

The world's focus: Climate change or sovereignty?

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The protection of humankind from the siege of conflicts has been the dominant theme of international politics since the end of World War II. While large-scale wars of the scale of the two World Wars were largely avoided, numerous forms of conflict ranging from ethnic conflicts to conflicts by violent non-State actors emerged. A significant conflict that has emerged in the 21st century which has found space in the sovereignty-dominated international politics is that of the climate crisis. This is a global commons problem. Caused by manmade greenhouse gas emissions, its impacts are felt across the international system, transcending national boundaries and jurisdictions of the states of the international system. Because of the urgency to combat the climate crisis, terms such as the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) or the Conference on Parties (COP-21) have found space in discourses and policymaking around international politics.



Climate Change(Pexels)

However, owing to the sovereignty-dominated nature of international politics, countries still focus largely on direct, visible and more immediate challenges to humankind. Because of this, discussions on traditional forms of conflict, wherein states challenge each other's sovereignty are much more frequent and in-depth as compared to track 1 level discussions on climate change. An example of this can be found out on the number of voting and discussions that have taken place at the level of the UN on Russia's aggression in Ukraine since last year, as opposed to the number of discussions that have taken place on combating the climate crisis in the last one year.

Discussions around sovereignty also miss out the massive ecological devastations that take place due to traditional style conflicts as seen in the Russia-Ukraine crisis. While there are discussions on holding countries responsible for war crimes, there are no discussions on the ecological devastations that take place due to such wars. Resultingly countries feel no responsibility to even try to reduce ecological devastations.

Environmental damage caused by war lasts for centuries, as explosions inflict toxic damage along with physical destruction. After every explosion, particles of toxic substances, such as lead, mercury and depleted uranium, are released into air, water, and soil. When ingested explosives like TNT, DNT, and RDX, cause illness. Because the damage induced is long-term and not immediately visible to the human eye, even discussions around the environmental costs of wars do not find space.

Another fallout of countries focusing on sovereignty and scoring more points over adversaries lies in the ways in which climate itself has been used as a tool to wreak devastation on other states. An example of this lies in how water sharing agreements can or cannot be adhered to, especially during times of traditional conflicts. In 2017, at the heights of the Doklam crisis between India and China when the armies of the two sides were locked in a conflict, China refused to share hydrological data with India regarding the volume of water in what is known as the Yarlung Tsangpo river in Tibet, and what is known as the Brahmaputra River in India. India and China have two legally binding agreements regarding river water data sharing, and China's actions were in violation of the two agreements. The interesting point to note is that while India had already paid China for the data, China claimed its weather monitoring systems had failed in Tibet, which is why data sharing could not take place. Interestingly, Bangladesh had received the same data from China. 2017 was a year in which Assam, unprepared for a voluminous surge of water in the Brahmaputra, suffered a terrible flood with massive destruction and deaths. China also plans to construct 20 dams on the Yarlung Tsangpo in Medong on the border with Arunachal Pradesh, apparently to achieve China's carbon neutrality goal by 2060. However, the construction will affect converging belts underground and has the potential to cause earthquakes. The creation of artificial floods which will have tremendous negative impacts on lower riparian states like India is a big possibility.

To combat climate change and its devastating impacts, the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development's 17 goals are laudable. To limit global warming to 1.5 degrees Celsius above pre-industrial levels as has been set out in the Paris Agreement, global greenhouse gas emissions need to peak before 2025 - two years away from now! Countries have been articulating climate action plans to cut emissions and to adapt to climate impacts through nationally determined contributions. However, the existing commitments so far are not sufficient to meet the 1.5 degrees Celsius target.

The kind of commitment countries have to address climate change is seen in the actions of two of the most powerful states of the international system--namely the United States (US) and China. Former US President Donald Trump had withdrawn from the Paris Agreement, which the US in 2021 rejoined under Donald Trump. The ease with which

countries can adhere or not adhere to climate agreements under different governments is a big challenge. As far as a China is concerned, China has set a target to reduce China's energy intensity per unit of Gross Domestic Product (GDP) by around 2% of its GDP in 2023. However, the target is conservative as compared to the emissions China causes and there is a need to aim higher in the next two years if China wants to actually meet the 2025 objective.

While a lot remains on paper in the form of goals and plans to address climate change, the fact on the ground is that for countries across the globe, the challenge of the climate crisis is not seen as urgent as matters around sovereignty. The lackadaisical approach to climate change along with the usage of the environment or its resources to help score points in traditional conflicts remains a challenge that needs to be addressed.

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