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# Climate Peacebuilding: A Reset for Major Power Relations?

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*The international community has been facing the threat of nuclear war and, up to this point, has failed to meet universally embraced climate and sustainability goals. As major powers drift toward bloc politics, is it possible to reset these relations to accelerate climate action? Such a reset-focused “climate peacebuilding” agenda needs to create diplomatic opportunities for conflict transformation to connect separate climate, development, and security initiatives around mutually supportive objectives.*

As Russia’s war in Ukraine has brought back the threats of nuclear war, geopolitics has overshadowed the global climate agenda. Amid worsening tensions among major powers, will climate diplomacy further deteriorate, or can it help with peacebuilding?

The United States and the BASIC (Brazil, South Africa, India, and China) group paved the way for the 2015 Paris Agreement when collective action seemed impossible. During the key pre-Paris negotiations in Copenhagen, major powers were deeply divided on the future of United Nations climate policymaking, but they managed to develop a pledge-and-review system as an umbrella for advancing global climate policy.<sup>2</sup> Their consensus proved that when the stakes are high, major powers can work together and that their cooperation can enhance both other countries’ interests and global governance frameworks.

However, the United Nations Environment Program’s (UNEP’s) 2022 Emissions Gap Report demonstrated that the international community is nowhere near reaching the scale and pace of needed emission

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reductions and that there is no credible pathway to a 1.5 degrees Celsius world.<sup>3</sup> Moreover, even though climate diplomacy has taken a more promising turn through the election of climate-friendly leadership within key emitters such as the United States and Brazil, major power relations are rapidly deteriorating. President Biden warned that the world was at risk of a nuclear “Armageddon” as President Putin threatened to use nuclear weapons, and President Xi urged China’s military to be ready for war.<sup>4</sup> The estimates of the likelihood of nuclear war occurring have ranged from 10 to 25 percent.<sup>5</sup>

Thus, the glass-half-empty scenario is either nuclear devastation or climate devastation on a first-come, first-serve basis. Extensive research about the lack of intelligent life in the universe questions whether civilizations self-destruct before they can encounter each other.<sup>6</sup> Our civilization is luckily still alive, but current nuclear and climate threats demonstrate that humans have not found productive ways to work together. Simultaneously, climate injustice is destroying the belief in the system of global governance from within, as those who are facing major loss and damage are generally those who contributed the least to climate change.

### **CONNECTING CLIMATE CHANGE AND MAJOR POWER PEACEBUILDING**

A positive, glass-half-full scenario is treating the current situation as a “make it or break it” moment to reset global governance. This reset needs to recognize that climate action and peacebuilding among major powers are deeply intertwined. Effective climate management depends on major powers’ ability to prevent, manage, resolve and transform their conflicts and sustain peace. At the same time, durable peace is not feasible with the current climate and sustainable development trajectory. Thus, a new climate peacebuilding agenda is needed to simultaneously focus on transforming political relationships among major powers and accelerating consensus building around climate management. Yet, several barriers stand in the way. Major powers have competing visions of international security, and bloc politics extend to climate change. The U.S. National Security Strategy sees out-competing China and constraining Russia as its global priorities.<sup>7</sup> The war in Ukraine has led to the expansion of the NATO alliance, and Biden officials are explicit that U.S. support for Ukraine is crucial for the future of the liberal world order.<sup>8</sup> The Biden administration also sees climate change as an existential threat to the United States and the world. It pursues an ambitious climate security agenda at home and

abroad both through NATO and the UN Security Council's (UNSC's) engagement on the topic.<sup>9</sup>

While the United States has sought to isolate Russia following its invasion of Ukraine, Russia's BRICS partners, Brazil, India, China, and South Africa, have been reluctant to condemn it directly. They have continuously engaged Russia to further deepen BRICS and launch new joint initiatives.<sup>10</sup> Major BRICS players such as China and India have enabled Russia to maintain its export revenues and have sought alternative forms of payment to bypass sanctions. The BRICS countries have also opposed the UNSC's discussions on climate change: Russia and India even voted against integrating climate-related security risk into UN conflict prevention strategies, and China abstained.<sup>11</sup> As BRICS frame climate change from a development perspective, they are holding advanced economies accountable for the provision of adequate funding to manage the crisis.<sup>12</sup> Since their own contributions to the crisis have grown, it remains to be seen if they will themselves take proportionate responsibility for their emissions and provide funding for loss and damage in the future. Second, another barrier to climate peacebuilding is that UN diplomacy does not lend itself to the effective transformation of major power relations, either through UN peacemaking or climate-focused bodies. The UNSC's management of major power relations is blocked by vetoes, and since the UN Secretary-General explicitly condemned Russia's actions, he is unlikely to be effective in using his good offices for mediation.<sup>13</sup> Through the annual Conference of the Parties (COP) process, UN climate diplomacy has become a 30,000+ people mega event that serves as a mobilization instrument rather than a conflict transformation mechanism. Intensifying yet diverging trajectories of the Group of Seven (G7) and BRICS deepen security challenges and bloc politics. This leaves the Group of Twenty (G20) as the gathering place for major powers where strategic long-term planning can materialize. However, the G20 Bali Leaders' Declaration admits that "the G20 is not the forum to resolve security issues"<sup>14</sup> and reclaims the group's original economic agenda.

Finally, the long-term viability of the climate agenda depends on embedding the response to climate change within the larger framework of sustainable development diplomacy. The most ambitious diplomatic effort to achieve a transition to sustainability, the adoption of the UN Sustainable Development Goals (UN SDGs), has been off track. The COVID-19 pandemic negatively impacted implementation progress, and a major large-scale study found that the impact of SDGs has been largely discursive, while their normative and institutional impact remains rare.<sup>15</sup> In addi-

tion to the aforementioned diplomatic tensions, major powers' leadership on SDGs has been limited, and the future of this process remains unclear.

### TOWARD A PEACEBUILDING AGENDA?

A reset of major power relations would require developing a common narrative that connects climate, development, and security, so that the achievement of mutually supportive objectives becomes feasible. It also calls for a rethinking of current diplomatic processes to envision how to avoid deepening bloc politics and turning non-powers into bystanders. While the core tenet of both climate and sustainable development diplomacy is that the evolution of a universal process is progress, the gap between needs and outcomes undermines both the legitimacy and relevance of existing processes. This provides room for speculative policy options like solar geoengineering, which is gaining prominence in climate change debates. But counting on this option is risky because the technologies that reduce incoming sunlight on earth are untested, their ramifications unknown, and their use unregulated.<sup>16</sup> Major power conflict increases the risk that a major power will use unilateral rather than multilateral channels to develop and deploy these technologies and affect weather patterns, food, and water security around the world. Finally, a reset agenda needs to explore how to develop joint long-term strategies to accelerate climate action and accountability as well as to advance the implementation of the SDGs. Who would be well positioned to champion such a mandate? Three possible diplomatic pathways could serve as starting points.

*Creating a Brundtland Commission 2.0:* In 1983, the World Commission on Environment and Development, or the Brundtland Commission, was an independent commission comprising a group of officials and experts who developed a common narrative to understand the interconnections among social equity, economic growth, and environmental problems. Its "Our Common Future" report<sup>17</sup> offered a set of guiding principles for greater cooperation and launched the era of sustainable development and renewed multilateralism. A new, 21st century version of the Brundtland Commission could offer guidelines for making major power relations more sustainable and create space for envisioning how to innovate across climate, security, and development bodies. Like the original Brundtland commission, it could be led by a prominent official and operate independently, while being initiated by or connected to the UN Secretary-General and the UN General Assembly.

*Strategically Using the India-Brazil-South Africa (IBSA) Dialogue*

*Forum:* Another possible diplomatic pathway for climate peacebuilding is for the aspiring permanent UNSC members to develop a strategic vision for the system of global governance that has the potential to transform major power relations while accelerating the transition to sustainability. India, Brazil, and South Africa already have a joint platform – the IBSA Dialogue Forum. The Forum was established in 2003 for consultation on global and regional political issues, reform of global institutions, trilateral collaboration on concrete areas/projects, and assistance to developing countries. During the 2022 IBSA meeting, the three countries reaffirmed the urgent need for comprehensive reform of the UNSC to help combat contemporary challenges to international peace and security.<sup>18</sup> The current crisis is an opportunity for IBSA countries to “pitch” their vision of international security to other powers and the international community and specify their contributions. They can explain what makes them the best candidates for becoming permanent UNSC members and how they would change the UNSC to work better for everyone. The IBSA platform can be used to propose new long-term strategies for global governance to manage both major power conflicts and climate stress as well as plan a post-2030 sustainable development agenda. The three countries will have G20 and BRICS presidencies in the upcoming years, so they will have agenda-setting power, and they have a robust understanding of the needs of the Global South.

*Reconnecting the United States with the BASIC Group:* Finally, the United States and the BASIC climate coalition paved the way for the Paris Agreement, and they could revive that entrepreneurial spirit to form a consultative group for long-term strategic planning. While the BASIC group already meets regularly, it would need to move beyond immediate climate negotiations to big picture thinking across climate-security-sustainable development agendas. At the same time, U.S. engagement with BASIC would help it connect with the countries from the BRICS bloc rather than reinforce the deepening of bloc behavior. Yet restarting the U.S.-BASIC relationship is only feasible if the relations between China and the United States improve. The resumption of climate talks following the Biden-Xi meeting in November 2022, and the appointment of China’s ambassador to the United States as Chinese foreign minister are possible openings for closer collaboration. Using the U.S.-China relationship as the foundation for broader U.S.-BASIC strategic planning can not only help with climate peacebuilding, but it can also make major power consultations more resilient to possible bilateral crises and deadlock.

It is time for a renewed diplomacy to mitigate the reemergence of bloc politics and ensure transition to sustainability. If the international

community wants to rely on major powers to prevent nuclear war and accelerate action on climate change, major powers need to be able to work across political blocs and deliver diplomatic innovations. Creating new diplomatic spaces for climate peacebuilding is a necessary starting point. *f*

## ENDNOTES

- 1 This work relates to the Minerva Research Initiative award [N000141812744] issued by the Office of Naval Research (ONR). The views expressed are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the views of the ONR.
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