

A Climate Coalition of the Willing

Intergovernmental efforts to limit the gases that cause climate change have all but failed. After the unsuccessful 2010 Copenhagen summit, and with little progress at the 2010 Cancun meeting, it is hard to see how major emitters will agree any time soon on mutual emissions reductions that are sufficiently ambitious to prevent a substantial (greater than two degree Celsius) increase in average global temperatures.

It is not hard to see why. No deal excluding the United States and China, which together emit more than 40 percent of the world's greenhouse gases (GHGs), is worth the paper it is written on. But domestic politics in both countries effectively block "G-2" leadership on climate. In the United States, the Obama administration has basically given up on national cap-and-trade legislation. Even the relatively modest Kerry-Lieberman-Graham energy bill remains dead in the Senate. The Chinese government, in turn, faces an even harsher constraint. Although the nation has adopted important energy efficiency goals, the Chinese Communist Party has staked its legitimacy and political survival on raising the living standard of average Chinese. Accepting international commitments that stand even a small chance of reducing the country's GDP growth rate below a crucial threshold poses an unacceptable risk to the stability of the regime. Although the G-2 present the largest and most obvious barrier to a global treaty, they also provide a convenient excuse for other governments to avoid aggressive action. Therefore, the international community should not expect to negotiate a worthwhile successor to the Kyoto Protocol, at least not in the near future.

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Intergovernmental efforts have all but failed to reach a global deal.

This, however, does not mean the world must resign itself to the dangerous ramifications of climate change, nor accept the limitations imposed by domestic politics in Beijing and Washington. By constructing a coalition of willing actors, the international community can make second-best, but still worthwhile, progress toward mitigating climate change without a multilateral treaty. Such a coalition

would include all the countries, regions, provinces, states, cities, and towns who want to make progress toward limiting greenhouse gasses. It should also include various governmental agencies—e.g. environmental regulators, energy policy-makers, and transportation officials—as well as private actors ranging from corporations to civil-society groups. Finally, it should allow individuals to do their part too. Many of these actors, ranging from the European Union to New York City, from the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency to the Chinese Ministry of Environmental Protection, from Walmart to perhaps the reader of this article, already have done their part, in hundreds if not thousands of GHG mitigation programs and projects. Together, these initiatives constitute what political scientists might call the “regime complex” for the climate—that is, the totality of governance initiatives, public and private, big and small, that seek to limit GHGs.¹

With the multilateral approach deadlocked, policymakers and civil-society advocates need to turn to this larger range of governance tools and work to increase their ambition, scope, and effectiveness. A critical mass is necessary. By summoning a coalition of the willing for the climate, political leaders can take non-multilateral approaches to a scale where they can both make a substantive difference in the fight against climate change and lay the groundwork for a possible rebirth of the multilateral approach.

The Breakdown of Climate Multilateralism

It is important to understand why the intergovernmental approach is no longer sufficient. First, consider its record. Since the Rio Earth Summit of 1992, almost every country in the world has met regularly to coordinate a global response to climate change. Two decades of this multilateralism, under the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC), have resulted in exactly one treaty requiring GHG reductions—the 1997 Kyoto Protocol that committed rich nations to a miniscule five percent average reduction in emissions relative to 1990 levels. Even this proved too much for the United States, which refused to adopt the protocol, and indeed for many signatories—such as

Canada—that are failing to meet their commitments. Developing countries faced no requirements at all.

Kyoto, which expires in 2012, was meant to pave the way for more significant cuts, but that goal remains distant as the breakdown in Copenhagen and continuing inaction in Cancun demonstrate. This is not to say that the UNFCCC process has not been useful—indeed, it is absolutely essential, coordinating scientific knowledge about the issue, establishing a global carbon-trading mechanism, placing the issue at the top of the international agenda, etc.—but the principal goal, preventing catastrophic climate change, is the only one that ultimately matters.

To be fair, no one expected the problem to be solved easily. Collective action problems tend to be more difficult when the number of actors is high, costs are proximate and clear while the benefits are distant and diffuse, and individuals have strong incentives to free ride on the sacrifices of others. By these measures, climate change is perhaps the toughest collective action problem society has ever faced. But even these issues could be overcome with strong leadership from the major powers. Unfortunately, domestic politics prevent the two countries that contribute more to climate change than any others, the United States and China, from adopting the international obligations required by the multilateral approach. Consider each in turn.

One might think that, with the Democrats in control of both Congress and the White House for the last two years, political conditions in the United States have been optimal for climate legislation. But that is wishful thinking, for two reasons. First, climate is not just a partisan issue. Although Republicans are almost unanimous in their opposition to firm caps on carbon reductions, Democrats face dissent within their ranks from members representing conservative, energy-intensive, or agricultural states. This imbalance is rooted in the Constitution of the United States. Although Senate action is required to ratify any international treaty, Senate votes are awarded equally to the 50 states, not weighted by population, meaning that less populated, carbon-dependent rural interests tend to disproportionately dominate.² And even in the House, climate legislation passed by only seven votes, with 43 Democrats joining the Republican opposition.

Second, on top of this structural bias, the U.S. political system has recently showed little capacity for far-reaching change. A culture of partisan obstructionism has brought public business to a standstill. Because the Obama administration needs to spend vast amounts of political capital to get anything through Congress, it has prioritized health care and job creation over climate change. The locus of this dysfunction is, again, the Senate, where a de facto super-majoritarian rule and a 59–41 partisan divide have made it impossible to pass ambitious legislation. With Republicans taking control of the House, climate legislation is unlikely to surface for at least two years.

China is politically even more constrained than the Obama administration.

The domestic politics of climate in China are less transparent than in the United States, but the outcome is equally clear. It is common to portray the Chinese Communist Party as an all-powerful ruler that could dictate changes in emissions policy tomorrow, if it decided to. In some sense, though, the party is even more constrained than the Obama administration. According to the Institute of Environmental Economics at Renmin University, the cost of strict emissions reductions would amount to about seven percent of GDP in 2050.³ In the eyes of Party leaders, these costs are incompatible with maintaining the rising standard of living to which urban Chinese have become accustomed. Worse, they are incompatible with the rapid job creation needed to employ the millions of Chinese moving from the countryside to the cities. For a party judged largely on economic performance, policies that threaten to reduce annual GDP growth below some minimal threshold—commonly believed to be about eight percent—would put the very stability of the regime into question.

It is also important to note the regional and sectoral dynamics at play within China. China's dynamic export sector requires cheap energy and is agnostic about its source. This is not true of China's enormous state-owned coal industry, concentrated in the central northern regions of the country. In poor provinces such as Shanxi and Inner Mongolia, coal is one of the most important industries. This concentration ensures that China's coal industry—which provides more than half the country's energy needs—has a strong voice at the national level, including among top leaders. The Party is no doubt reluctant to induce economic disaster in poor, politically important areas of the country. In addition, provincial governments retain enormous power over policy implementation, and are adept at resisting national policies through half-hearted implementation and misreporting. Such tactics have done much to undermine environmental regulation in China generally. For Beijing to overcome these habits, it would have to invest significant political capital in badgering regional governments to reduce emissions.

At the same time, it is true that Chinese leaders increasingly fear the costs climate change will impose on China—and their hold on power—in the future. As the government's own National Climate Change Assessment Report makes clear, many of China's largest and most productive cities sit in low-lying coastal areas vulnerable to sea-level rise and typhoons. The north and center of the country face the opposite problem: already struggling to find enough water for agriculture, industry, and personal use, they would become even drier.⁴ For these

reasons, China has taken ambitious measures to reduce the carbon intensity of its growth, and hopes to turn the climate-change threat into an opportunity by becoming the world leader in green technology and manufacturing.⁵

Unfortunately, none of this changes the fundamental political calculus in Beijing. Climate change will hurt China and the Communist Party a good deal in the future, and there are benefits to developing green technology now, but the costs of taking serious action in the near term remain unacceptably high. Given a choice between paying now or paying later, China's autocrats seem to make the same choice as elected officials in the United States.

Not only are both the United States and China blocked internally from taking action on climate change, these domestic blockages also reinforce each other. At a time of stress in Sino–U.S. relations, proponents of cutting greenhouse gases in both countries cannot be seen as capitulating to the other side. The U.S. Senate has firmly signaled its opposition to any deal that does not include countries such as China. And China—committed to a rhetoric of fairness, developing country solidarity, and nationalism—will not move unless the United States (which has a GDP per capita seven times that of China, emits four times as much carbon per person, and historically has emitted four times as much overall) does as well.⁶

Beyond Intergovernmental Approaches

A global treaty of the kind sought at Copenhagen and Cancun would be the best way to combat climate change. It would ensure participation at the scale needed to solve the problem and limit free riding. Such an approach has worked before; just before embarking on the UNFCCC process, the world created a multilateral regime to reduce ozone depletion. In the landmark 1987 Montreal Protocol, rich countries agreed to phase out ozone-damaging pollutants, poor countries were offered the funding and technology needed to comply, and today the ozone hole over Antarctica is closing while the world is less concerned about life-threatening radiation from the sun.⁷

But the best way is not always available. Multilateral efforts to regulate other environmental concerns such as forests and fisheries have also been stalled since the 1992 Rio Summit. In both these areas, however, rather than simply despairing at the lack of intergovernmental progress, concerned civil-society groups and corporations have created transnational regulations of their own. They have developed voluntary standards for sustainability and monitoring mechanisms to make sure the corporations that adopt the standards follow them. Corporations whose adherence to these standards is confirmed by independent auditing agencies may attach labels to their products to attract green-minded consumers and investors. The largest initiatives in these areas—the Forest

Stewardship Council and the Marine Stewardship Council—each now covers about five percent of the world market in forests and fisheries, respectively.

Tools such as these are part of a rise in new forms of transnational governance. Private regulation, market mechanisms, networks of ostensibly domestic government agencies, multi-stakeholder partnerships, and other governance tools are joining traditional state-to-state international organizations. In the health field, partnerships such as the Global Fund and the Global Alliance for Vaccines and Immunizations, in which public and private actors cooperate to provide medicines to the poor, are now among the most important global institutions. In fields as diverse as economic regulation and counterterrorism, informal networks of government officials—not treaty-based international organizations—are the key actors.

Transnational governance has also exploded in the climate realm. A forthcoming report sponsored by the Leverhulme Trust identifies some 60 examples of “transnational climate governance,” though the actual number is likely much higher. The C-40 network, for instance, brings together 40 of the world’s largest cities to tackle climate change through specific reductions commitments.⁸ The E-8 is a similar network among the world’s largest electricity companies. The Worldwide Fund for Nature runs a Climate Savers program in which some of the world’s largest companies—including IBM, Coca-Cola, Nokia, and others—commit to reducing their emissions. The Investor Network on Climate Risk is a group of investors with some \$9 trillion in assets looking to invest in companies that monitor climate-related risk.⁹ There are also hundreds, if not thousands, of “unilateral” actions by municipal and sub-national governments that seek to “think globally, act locally.”¹⁰

Of course, not all of these programs are effective. Some amount to little, while others simply reinforce good behavior that would have happened anyway. And even if they were all perfect, they remain too ad hoc and limited in scope to dent the massive problem of climate change. Existing programs need to be strengthened and expanded, and more actors need to get involved. The challenge for policymakers, then, is to assemble a large enough coalition to bring these initiatives and others like them to scale.

Toward a Coalition of the Willing

Who would a coalition of the willing for the climate include? If we look only at nation-states, the balance of power between climate leaders (e.g. Europe, small islands) and laggards (e.g. the United States, China) seems tilted to the latter. But a closer look reveals that, even in these states, sub-national governments—states, provinces, cities, towns—often have substantial discretion over policy choices which bear heavily on climate change. California, for example, can set

its own vehicle emissions standards, which other states can choose to adopt. Although not all countries give their sub-units such powers, even more centralized countries grant localities significant discretion over transportation policy, power generation, and other climate priorities.

At this level of analysis, the United States as a whole has been much more proactive than Washington. The West Coast, Midwestern, and Northeastern states have each developed regional climate action plans which call on states to take concrete steps to limit GHGs. Some states have committed to specific reductions—the Northeastern states jointly aim to reduce carbon emissions by 10 percent by 2019, California by 25 percent by 2020. They are joined by the more than 1,000 mayors, representing some 86 million Americans, who have signed the U.S. Conference of Mayors' Climate Protection Agreement, pledging their cities to uphold the Kyoto Protocol voluntarily. A 2008 study estimated that existing sub-national initiatives in the United States, if fully complied with, could stabilize U.S. emissions at 2010 levels by 2020.¹¹

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National governments are not unitary monoliths either. In the United States, the Senate has blocked climate legislation, but the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) has significant authority to regulate GHG emissions without congressional approval. And under President Obama, the federal government, the nation's single largest emitter, has itself become a climate leader. The President has ordered the government, including the military, to reduce its carbon footprint by 28 percent by 2020.¹²

There is similar support from important governmental actors in China. The national Ministry of Environmental Protection lacks the authority of the EPA, but has considerable scope to develop voluntary programs or other pro-climate initiatives. As long as it and other agencies and sub-national units do not cross the interests of powerful economic actors, they have considerable scope to reduce Chinese emissions—for example, by embracing carbon-trading and technology-transfer schemes. Indeed, municipal governments including Beijing and Tianjin have created voluntary carbon exchanges.

When one looks at private actors, there are even more possibilities. Some of the largest firms, including energy giants such as BP, have taken concrete steps to reduce their impact on the climate. Exelon, the largest U.S. utility company, has taken the drastic step of breaking with the International Chamber of Commerce on this issue, so as to disassociate itself from climate laggards. And Walmart—which, if it were a country, would be China's fifth or sixth largest export market—has told its suppliers it will be looking at their emissions. Market

incentives from green consumers and investors can combine with enlightened corporate leadership and the threat of future regulation to push industry toward sustainability. Civil-society groups—and not just the usual environmental ones—are also taking the lead. For example, the Catholic Climate Covenant asks individuals to take the “St. Francis Pledge” to reflect on their impact on the climate and take actions to reduce their personal emissions.

Last, we should not forget the individuals all over the world who want to do their part for the climate they will leave their children. A December 2009 poll commissioned by the World Bank found that most individuals in the 15 countries surveyed were willing to do more and *pay* more to reduce climate change, including 55 percent of Indians, 62 percent of Americans, and 82 percent of Chinese.¹³

How Would It Work?

To make a difference, existing transnational and sub-national climate governance programs are going to have to get much bigger. As mentioned earlier, non-multilateral initiatives in areas such as forests and fisheries have made a difference for the firms and regions which participate, but not across the entire world. Fortunately, a clear majority of the world *wants* to do something about climate change. But how can the various climate leaders—which together represent enormous slices of the global population and economy, wielding substantial political power—coordinate outside a multilateral process that, because they are not necessarily sovereign states, disenfranchises them?

First, top political leaders should use their convening power to summon all willing parties into a global coalition for the climate. Only top political leaders—for example, the heads of state of the G-20—have the standing to convene a coalition vast enough to make an appreciable difference. This recruitment must go beyond simply calling for participation; top political leaders should wield their prestige and influence to press key actors to join. Hosting a business roundtable on climate at the White House, Zhongnanhai, and other executive seats would be a good first step.

Involving pro-climate actors in the developing world will be a particular challenge. Existing programs, such as those cited earlier, are concentrated in wealthy countries because these societies tend to have stronger civil-society groups, a longer experience with voluntary regulation or other innovative governance mechanisms, and more stringent environmental regulations. Because future emissions will come mostly from the developing world (which will surpass the industrialized countries by 2018), this chasm must be broken if the coalition is to succeed.¹⁴

One way to engage the developing world is, perhaps ironically, to link the “bottom-up” approach with the UNFCCC itself. Although the coalition will not be a treaty organization, because it will include many non-sovereign actors without formal standing under international law, it should nevertheless be recognized and endorsed by the world body. This “nested” institutional design would enhance the legitimacy of the coalition and inject some needed dynamism into the multilateral process.

Second, members of the coalition will be expected to reduce emissions by choosing from a range of instruments—some legally binding, some enforceable through “soft” measures such as transparency and market tools, and some merely aspirational. Different tools are appropriate for different kinds of actors, such as:

- *“Mini-lateral” treaties:* Ambitious countries could reach a separate climate deal without laggards. A limited treaty—among, say, the European Union and leading developing countries such as Brazil and India—could help a number of countries commit to substantial reductions. Such a club would be particularly effective if wealthy nations were willing to offer substantial adaptation aid and technology transfers through this mechanism.
- *Unilateral regulation:* A number of governments—such as the European Union and its member states, the Northeastern U.S. states, and California—have already agreed to reduce carbon emissions even without an international legal obligation. Together, these jurisdictions represent a substantial percentage of the world economy and population. The voluntary commitments submitted in the wake of the Copenhagen conference will build on these gains, but more should be done.
- *Voluntary private regulation:* Self-imposed emissions reductions and other pro-climate measures by firms have been minimal so far, thus representing a ripe area for growth. Numerous schemes exist, ranging from totally voluntary programs, such as the EPA’s Energy Star program or the Worldwide Fund for Nature’s Climate Savers, to agreements negotiated between firms and regulators such as the ambitious plans of the United Kingdom and Denmark. Governments can do more to fund and support these programs, either running them themselves or bringing together firms and civil-society groups to create their own programs.
- *Individual commitments:* Countries and firms are not the only ones who hold the key to solving climate change. Individuals’ emissions represent an enormous amount of global emissions, especially in rich countries where per capita consumption of fossil-fuel energy sources is high. Numerous tools exist allowing concerned individuals to calculate their carbon footprints and suggest practical ways to reduce them.¹⁵ Civil-society groups should take the lead in developing and publicizing these tools, potentially with government support.

These commitments could be registered and publicized in a central online clearinghouse. This registry, managed by a competent organization selected by the UNFCCC, could be modeled after a similar database relating to corporate social responsibility commitments run by the UN Global Compact Office. This

registry would provide a public record of commitments, thus allowing coalition members to be held accountable.

Just as there are various commitments members of the coalition could adopt, these commitments come with various enforcement tools to make the commitments credible. Those actors adopting legally binding reductions would of course enforce them through standard law enforcement practices. For softer commitments, a range of enforcement mechanisms would be available—and desirable. Companies could use credible reduction commitments as a powerful tool to attract climate-conscience consumers and investors. Doing so, however, raises the possibility that they would lose these customers and investors if they were found to be cheating on their commitments. Beyond market incentives, institutions found to be in violation of their commitments could be “named and shamed” by civil-society groups, imposing potentially costly reputational sanctions. Civil-society groups should devote more energy to this crucial watchdog role, and governments should provide resources to help independent groups play it.

Third, effective enforcement extends beyond merely punishing violators; carrots are needed as well as sticks. One crucial step would be to make sure that carbon markets around the globe continue to integrate once Kyoto expires. These markets allow governments and companies to outsource reductions to places where they can be done more cheaply, and so are vital to making GHG reductions widespread. Though not without difficulties, carbon markets are increasingly efficient. As the coalition’s actions increase demand for carbon credits, it will be important for actors to be able to buy abatements from a range of markets.

As a further incentive, the climate coalition should also build a range of learning and capacity-building networks for different types of actors. Peer-to-peer networks of firms, regulators, civil-society groups, and individuals could develop and disseminate best practices for reducing emissions, thus making reductions more efficient. A model for such networks already exists in the UN’s Global Compact.¹⁶ Along the same lines, the coalition could organize technology transfer groups similar to the Montreal Protocol’s technical committees, which were instrumental for diffusing ozone-safe technology around the world. These networks would make the coalition a club for innovation in learning, giving coalition members important advantages over climate laggards.

Fourth, coalition members could adopt various methods to pressure climate laggards to reduce emissions and to punish coalition members who break their commitments. Many of these pressures would be indirect. For example, the coalition’s learning networks and technology committees would give laggards incentives to join the coalition. Moreover, by increasing demand for clean energy, climate leaders would drive the development of technologies and

adoption methodologies, making it significantly easier for climate laggards to reduce their future emissions. High standards would also encourage companies benefiting from economies of scale to increase the environmental performance of their products globally, spreading climate-safe technology to laggards automatically. For example, California's high automotive emission standards have induced car manufacturers to sell cleaner cars throughout the United States.¹⁷

There is more to climate governance than the UNFCCC.

Beyond these indirect pressures, the coalition could coordinate its considerable influence to coerce climate laggards into better performance. Many consumers and investors, like the Investor Network on Climate Risk mentioned above, already direct their money to companies with proactive climate policies. These programs should be strengthened and expanded through explicit governmental support. Governments should also exercise their market power directly. Some already do so through the investment of public pension funds and through government procurement policies. For example, the Institutional Investors Group on Climate Change, a consortium of European pension funds and other large institutions representing some €4 trillion, has committed itself to climate-friendly investments. These efforts should be increased.

Targeted sanctions against climate laggards would be an even more forceful action. The European Union is considering a series of special tariffs on goods from laggard economies, and similar rules have been proposed by U.S. legislators. Although it remains uncertain how such rules would interact with global trade laws, it seems likely such “carbon tariffs” would be allowed as long as they were applied in a non-discriminatory fashion.¹⁸ Other countries should follow suit, and make these sanctions as effective as possible by discriminating on a sub-national basis—e.g. on a regional or even firm level—to reward leaders and punish laggards. Targeting sanctions as specifically as possible would also make these pressure tactics more fair and minimize trade distortions.

Thinking Beyond the State

It is now clear that the multilateral approach, for all its strengths, can be held hostage by a few influential actors in just a few powerful countries. At least for now, the domestic politics of the United States and China—to say nothing of the rest of the world—form an insurmountable barrier to a global treaty on emissions reductions.

Given this stalemate, policymakers and civil-society advocates must recognize that there is more to climate governance than the UNFCCC. Across the

world—including in the G-2—counties, regions, cities, firms, government agencies, civil-society groups, and individuals are taking concrete steps toward a safer climate. Political leaders concerned with the climate should create a global coalition of the willing to direct their prestige and resources to these initiatives, expand their scope, and create others like them. In particular, the European Union, which has been unable to shift the G-2 through diplomatic

A coalition of the willing might even rekindle the multilateral process itself.

pressure, will need to take the lead in bringing non-multilateral approaches to a global scale if it is to realize its aspiration to become the world's "environmental superpower."

To be sure, a global coalition of the willing is a second-best alternative to a multilateral treaty. It allows laggards to free ride on the sacrifices of leaders, and there is no guarantee it would attain the scale of reductions necessary to keep climate change within safe levels. It has never even been tried before. But we must not

make the best the enemy of the good.

In the end, the greatest effect of a coalition of the willing for the climate might even be its potential to rekindle the multilateral process itself. By spurring the development of green technology and mitigation techniques, leaders would change the cost-benefit analysis that laggards face today. By targeting carrots and sticks at leaders and laggards, respectively, the coalition would strengthen existing constituencies for climate regulation, while also building new ones. By demonstrating that saving the climate and enhancing prosperity are not incompatible, the coalition would offer vivid evidence of the feasibility of change. In these ways, the coalition might unclog the very stalemate that makes it necessary.

Notes

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