

Review

## China and Climate Multilateralism: A Review of Theoretical Approaches

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### Abstract

China's approach to multilateral climate negotiation has shifted greatly over the past decades. From being an obstacle to a follower, and now a potential leader, China has attracted academic attention. This article surveys the literature on China's role in climate multilateralism as examined by scholars through different lenses. The article asks whether analyses at different policymaking levels can explain China's changing position. I review studies addressing the international level and the nexus between the complementary international and domestic levels to offer a comprehensive understanding of China's strategic moves and choices in multilateral discussions on climate change. The review finds that factors at the international level are influencing China's climate ambitions and goals, and even to some extent are determining its strategies toward climate multilateralism; however, for China to deliver its international climate commitments, its enhanced ability will need domestic support. While these insights are valuable to understand China's international behavior, an emerging framework needs to be included in this discussion, as transnational governance scholarship might be able to explain how new actors may unlock China's position on climate change in the future.

### Keywords

China; Chinese climate policy; climate change; global climate governance; multilateralism

### Issue

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### 1. Introduction

Climate change is considered one of the most pressing global issues at present and has become a top priority in the international arena following widespread recognition of the need for urgent collective efforts to tackle it. After decades of participating in climate governance at both the international and domestic levels, China, as the largest developing country, is set to become a global leader in multilateral climate change mitigation and response efforts for at least two reasons. First, China can play an important role in spearheading multilateral efforts to limit global warming to the 1.5°C pathways proposed by the UNFCCC (IPCC, 2018), as demonstrated by Chinese President Xi Jinping's pledge to the UN General Assembly to reach peak carbon emissions by 2030 and carbon neutrality by 2060 (McGrath, 2020). Second, China is already investing in green energy, which through multilateral agreements can be diffused through its Belt and Road Initiative that

connects it to its western counterparts by land (Davidson & Wang, 2021). It is thus evident that the way in which China positions itself in multilateral negotiations is crucial for determining the capacity of the international community in the face of climate change (Stalley, 2015). In recognition of China's unique leverage to either halt or drive multilateral climate change mitigation efforts, scholars in recent years have sought to understand the complex politics affecting its international positioning. Various theoretical frameworks have discussed China's climate change policy, including regime theory, two-level game theory, the global leadership and championship literature, the advocacy coalition framework, rational-choice theory, multi-level governance (MLG), consultative authoritarianism (Teets, 2013), fragmented authoritarianism (Mertha, 2009), and authoritarian environmentalism (Kwon & Hanlon, 2016). Though all fixated on China, these approaches have taken on different perspectives to frame their insights. For instance, the discussion by MLG scholars studied the vertical organization

of the governance functions within China; they stated that China's domestic environmental governance can be fragmented and is subject to complex decision-making processes (Hensengerth, 2015; Hensengerth & Lu, 2019; Liu et al., 2021; Schreurs, 2017). Some researchers have argued that MLG applications to China need to reflect more on its local context (Westman et al., 2019) and how the Chinese authorities recognize it (Wu, 2018). However, this article is not the place to discuss this perspective in detail.

Based on the above work, three dominant perspectives to studying China's evolving positions on climate change can be discerned: those that focus the explanation on the international arena; those that emphasize China's domestic politics, suggesting that domestic interests and political institutions are at the root of any explanation; and those that look at the nexus of international and domestic factors. However, perceptions still differ on China's contribution to climate issues (Zhang, 2013). The question then arises whether current analyses of China's position toward climate change at different policy-making levels are sufficient to explain its changing behaviors and roles.

This article reviews the recent academic literature on China's international positioning in multilateral climate change mitigation efforts that focus on the international arena and the nexus between the international and domestic levels. I do not include analyses that focus on the domestic level since a proper discussion would require a separate analysis solely concentrating on variables at this level. This article draws on three theoretical streams that are frequently used to study this topic (international regime theory, global leadership and championship literature, and two-level game theory); it concludes that factors in the international political arena can influence China's climate ambitions and goals and even to some extent determine its strategies toward multilateral climate governance. However, for China to deliver its international climate commitments, it will need to mobilize the strategies it has applied domestically. This discussion may be particularly relevant as China's potential leadership position in climate affairs has elicited both support and opposition. In light of a multilateral political system in crisis, as is widely proclaimed, a better understanding of China's willingness and ability to participate in multilateral climate change mitigation efforts could foretell the success of such efforts.

Those studies that have applied the theoretical approaches discussed in this article have accurately captured the current evolution of China's international positioning on climate mitigation. The study of these various approaches shows that China's approach to global governance is not static. The evolution of its position and attitudes on multilateralism may have implications for the perception of China as a strategic player; it raises the important empirical question of how China's strategic decisions in international climate politics should be viewed and responded to. More generally, it also leads

to questions about the applicability of Western theories for studying non-Western contexts, as it is important to evaluate the explanatory value of existing theories in the Chinese context and to consider where they need to be adapted to better understand China.

This article first provides a brief overview of China's multilateral climate governance engagement. Section 2 reviews the main theoretical approaches put forward by scholars to understand China's international position in mitigating climate change. Section 3 proposes transnational climate governance as a useful approach to study the future direction that China could take in leading the global effort to fight climate change. The final section concludes the article.

## **2. The Puzzle: China's Changing Positions and Roles in UN-Led Multilateral Climate Talks**

China has participated in multilateral climate negotiations led by the UN since the 1990s. The country's role in the negotiations had always been controversial because it used to strongly oppose legally binding agreements. In recent years, China's opposition has given way to a more favorable view of multilateral climate governance. Thus, it is safe to conclude that China's view of climate change has evolved greatly over the past years (Cao, 2015; Stalley, 2015; Zhang, 2013). This can be ascribed to the international pressure that China received and its domestic interest in taking a more sustainable approach to economic development.

Two summits signified the turn in China's approach to climate diplomacy: the Copenhagen summit (2009), which marked the softening of China's position, and the Paris summit (2015), after which China began to take a more active role in global climate governance. These two summits also divided China's engagement in UN-centric multilateral diplomatic efforts into three stages, during which China occupied different roles: as a passive follower, an active participant, and a potential leader as illustrated in Table 1 below.

Throughout the negotiations, three key issues have been central to discussions involving China. The first is whether China should commit to a legally binding climate agreement. The second issue regards climate mitigation or, in other words, the reduction of emissions, which has been core to all intergovernmental climate negotiations to date. In the debate about the responsibilities of industrialized and developing countries for managing climate change, China has always been a staunch promoter of the "common but differentiated responsibilities principle." This emphasizes that industrialized countries are responsible for historical emissions and have the primary obligation for global warming while developing countries should still have the right to produce emissions to enable development. However, as China replaced the US in 2014 as the world's largest greenhouse gas emitter, accounting for more than one-third of global emissions (Williams, 2014) and became

**Table 1.** China's changing positions across three participation stages.

Stages/issues	Prior to Copenhagen 2009	Copenhagen 2009—Paris 2015	After Paris 2015
Commitment to a legally binding agreement	A passive follower/spoiler (Kastner et al., 2020, p. 166)	Softened position	Active player/investor (Kastner et al., 2020, p. 167)
Climate mitigation	Reluctant player	Positive transition	Potential leader/champion (Engels, 2018)
Green finance and technology transfer		Positive transition	Investor

the world's second-largest economy, some industrialized countries began pushing China to cut carbon emissions more aggressively and even started questioning whether China should still be considered a developing country. This dispute has continued for years in multilateral climate negotiations. The third issue that China has sometimes been criticized for is that of the Green Climate Funds and technology transfer. While negotiating for the establishment of the Green Climate Funds, China argued that industrialized countries should provide financial and technological transfers to developing countries to allow them to combat climate change. Industrialized countries, however, argue that China should be at the giving rather than the receiving end, considering China's current rising emissions and rapid economic development.

### 3. Unpacking China's Approach to Climate Multilateralism

China's evolving attitude toward climate change has attracted much academic attention. International Relations scholars are the major contributors to this discussion: regime theory, the global leadership and championship literature, and two-level game theory focus on unpacking China's (changing) climate positions at the international level.

#### 3.1. Regime Theory

Regime theory argues that international regimes exist on many levels. A regime consists of "a set of implicit or explicit principles, norms, rules, and decision-making procedures" (Krasner, 1982, p. 186). Regime theory has been applied to provide explanations of Chinese domestic policymaking from external factors (Kim, 2018; Moore & Yang, 2001; Robinson, 1994), with the attempts mainly concentrated on the economic and military spheres (Botchway, 2011; Hu, 1997; Ramezani & Kamali, 2021). Scholars have identified policymakers' perceptions of the international regime, the foreign policies of superpowers, the structure of the international system, and China's calculation of its relative power as key variables in understanding Chinese policymaking (Kim, 2018; Robinson, 1994).

Inspired by the question of how China's rise and expanding role on the world stage has had impacts

on or implications for the current international order (Wu, 2018), Kastner et al. (2020) modeled China's approach to climate diplomacy and sought to reveal whether China should be considered a "revisionist" or a "status-quo" force in global governance, using two independent variables in their analysis. The first factor was the balance of external options, while the second was whether contributions made by a rising power like China are viewed as indispensable for the regime's success (Kastner et al., 2018).

This model is, to some extent, consistent with the empirical evidence from the period when China was holding up the negotiation process. When external options were extremely strong, meaning that other countries were paying for the cost of mitigation, China was able to become a spoiler, using its bargaining power to push for the restructuring of the international regime to better suit China's interests (Kastner et al., 2018, p. 2). For instance, during the Copenhagen summit in 2009, China and the industrialized countries wrangled over the seven emission reduction plans, which include the United Nations IPCC program, the G8 country program, the UNDP program, the OECD program, the Garnaut program, the CCCPST program, and the Srensen program. China criticized all seven plans because they were mostly based on experts' work from industrialized countries while largely neglecting the reality in developing countries; China received strong opposition from industrialized countries in response. British climate minister Ed Miliband accused China of "trying to hijack the UN climate summit" and "hold the world to ransom" to prevent an agreement from being reached (Vidal, 2009). The Copenhagen conference ended with no substantive progress.

Regime theorists argue that external pressures from the negotiating table explain China's willingness to cooperate. The work of Kastner et al. (2018, 2020) shows how external factors influence China's international behavior, particularly in relation to China's willingness to contribute to global governance, although the authors do not give much attention to how its behavior may affect the regime's success. Kastner et al. (2018, 2020) considered only external factors, viewing China as a rising power in the international regime. This enables the theoretical framework to explain China's behaviors, specifically, when China will support or undermine

certain multilateral decision-making across different issues. However, their position also leaves room for some reflection.

Importantly, in the issue area of climate change, we need to reflect further on how to better account for the variation of positions over time. As mentioned earlier, Kastner et al. (2020, p. 167) argue that China's position dramatically impacted the 2009 Copenhagen summit because of the country's strong external options. However, the situation where there are external options and China is indispensable under the climate change regime is evolving. For instance, when external options are relatively strong, and China's contribution is considered essential to the regime's success, China is still very likely to be cooperative. Based on empirical observations, the year 2009 witnessed the beginning of China's transformation, as the country showed both intransigence and softening. Former Chinese President Hu Jintao's speech at the opening session in Copenhagen demonstrated China's "strong determination to assume responsibility for global climate governance" (Gao, 2018). Furthermore, China also released its climate pledges—more specifically, an emission intensity reduction target for 2020—which was welcomed by the international community. China's pledges were also praised by President Obama as ambitious and impressive (Gao, 2018). Another example of the impact of external options would be the US's entry and exit from the multilateral agreement. Before and after US withdrawal, China was actively pushing for ratification of the Paris Agreement. In this case, external options did not seem to impact China's willingness to cooperate.

Another question for further reflection is whether a theory can be applied to understand China's international behavior without considering the country's domestic context, or at least the connection to domestic factors? This will be probed in the following discussion section.

### *3.2. Global Leadership and Mitigation Championship Literature*

The global leadership and championship literature contains a very recent discussion of China's approach to climate multilateralism. Although it addresses the same question as regime theory, this line of inquiry builds on China's active attitude toward climate issues and its increased willingness and capacity. However, some scholars have shown reservations about claims that China is leading international climate negotiations (Engels, 2018), while others have expressed optimism, especially in the absence of leadership in climate change governance today (Buzan, 2021; Zhuang et al., 2018). Hence, it is crucial to consider the potential for Chinese leadership on climate change.

First, we should ask whether China is willing to take the leadership role? China is perceived as aiming to play a more constructive role in shaping global governance, and climate change is one of the issue areas that China has

been addressing at a very early stage (Wu, 2017), as it is likely for China to realize its global strategy. Chinese leaders recognize that an active response to climate change should not only be based on environmental considerations and China's sustainable development but should also improve its standing in the international community, as this is related to China's long-term political interests (Buzan, 2021). One of China's diplomatic strategies under President Xi's leadership pictures China as a responsible nation that should participate in the international rule-making process and help shape the international order. Xi's vision for China's future is to "stand on the central stage of global affairs, make greater contributions to humanity, and construct a global community with a common destiny" (Shen & Xie, 2018, p. 709). The idea of constructing a community of shared future for humankind was first brought up by President Xi in 2014, then reiterated by him on multiple occasions regarding international cooperation. It is interesting to consider the definition of leadership; scholars from China are optimistic about China's potential leadership role, but they emphasize that China is a "torchbearer" (Zhuang et al., 2018), which implies a guiding function rather than structural leadership. At the same time, they also recognize the potential conflict between the EU and the US regarding structural leadership on climate change, while China can work to set better roles for other developing countries (Zhou & Zhuang, 2021). Nonetheless, China's willingness to be a climate leader is the fruit of its domestic environmental interests and global political strategy.

A second question is whether China is able to take the leadership role. Empirical observations suggest that China's leadership goals on climate change may be achieved through making institutional, moral, and financial contributions (Shen & Xie, 2018). Institutionally, China has demonstrated some entrepreneurial spirit in its negotiations. Its efforts to reach bilateral agreements with the US and the EU have helped build a consensus between industrialized countries and developing countries and establish the Green Climate Fund (Shen & Xie, 2018). At the same time, China has forged new partnerships with the BASIC countries (Brazil, South Africa, India, and China), seeking to further the negotiating interests of developing countries. On the financial side, China has pledged to establish a \$3.1 billion South-South climate fund under the UN framework for mitigation and adaptation projects in the most vulnerable and least developed countries ("China South-South Climate Cooperation Fund," 2015), which not only promotes the development of green finance but also shows the world that China is willing to be a responsible player as the biggest developing country. China has also incorporated a green development strategy into the Belt and Road Initiative, a \$900 billion international initiative on infrastructure proposed by China. The United Nations Environment Program and the Chinese Ministry of Ecology and Environment announced the formation of an international coalition to ensure that the Belt and

Road Initiative leads to green growth. Morally, China has been a strong supporter of UN-centered climate multilateralism, protecting the values and ideas related to addressing climate change and curbing climate skepticism (Shen & Xie, 2018). However, scholars also have reservations, arguing that China’s domestic interest is key to understanding its actual ability to assume a leadership role. Engels (2018, p. 5) believes that China’s championship of climate mitigation only happens to coincide with important domestic priorities rather than being intentional and could pose a risk for the continuation of China’s support of the global climate mitigation regime.

Lastly, we ask whether China is expected to become a leader? In terms of climate leadership, the Annex I countries have always been expected to play this role (Hurri, 2020). The topic of climate leadership has always been associated with highly industrialized countries such as the US or the EU (Bäckstrand & Elgström, 2013; Dai & Diao, 2010). Given China’s volume of emissions, its investments in renewable energy, and its large economy and population size, it is expected to take on more responsibility. However, how much leadership power do the industrialized countries expect China to hold? Would the Annex I countries, which have always taken a leading role in setting the rules and agendas, controlling the direction of international negotiations, et cetera, be willing to hand some of these prerogatives to the Chinese? Rethinking China’s expected leadership, China may be far from becoming an actual leader. According to Hurri (2020), industrialized countries want China to take more weight onto its shoulders. Over the last decade, China has taken over some responsibilities to assist the global progress on climate change, especially in helping other developing countries confront climate change. However, China remains in conflict with industrialized countries as it attempts to seize more institutional power, related, for instance, to setting the rules and agendas, steering the direction of negotiations, or mediating international cooperative efforts. In other words, China certainly has the potential to be a leader, but acknowledging the country as a climate leader creates a role conflict for the current leaders (Hurri, 2020).

Returning to President Xi’s vision on China’s future contribution to global governance, it is quite clear that China aspires to take on institutional leadership on certain issues. Regarding climate change, the conflict

between China and the industrialized countries may continue, but this will not involve who should take more responsibility as was the issue over the past two decades but will rather concern competition for more voice and influence. If China’s interest in taking on climate change leadership were only due to domestic priorities (Engels, 2018), it is obvious that these domestic interests and international commitments would need to converge for China to become the next champion or leader (Wu, 2017). Chinese researchers have confirmed this trend. It has shown that over 100 countries have committed to carbon neutrality (Motive Power, 2021) and that China has also begun to map its low-carbon development plan to reach carbon neutrality by 2060—suggesting that policymakers in China have recognized the importance of a green transition and the potential for a new international order based on the new rules relating to carbon neutrality (Chai et al., 2020, p. 37). President Xi’s concept of building a human community for a shared future is consistent with the idea of global climate governance leadership (Li & Liu, 2019), reinforcing high-level convictions and setting a milestone in the history of China’s climate governance.

### 3.3. Two-Level Game Theory

The two-level game theory was originally derived by Putnam (1988) from game theory. The two-level game approach focuses specifically on the negotiating positions of state actors in relation to international and national interest. This analytical framework is considered appropriate for researchers to interpret China’s international climate negotiation strategy because it provides a baseline logic (as illustrated in Figure 1) to look at different actors and issues across the two levels (Cao, 2012; G. Chan et al., 2008; Gunter & Rosen, 2011; Hsu & Jiang, 2015; Wang, 2018; Zhang, 2013).

The application of the theory in Chinese studies has inherited certain elements from Putnam’s experimental work. This logic of interaction between international negotiation and domestic interests is reflected in the application by Chinese scholars. First, researchers agree that China’s behavior at the international level is influenced by domestic interests. There is much empirical evidence to support the idea that the roots of China’s shifting positions at the international level can be traced to

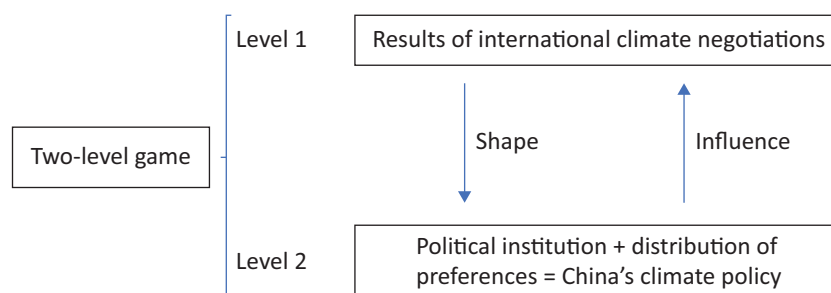


Figure 1. The logic of two-level games analysis.

domestic causes. For instance, China's aggressive investment in renewable technologies has led to a proactive stance at the negotiating table.

Various factors are considered when applying two-level game theory to the study of China. G. Chan et al. (2008) pointed out that China's domestic environmental crisis, the ecological cost of its rapid economic development, incidents of environment-related protest and unrest, and the recognized need for sustainable development have all clearly impacted China's diplomacy. This can explain why China is willing to participate in talks on fighting global warming while, at the same time, it guards the principle of common but differentiated responsibility, for its own benefit as well as for that of the developing world (G. Chan et al., 2008). Likewise, international social engagement through participation in international treaties or trade can help China integrate with the world politically and raise its environmental standards to meet the higher standards set by the industrialized countries (G. Chan et al., 2008). Similarly, Zhang (2013) also recognizes that decision-makers are under pressure from both international negotiations and domestic politics. To clarify, Zhang (2013) further hypothesizes that if the cost of abatement were high, China would be less willing to participate in international climate change negotiations. If climate change caused high levels of ecological vulnerability, and the principle of equity was accepted by parties at the international level, then China would be likely to take a more cooperative attitude in international climate change negotiations (Zhang, 2013).

The application of two-level game theory in the study of China is no longer state-centric. International institutions, national and local governments, domestic and international NGOs, and the media are all considered key actors in mobilizing China's climate multilateralism (G. Chan et al., 2008; Gunter & Rosen, 2011; Hsu & Jiang, 2015; Wang, 2018). One application of two-level game theory to the situation in China shows that the Chinese government interacts with international institutions such as the UNFCCC to engage in setting activities, rule negotiations, and rule compliance at the international level, while Chinese media and local governments focus more on shaping China's domestic climate policy. NGOs, on the other hand, can be active at either level, using inside-out strategies to advocate for policy change. These two levels then interact to influence China's approach to global climate governance.

However, some researchers have noted that the original theory was based on the US model of policymaking and thus has "greater relevance in the context of American politics" (Zhang, 2013, p. 3). Therefore, elements of the analysis such as "win-sets," "strategies of negotiators," and the "ratification process," which are all prevalent in democratic contexts, may take on different forms or meanings when applied to the Chinese context given the differences in the political and cultural system. Instead, researchers have expanded their explanations by adding more participants and factors into the

analysis. Moreover, these researchers concluded that factors at either the domestic or the international level evidently have different weights in terms of their explanatory power and that the different levels are not equally important. Empirically, during a certain period, international factors might play a decisive role, while at other times, domestic factors would be critical. Therefore, it is explicitly clear that factors at the international and domestic levels are not equally influential in shaping China's strategic climate choices.

In sum, the three pieces of literature discussed in this section collectively highlight the importance of factors at the international level to examinations of China's international behavior regarding climate change. The leadership literature and two-level game theory also consider domestic factors. The next question is to what extent these theoretical approaches adequately address China's changing international position on climate governance.

#### **4. Fully Answered? External Factors, Interplay Between Two Levels and China in Climate Multilateralism**

Regime theory, the leadership and championship literature, and two-level game theory share certain commonalities. First, this research aims to understand China's (evolving) international position on climate change; in other words, the dependent variables are the same in general terms, with leadership literature focusing on more recent changes. Even though domestic interests are raised in some discussions, the phenomenon that is explained remains China at the international level. For this reason, certain prevalent theories, such as advocacy coalition framework, MLG, consultative multilateralism (Teets, 2013), and authoritarian environmentalism (Kwon & Hanlon, 2016), which are used to shed light on domestic factors and dynamics of China's national climate governance, are not included in the discussion in this article.

The three theoretical approaches that were discussed in Section 2 all note that external factors, such as the geopolitical dynamics at the international level and the systemic flaws in the global climate regime (Buzan, 2021; Kastner et al., 2020; Zhuang et al., 2018), impact China's strategy toward climate multilateralism. In fact, external factors may enjoy more explanatory power than traditionally thought. In practice, China is a highly strategic player, and its approach to multilateralism should not be considered a consistent feature (Kastner et al., 2020, p. 165) but as dynamically evolving in response to international influences.

The three theoretical approaches all have their own unique features and merits in terms of contributions. International regime theory examines only external factors to comprehend China's international behavior, and it attempts to make general statements on China's strategy toward multilateralism in the context of a relatively long period of changing external conditions. The global leadership and championship literature

investigates China's potential as a climate leader more than it reflects on China's past strategies. The leadership and championship approach is proposed because China has taken a proactive stance on climate change in recent years. China's turn to become a potential climate leader is arguably shaped not only by its experience as a participant in the UNFCCC processes but also the fact that as its economic wealth and emissions have continued to increase, it has gradually gained sufficient structural power to participate in international climate governance.

An example of this is China's leadership of the institutional arrangement of the "bottom-up" approach under the Paris Agreement (Li et al., 2021). In addition, discussions of global leadership and championship may stimulate the study of how China might use climate issues as an opportunity to advance its political stance (Buzan, 2021) and further expand its political influence, especially in the Global South. Two-level game theory enjoys the advantage of harnessing factors at both international and domestic levels to account for China's international climate strategies. While some scholars in the global championship literature have also examined domestic influences, they have not analyzed the interplay between the two levels. Two-level game theory has been applied in different contexts and to various issues, but when it comes to China, it is confronted by the question of how to adapt to the domestic context to attain an in-depth analysis.

Another valuable contribution that emerges from these analyses is that they help position China's role in climate multilateralism relative to that of other countries. When China is reluctant to participate, other countries exert pressure to give China the impetus to change. As China makes progress, other countries could cooperate with China in addressing global climate change. From the current perspective, China and the industrialized countries of the EU have the competence and the willingness to "lead" or, in other words, to seize more institutional power in climate-related international institutions. This situation might lead to conflict between China and industrialized countries, not about who should take more responsibility for having caused global warming, but about who should have a greater voice in the negotiation process.

#### 4.1. *Adaptation to the Chinese Context*

It is challenging to transplant theories and concepts from political science, such as regime theory and two-level game theory, to China, as the approaches have been primarily applied in Western and democratic contexts. The direct application of Western theories to China's circumstances or to use China's case to contribute to Western theories requires further exploration.

First, it is important to consider the differences in parameters of the political systems. Specifically, the lack of deliberative democracy in the Chinese system

(Westman et al., 2019, p. 14) means that democratic concepts such as competing interests (between political parties) and ratification processes would have to be replaced by Chinese indigenous governance concepts. For instance, regarding the environment and climate-related issues, the Chinese decision-making process may involve coordination between the Ministry of Ecology and Environment, which supervises and guides environment-related plans and decision-making; the China Meteorological Administration, which provides the scientific environment and climate evidence; the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, which coordinates international negotiations; and other government agencies. When applying Western theories to the Chinese context, the potential for conflict between the functional hierarchies (such as those mentioned above), as well as territorial (*kuài*) and vertical (*tiáo*) chains of command (Hensengerth, 2015, p. 313), need to be considered, rather than conflicts of interest between political parties, as in democracies. The term *tiáo* (vertical) refers to the vertical lines of authority over various sectors reaching down from the ministries of the central government. *Kuài* (horizontal) refers to the horizontal level of authority of the territorial government at the provincial or local level. The ministries and government bodies mentioned above may share overlapping functions which should be considered when transplanting theories: For instance, both the Ministry of Ecology and Environment and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs are responsible for the supervision of China's participation in the UN Conferences of Parties.

Secondly, we need to take into account the differences in civil society actors when applying theories originally developed in Western democracies to the Chinese context, especially in the field of environment and climate change. NGOs in the West have played a significant role in advocacy throughout the policymaking process. In China, the definition and functions of civil society actors are very different from those in Western contexts. Policy entrepreneurs such as international NGOs often undertake the role of policy translators (Stone, 2012), while in China, international NGO operations are limited by local management schemes, one of which is the overseas NGO law. On the other hand, local NGOs in China lack the capacity to establish direct global interconnections due to the relatively strict regulatory regime imposed on Chinese civil society. Therefore, for international organizations or international NGOs to be able to disseminate norms, set standards, or advocate policies, they often need to target local actors such as Chinese NGOs, rather than the Chinese state (Gunter & Rosen, 2011).

In order to reconcile Western theories with the unique case of China, it seems inevitable that Western theories will merge with indigenous Chinese theories or concepts (Zhang, 2017). Conceptual innovation may provide an answer. For instance, consider the concept of rightful resistance developed by O'Brien and Li (2006) to conceptualize Chinese farmers' contentious practices.

Collective action in rural China “often hinges on locating and exploiting divisions within the state by using the rhetoric and regulations of the central government to resist misconduct by local officials” (Zhang, 2017, p. 286). The concept of rightful resistance is a case where Chinese practices could inform existing Western theories on contentious politics. In the context of studying Chinese climate policy, a new idea like “a community of shared future” (*renlei mingyun gongtongti*), which is inspired by the concept of “all-under-heaven” (*tianxia*) from traditional Chinese philosophy, could provide opportunities for such innovation. As argued by Buzan (2021), climate change is a profound threat to “everything in the world,” which is difficult to describe and interpret using Western concepts of international relations (Buzan, 2021).

### 5. A New Question? Transnational Climate Governance and China

One of the major changes in the current global system to address climate issues is the rising importance of non-state actors (Andonova et al., 2009; S. Chan et al., 2015; Hale, 2020; Kuyper & Bäckstrand, 2016). Given that the traditional state-centric climate system, which evolves around the UNFCCC regime, has been under contestation academically (Keohane & Victor, 2011; Lederer, 2015), transnational, non-state actors’ efforts to influence state-centric global responses to climate change beyond the multilateral system are intended to create a new form of governance. This is also referred to as transnational climate governance (Hale, 2020).

According to Andonova et al. (2009, p. 56), “transnational governance occurs when networks operating in the transnational sphere authoritatively steer constituents towards public goals.” NGOs, private companies, subnational governments, et cetera, can all participate in the process of transnational governance. Polycentrism (Ostrom, 2009), fragmentation (Biermann et al., 2009; Zelli & van Asselt, 2015), and regime complexity (Keohane & Victor, 2011) are all conceptual frames to capture the changing landscape of climate governance. Despite the different positions of these concepts, they are all based on the growing empirical process of multi-actor and multi-level (both horizontal and vertical) processes of governance efforts (Dorsch & Flachsland, 2017). Furthermore, researchers also seem to agree that the current international system for managing climate change is in transition, with more actors engaged in more activities at significantly more levels of governance (Jordan et al., 2018). This transnational system may fill some governance gaps and may be able to co-exist with the traditional state-centric system, yet there is no consensus on whether it is a supplement to or an alternative for the traditional one.

The involvement of China, as a key player in multilateral climate negotiations, with the transnational trend of climate governance has attracted academic attention. Researchers acknowledge that domestic polit-

ical context may condition actors’ engagement with transnational governance, and this informs the study of China in transnational governance (Hale & Roger, 2018). Empirically, given China’s domestic political context, the question is whether China can be or has been associated with transnational climate governance and what factors affect the scale, form, and shape of its engagement.

Transnational climate governance remains rather a novel concept in China. While Chinese officials have made statements welcoming the efforts of subnational and non-state actors openly, in practice, the regulation of civil society at home does not seem to be loosening up. A distinctive feature of the Chinese engagement with transnational climate governance is that the authority (the Chinese government) remains at the center, challenging the traditional understanding of the concept at the global level where non-state and sub-state actors are the main actors. According to Hale and Roger (2018), domestic factors are the main drivers of China’s response to climate change. Beyond that, Chinese officials have made it clear that China is a firm supporter of UN-centered multilateralism regarding climate change. And global climate governance has always been the main narrative that they use to describe the global efforts to address climate change. Empirical evidence confirms this, as China’s participation in transnational governance initiatives remains relatively shallow and uneven, with national government and subnational government units being the major participants (Hale & Roger, 2018). However, does this imply that the participation of other Chinese actors in transnational governance will be limited as well?

Chinese NGOs, subnational governments, businesses, and other non-state actors can still enjoy some political space to engage in transnational schemes. As research on China’s domestic climate governance indicated, “although China remains authoritarian, it is nevertheless responsive to the increasingly diverse demands of Chinese society” (Mertha, 2009, p. 995). As climate change has become a policy priority, the barriers to entry into the policymaking process have been lowered for certain “policy entrepreneurs” (Mertha, 2009), as Chinese leaders see the need to incorporate Chinese civil society actors into climate decision-making to fill governance gaps. Although most Chinese actors are involved in transnational governance as followers, and many grassroots environmental NGOs are still unfamiliar with the concept, transnational climate governance may be a particularly attractive strategy for NGOs. As an increasing number of foreign NGOs and transnational NGO networks join hands with local NGOs, they may be able to lobby or initiate local-level activism (Hale & Roger, 2018) or even become more embedded in the policymaking process. This transnational policy diffusion is empirically observed, as in the case of the low-carbon economy agenda, which was introduced by transnational actors, backed by foreign funding, promoted by policy entrepreneurs from domestic research institutes, pro-



pelled by top-level attention, and finally adopted by the government bureaucracy (Hofem & Heilmann, 2013). Further work needs to be carried out on the conditions for and the kind of transnational governance initiatives that can be accepted in China.

## 6. Conclusion

Departing from analyses at different policymaking levels, this article presents a review of approaches that help understand China's shifting positions toward climate multilateralism. This article has shown that it is essential to consider a range of theories that can provide additional insights into understanding China's international climate position.

Conceptually, it is crucial to focus on a variety of theoretical approaches to examine how China's climate multilateralism has evolved. At different levels of analysis, different sets of variables are considered to be important influences on China's position, and they lead to different conclusions. The analysis at the international level focuses on China's external options and the urgency of the issue itself. However, to fully explain the variation in China's position, factors at the international and domestic levels have played different roles at different times. China's domestic willingness and capabilities impact China's global expansion. The analysis of the international–domestic nexus reflected on the international context or the “strategic landscape” of the climate change issue, as well as China's political willingness and ability. It emphasized the interaction between the two levels, which may add additional insights to the analyses of regime theory and global leadership and championship literature.

What appears to be missing from the current analysis is how “changes” in the trajectory of China's climate multilateralism may be interpreted. As Kastner et al. (2020, p. 165) have argued that analysts “should not treat China's approach to multilateralism as a constant feature of the country's general disposition” (Kastner et al., 2020, p. 165), it is relevant to focus on the dynamics and conditions of the change process as a potential area for further research. The conceptual framework of “critical junctures,” derived from historical institutionalism, can be invoked to discover patterns of political changes (Capoccia & Kelemen, 2007; Collier & Collier, 2002). In general, this framework can be used to explain various development processes, including the organizational decision-making process (Capoccia & Kelemen, 2007, p. 343). Some scholars have argued that China's climate policy has reached a critical juncture, whether seeking energy self-sufficiency by burning coal or promoting “ecological civilization” to gain a green reputation internationally (Oxford Analytica, 2020). Nevertheless, it is yet to observe whether a period of significant change as demonstrated in Chinese climate policy can produce distinct legacies (Capoccia & Kelemen, 2007, p. 347) in the study of development and change.

Another gap may be the limited range of actors included. With the introduction of the transnational governance framework, non-state actors have become an integral part of the discussion, and as a result, the form of international cooperation is transforming. The current literature on climate change in China focuses on the state but rarely mentions civil society actors. Similar to the Chinese state in its participation in global climate governance, Chinese NGOs are also constrained by their domestic political constituency (Wang, 2018). However, they are subject to international and transnational influence from foreign peers regarding their approach to climate policy advocacy (Hofem & Heilmann, 2013). Attention to this element would require further work on how plural theories can be employed in the discussion.

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## Conflict of Interests

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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