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Environmental Multilateralism: Climate Change and American Decline

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The United States' poor record of leadership in international environmental policy grows more concerning as the impending effects of unrestrained climate change become increasingly apparent. Though it is the country most able to provide effective leadership, the U.S. is routinely condemned for acting unilaterally, often in ways that undermine international agreements that it sees as counter to American interests (Ivanova 2008, 58). Robert Falkner, political scientist at the London School of Economics, explains: "America's hegemony has formed the basis for both international leadership and veto power in environmental regime formation" (2005, 585). This lack of international systemic restraint, coupled with the absence of a clear "global strategic imperative" to act on climate change, means that the decentralized U.S. foreign policy apparatus and competition among domestic interest groups can produce variation in U.S. and foreign environmental policy (Falkner 2005; 586, 589). Falkner concludes that "renewed US [*sic*] environmental leadership is only possible as a result of strong public demand, supported by institutionalized pressure from environmental groups and business interests acting in favor of international regulation" (2005, 597). Falkner's basic outline of the conditions necessary for the U.S. to assume environmental leadership is helpful in creating a model for promoting positive change in U.S. environmental policy.

Leadership by the U.S. is necessary to create a strong plan for reducing the effects of climate change. As Falkner argues, since the U.S. is the global hegemon, it has the ability to work unilaterally or multilaterally, an option that impedes stable global cooperation on climate change. American hegemony is not a constant, however; it is in decline. It is in the United States' best interest to lead the world in climate negotiations, not only to protect the environment and current related American interests, but also to secure an advantage in the international climate agreement that will serve future American interests. Many American leaders might reject this argument, so it is important to look at a case study in order to understand the conditions under which the U.S. would assume the necessary leadership role. U.S. environmental and business interests aligned because of the mutual reinforcement of scientific evidence and widespread public support. The alignment between these two core interests allowed the U.S. to lead efforts that resulted in the creation of the Montreal Protocol. The U.S. used its power as hegemon to help create the Montreal Protocol, which in turn helped maintain future U.S. advantages in certain areas.

Even without the threat of future decline, it is in the United States' interests to work multilaterally to mitigate the effects of climate change, as environmental consequences will directly harm U.S. national interests and cannot be stopped unilaterally. Climate change has

already had a substantial net negative impact on food production, foreshadowing the food insecurity that will result from climate change (IPCC 2005; 5, 13). More indirectly related security threats may arise as well; natural disasters, which have and will continue to increase in frequency and severity “may, when coupled with other triggers, do more to destabilize the government than an armed attack on the nation or its capital” (Busby 2008, 476). The U.S. has an interest in preventing states from failing, which can lead to regional conflict; so it has an interest in stopping events related to climate change. Furthermore, the U.S. will be expected to give aid to the most afflicted countries, and some of this money and support may come from the military (Busby 2008; 475, 476). Even if the United States were to remain a hegemon indefinitely, its interests lie in preventing climate change, not just for moral reasons, but for more pragmatic national interest reasons as well.

International cooperation is necessary for successful climate change action, and it will not occur without American leadership. The negative environmental actions of one country frequently affect other countries in unforeseen and unavoidable ways, so “individual states are ill-equipped to respond alone to the myriad of challenges posed by transboundary environmental, social, and health problems” (Schreurs 1997, 1). Additionally, due to the costs of being the first state to act and the problems that can arise with free riders, the international community needs a regulatory system to ensure the long-term viability of any international efforts to combat climate change (Figueres 2012). For several reasons, this will not happen without American leadership. Not only has the U.S. historically been a force for developing international organizations and treaties, but treaties that are not supported by the U.S. are often seen as less legitimate (Ivanova 2008, 58). Furthermore, because the U.S. is the largest contributor to man-made climate change, it is essential the U.S. visibly work to find a solution, otherwise other countries will argue that it is unfair for them to pay to fix the problem that the U.S. had a large part in creating (Falkner 2005, 591). In short, without American participation, no international environmental action can have true legitimacy, stability, and success (Falkner 2005, 591).

Falkner is correct that while America remains a hegemon and does not see environmental issues as a matter of national security, it will continue to have the choice to act unilaterally or multilaterally, and this choice will be decided by domestic politics. One thing that he does not consider is that while America does have flexibility in international environmental politics now, it will eventually lose the power that comes with being a hegemon. Because of this, it is in the United States’ long-term interests to establish an international climate change agreement now, using its power to create a system that will benefit it when American power diminishes in the future. To do this would not be to act under structural pressure, but to foresee a situation where structural forces may have more power. This means that the U.S. will not automatically work to create a climate change agreement, so it is necessary to use Falkner’s arguments to determine what domestic conditions must exist for the U.S. to act in its long-term interests. Domestic politics are primarily influenced by environmental interests, business interests, and public opinion, which are informed by scientific evidence and consensus, determining factors that Falkner does not adequately address. All of these arguments can be seen in the case of American leadership preventing destruction of the ozone through the Montreal Protocol.

American power has peaked; it should work while it still has a significant advantage over other countries to maximize its power and capabilities for the future, when it exists in a multipolar world. Although its military advantage will likely remain strong for the foreseeable future, trade war is currently much more likely than traditional inter-state conflict. The American military is useful in engaging in regional conflicts, but it is less relevant in the negotiation of environmental treaties (Young 1994, 136). On the other hand, economic power can increase a hegemon's bargaining power, as a hegemon can better cajole and coerce using the promise of trade or assistance, soft power, or the threat of sanctions (Falkner 2005, 588). However, the American share of the world economy has been decreasing since 1950, while the Chinese share of the world economy has been increasing since then and is now larger than the American share (Thompson 2012, Thompson 2015). As "the old order dominated by the US [*sic*] and Europe is giving way to one increasingly shared with non-Western rising states," American dominance is coming to a close, even if not in the immediate future (Ikenberry 2011, 56). In an increasingly multipolar world, the U.S. will not be able to act unilaterally or multilaterally depending solely on its domestic politics. Instead, the international system, and the great powers in the international system, will have a larger influence on how America acts.

In order to preserve American interests, the U.S. would benefit from establishing international environmental treaties that favor U.S. interests and give the U.S. a position of power for future negotiations, thus "locking in" American power that might otherwise dissipate. In the past, across a variety of issues, the U.S. has created structures that favor it, and thereby has "spun a web of institutions that connected other states to an emerging American-dominated economic and security order" (Ikenberry 2001, 21). This can be seen in the United Nations, where the U.S. has veto power due to its permanent seat on the Security Council. Even though these institutions have been built primarily by Western nations, rising nations do not want to change the structure or guiding rules of the international order; they want to gain more power within it (Ikenberry 2011, 57). This indicates that there might be little pushback against an international treaty concerning climate change, so long as it includes developing nations. Although this may partially restrain the U.S., "now may be the best time for the United States and its democratic partners to update the liberal order for the new era, ensuring that it continues to provide the benefits of security and prosperity that it has provided since the middle of the twentieth century" (Ikenberry 2011, 58). This means creating a comprehensive international treaty to mitigate the effects of climate change while preserving American interests before they must be ceded to a multipolar world order.

The Montreal Protocol is often cited as the best example of both international cooperation and American leadership on an environmental issue. In 1973, scientific evidence began to indicate that certain chemicals used in refrigerants and aerosols, among other things, could be destroying the ozone layer, which would increase levels of skin cancer and damage crops. The agreement to phase out these ozone-depleting substances (ODSs) was ratified in 1985, a mere twelve years after the first scientific discovery. At this point in time, all nations in the United Nations have ratified the original Montreal Protocol (UNEP 2014). In this case the U.S. was a

key player, and it led the successful phase-out of ODSs that were damaging the ozone layer (Ivanova 2008, 57). The role of American hegemony in creating this treaty provides a coherent, though perhaps overly simplified, model for what needs to happen for American leadership to occur on a climate treaty, as prescribed by Falkner. In the case of the Montreal Protocol, industrial interests shifted to favoring increased regulation after a vocal public demanded it. This shift was founded on the increasingly clear scientific evidence of the reality of ozone depletion. Additionally, the treaty gave an advantage to and protected the American chemical industry in the long term.

Support from the chemical industry was crucial in allowing the U.S. to have a pro-international regulation position, as business interests often impede environmental legislation. According to Falkner, “environmental groups and business interests frequently pull in opposite directions when it comes to managing environmental problems,” which causes “rifts within the domestic constituency of US foreign environmental policy” (2005, 595). Businesses often feel it is unfair for their economic interests to be sacrificed for the sake of environmental protection, and they lobby heavily in the name of protecting the U.S. economy (Sussman 2004, 352). In this they are often successful, as they have political access and money to donate to politicians’ campaigns (Harris 2001, 22). However, businesses will strongly support international legislation if they are already subject to similar domestic regulations, and “much international environmental regulation appears on the international agenda through the process of internationalizing domestic regulation” (Falkner 2005, 595).

The chemical industry eventually supported ODS regulation due to falling sales and the realization that this regulation would give them an advantage in creating substitutes. As soon as the ozone depletion theory became widespread, the sale of products using ODSs in the U.S. fell by nearly two thirds (Benedick 1991, 28). Although initially the industry was opposed to any regulation, “soon after the first signs of consumer disquiet showed, industry opposition to the CFC-ozone theory began to crumble” (Harris 2001, 164). In response to this pressure, firms began developing alternatives to ODSs (Benedick 1991, 31). Because of this shift, American chemical companies began to support international regulation that would then “level the playing field” and stop foreign companies from using the cheaper ODSs for their competing products (Benedick 1991, 31). They realized that this regulation would create a market for substitutes that only large, wealthy corporations could develop, and since the major American corporations had already started developing these alternatives, they recognized that international regulation would give them a long-term advantage (Schreurs 1997, 75). This support gave legitimacy to pro-regulation advocates and made it easier for American legislators and diplomats to champion this regulation at home and abroad.

It is clear that business support would not have occurred without pressure from the public, which has also helped to shape environmental legislation. Although politicians do listen to the preferences of businesses, “if enough of their constituents are concerned about an issue, they will usually work to promote those concerns in policy,” as they want to be reelected (Harris 2001, 22). Generally, strong public support is required for the U.S. to take action in global

environmental policy initiatives, so environmental groups often spend much of their time lobbying citizens in addition to lawmakers, in an effort to achieve widespread bottom-up pressure (Sussman 2004, 352).

The widespread public reaction to the unfolding reality of ozone depletion spurred American leadership on international ODS regulation. As stated before, once the scientific community coalesced around the new theory, “US [*sic*] consumer response was swift and significant,” which influenced the position of the chemical industry (Schreurs 1997, 75). This response was the result of the “powerful and evocative pictures of ozone depletion simulations [that] appeared in magazines” and “captured the US [*sic*] public’s imagination” (Schreurs 1997, 75; Benedick 1991, 27). Americans had access to and were interested in the data and results that American scientists, from prominent universities and organizations such as the University of Michigan, NOAA, and NASA, were finding. Because of that, Americans began acting on their environmental concerns (Benedick 1991, 29). Citizens changed their purchasing habits and lobbied their representatives in office, and in this way, “a well-informed public was the prerequisite to mobilizing the political will of governments and to weakening industry’s resolve to defend the chemicals” (Benedick 1991, 5).

Until this point, Falkner’s argument fits the narrative of American leadership in creating the Montreal Protocol. However, he underestimates the role of scientific evidence and consensus in strengthening public support and weakening business leverage. Because businesses do not want to appear anti-environmentalist, much of their resistance comes in the form of questioning the scientific evidence and conclusions drawn. Due to this tendency, “the more uncertain the science, the more interest group politics will come into play” (Schreurs 1997, 89). Additionally, people are more likely to care if there seems to be imminent danger to themselves or their way of life, so “robust action by the United States is much more likely if there is clear scientific evidence that the health of Americans or the U.S. economy would be harmed or if there are clear signs that environmental changes are causing substantial human suffering abroad” (Harris 2001, 17). From this perspective, environmental change can be seen more clearly as a matter of national security, which will both increase public pressure for action and induce more reticent public officials to acquiesce. Finally, collaboration between scientists and government officials can be crucial in helping legislators understand what is at stake, which will encourage them to take action (Sussman 2004, 350).

The role of science and scientists was pivotal in building public support, degrading industrial opposition, and pushing government officials to stop ozone depletion. None of the widespread public support would have been possible without credible evidence. In particular, “the public announcement during 1985 of the Antarctic ozone hole played an important role in mobilizing public concern” (Young 1994, 44). It is also telling that “the entire public policy debate revolved around the validity of scientific claims and whether those claims were strong and significant enough to pursue active regulation of CFC products,” as it indicates that scientific evidence was the primary point of dissension, not whether or not the proposed risks were worth accepting (Harris 2001, 187). Eventually, after more scientific research, it was widely accepted that damage to the ozone layer would be harmful both to human health and the environment,

which was the turning point in creating both a domestic and international coalition that was powerful enough to create the international regulations (Benedick 1991, 22). In addition, collaboration between scientists and government officials was critical in that scientists provided them with clear measures that were needed to prevent further ozone depletion (Benedick 1991, 5). Conclusive scientific evidence was the motor that propelled the U.S. to demand international regulation on ODSs, and without it there will be little incentive for any future environmental regulation.

Besides illustrating the conditions necessary for domestic consensus, the Montreal Protocol demonstrates how American hegemony can influence international environmental regime building and how it can preserve American interests for the future. As argued earlier, U.S. leadership is necessary in creating successful international environmental legislation, and the Montreal Protocol was no exception (Ivanova 2008, 59). Because the U.S. emitted the largest amount of ODSs and greenhouse gases, other states would have felt exploited if the U.S. did not participate in ODS regulation (Benedick 1991, 206). Instead, “the US [*sic*] government set the example by being the first to take regulatory action against the suspect chemicals,” which encouraged other states to participate as well (Benedick 1991, 206). The U.S. went beyond this, however, as they threatened trade restrictions against nations that did not take responsibility for emissions and “made certain that the implications of this threat were not lost on foreign governments, pointing out that there might be a price to pay for not joining in meaningful efforts to protect the ozone layer” (Benedick 1991, 29). The U.S. was able to apply pressure because of the American economy’s “nodal position” that “affords it a unique opportunity to use economic pressure in the pursuit of environmental objectives” (Falkner 2005, 590). Restricting trade with other countries was an asymmetrical threat, as other countries could not individually create the same level of restrictions. In these ways, American hegemony allowed the U.S. to do more to form an international coalition against ozone depletion than any other single nation could have done.

Because of American leadership on the treaty, the Montreal Protocol institutionalized American interests for the future, even in a fairly narrow area of regulation. The primary benefit of the U.S.’s role in the Montreal Protocol was that it allowed American chemical companies to have an advantage in the international market, as their greater resources and early research on alternatives allowed them to “capture” the market for the chemicals that replaced ODSs, which gave them a long-term advantage (Benedick 1991, 206). Furthermore, the U.S. established itself as a leader on the issue, ensuring that any future international ozone agreement must be agreed upon with the U.S. This power, though less tangible than the business advantage, guaranteed long-term American influence on the subject and afforded the U.S. the opportunity to shape future regulations in favor of American interests. In this case, besides protecting global human and environmental health, American hegemony secured American interests that would not have been assured otherwise. For environmentalists who want to stop climate change and for policymakers who realize that American power is temporary, the Montreal Protocol, under an analysis similar to Falkner’s, offers the foundation of a plan to institutionalize an American approach to climate change. In order to use American hegemony to create an international treaty

that attacks climate change while securing American interests, these environmentalists and policymakers must work to establish certain domestic conditions that will favor multilateralism. There is already government-funded climate change research, but this should be expanded and protected because without scientific evidence, it will be impossible to defend against those who believe international regulation is unnecessary. Without this evidence, it will also be difficult to know which measures will be most effective in alleviating climate change. This information should be widely spread throughout the media and in information campaigns, which will help garner public support. Finally, although adjusting to regulations may be difficult for American companies, it will be much easier for them than for companies in other countries.

This perspective should be discussed with major companies, and policymakers should listen to what the central industry stakeholders would like to see in a climate deal. This will help the climate treaty maximize American business interests and win industrial support. Currently, the U.S. is in a unique position in which they are simultaneously in the best position from which to act on environmental issues and powerful enough to ignore environmental issues entirely and suffer few consequences. However, acting now would speed international progress and environmental safety while protecting the U.S.

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