would be low-prioritised is a matter of grave concern. It is a fact that, still, countries have not realised that security is an interdependent concept and ensuring it needs collective action. In a post-COVID world, if countries are not willing to shift to a low-carbon path by reducing their dependence on fossil fuels, that would escalate the ill effects of climate change. The successful implementation of the Paris Agreement, which is the only existing global emission reduction treaty, is dependent on the concerted action of states, especially based on the cooperation shared between China

and the US. Behind the veil of COVID-19, if states are engaged in deliberate efforts to reverse the trends of globalisation and multilateralism which so far had acted as pillars of climate change policymaking, that would be a significant setback to the ongoing climate change negotiations. It is important that the states move to a green economy initiating climate action, but at the same time developing a holistic understanding that health and climate issues are beyond the capacity and control of individual nation-states.

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