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POLS xxxx

Introduction to International Relations: Contemporary Global Issues

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- 1. There is growing consensus that the world will soon face serious repercussions from climate change if significant changes are not enacted. Can states find consensus on how to fight climate change? What are the challenges in finding solutions? What do the theories of IR tell us about this issue?**

Climate change has become one of the most pressing global issues today. It is not only a scientific problem but also a complex political one since its effects will impact the states' social and political functioning. To mitigate the consequences of climate change, states need to collectively agree on certain fronts regardless of their personal gains. However, this might not be an easy step to take. This essay argues that while states are coming together to acknowledge the occurrence of climate change, their approaches to solve the problem will hugely depend on the perspectives states hold: whether they believe in cooperation or reject it, how much faith they have in institutions, and what the elites in the states think. This article also argues that when the interests of states intersect at a common point, where the individual costs are not too high, a consensus is plausible.

This argument shall be further elaborated by utilizing three major theories of International Relations (IR), namely Realism, Liberalism and Constructivism. This essay unfolds in three sections: first, the issue of consensus and challenges will be responded to through the Realist lens followed by an examination of liberalism and finally, an analysis of the constructivist perspective.

1. Realist perspective

According to realism, states pursue two major goals: survival and power. If states see it through the realist lens, then climate change is a potential security threat since it shall challenge power and survival of states and thus, it becomes imperative to pursue policies to counter its effects. Moreover, if entire or parts of states submerge under water, states will lose land, thus disturbing the status quo of some states and thus in order to maintain their survival and gain power, states

will seek to expand out by controlling more land and resources, leading to a potential conflict between states for the limited resources. Balance of power shall also change as some states might almost disappear, especially low-lying areas such as Bangladesh and most Pacific Islands.

Consensus building in realism has bleak chances. States choose to act in the way that furthers their personal interests in security, survival and power. Apart from that, climate change might not be a major concern for realists since comparatively, military and economic power matter more to them, thereby making a consensus on solutions harder. However, as structural realism points out at the importance of a hegemon in the international system, although there are debates about the current order being unipolar or multipolar, still the US plays a leading role. (Waltz 1979) So, even in the case of climate change, if the US plays a positive role and leads other states into an agreement, a consensus could be possible. However, the US itself withdrew from the Kyoto Protocol in 2001 and Paris Agreement under President Trump's leadership in 2017.

Nonetheless, as realists believe that the international order is anarchic, it is challenging to monitor the execution of any agreement made by states. In other words, the absence of a higher authority over states means that there is no regulating body to keep a check on the implementation of the policies. Second, states being the central actors, realists do not favour any collaboration with Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs), Transnational Companies (TNCs), private firms or even individuals for purposes like clean energy and technology for sustainable development. Third, realism assumes that states are rational actors and that they pursue cost-benefit analysis. However, states sometimes tend to show irrational behavior through ways where costs exceed benefits (Grieco et al 2015, 73). If current trends of lack of sufficient action continue, costs of states are certain to escalate in terms of greater number of problems such as poverty, migration crisis and rise of other social and political challenges which shall undermine human as well as national security (Klepp 2017). Apart from that, the idea of relative gains versus absolute gains means any compromise with economic development or industrialization would imply states losing out relative to others. This could also limit states from forming alliances.

2. **Liberalist perspective**

Finding a consensus to fight climate change is the most likely in case of liberalism since it deems cooperation, interdependence and the role of institutions to be important. Conspicuously, be it international institutions like the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) or Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) or any treaties and agreements made between countries such as Kyoto Protocol and Conferences Of the Parties (COP) 21, institutions are pivotal not only in formulating and implementing policies to fight climate change but also in fostering cooperation. By increasing the flow of transparency and trust, institutions promote functionalism, or more efficient way of cooperation. (Grieco et al 2015, 84) Further, agreements oblige states to abide by them. These agreements are not only binding on small powers but also on the bigger ones since rules and institutions provide them with a commitment to follow them and also create influence through their leadership. Second, the concept of 'joint gains' instead of 'relative gains' means that countries can unite to cooperate for common good. Third, liberalism promotes democracy and since democracies value individual rights more, they are more likely to find solutions to climate change. Liberalism also highlights cooperation with transnational environmental groups such as Greenpeace to find solutions.

On the other hand though, not all states might benefit from cooperation. This is to say that the disparities between developed and developing countries might come into play since any uniform rules might disbenefit developing states. This is the reason that the idea of "common but differentiated responsibility" was promulgated by the Kyoto Protocol where developing countries do not bear the same responsibility to take measures as do developed ones (Napoli 2012, 184).

3. **Constructivist perspective**

Constructivism places much weight on ideas, beliefs, and identities as shaping international relations. At the international level, states and the global civil society both matter. The latter is made up of individuals whose personal beliefs, ideas and identities shape their interests. Here,

the ideas of the elites carry importance. Therefore, what the leaders of a state think influences how it will act. This means that if the President of the most powerful state in the world and also one of the top carbon emitters, the United States of America, Donald Trump refuses to recognize the issue of climate change, he conspicuously sends the message that the issue is not a priority for the state. Similarly, the Prime Minister of India, in a formal address acknowledged that climate change was not happening, but it was the people who were becoming less tolerant of extreme weathers. These beliefs also shape their states' policies.

For consensus to build, constructivists propound deploying interaction, communication, networking, and process. These factors can then make it easy for states to negotiate and bargain on common issues like climate change. While realism believes in independence and liberalism does focus on interdependence, constructivism facilitates cooperation. Not only this, concepts like sustainable development, ecological integrity and climate action are changing the norms and when states evolve through normative change, it can bring significant social and political changes. So, one solution to fighting climate change is through breaking norms and bringing new ones.

Nonetheless, the personalities or identities of states such as developing or developed influence the strategic culture in the way they act. So, for instance, China and the US, both are the top carbon emitters but since they have different historical background and economic trajectories, they will act differently towards the issue. While US bears a large responsibility to cut down on the emissions, China refuses to accept the same amount of onus (Johnston 1995 in Grieco et al).

An examination of three prominent theories of international relations reflects how each theory has varying assumptions and propositions and hence they inform a state's behaviour differently. In the case of consensus towards climate change, the theories play a significant role in bringing states to the negotiating table. At the same time, each theory also has its own limitations which act as a challenge to the consensus building. However, I contend that constructivism is the most relevant theory in finding solution to how to fight climate change since it starts at the micro level by emphasising on identities influencing the ideas and beliefs of individuals, states and finally the international system. Therefore, when states recognize the problem, then are politically

willing to act on it and in the process, adopt normative change, will inform solutions to tackling the issue. Climate change is a collective action problem, where each state acts in its own interests ignoring the collective gains (Napoli 2012, 185). This is also called the Tragedy of the Commons.

I also agree that institutions have a vital role in this but empirical cases of failure of the Kyoto Protocol of 1997 and the Paris Agreement or COP 21 say it otherwise. As Napoli points out in his article, Kyoto Protocol failed majorly it being a collective action problem and states acting in their own independent interests and the concept of Prisoner's Dilemma where states should cooperate but end up not cooperating because of personal interests. (Napoli 2012)

Conclusion

The decisions and policies a state makes stem from its core interests. The IR theories help us understand these interests at the individual, state and international level. So, even in the case of climate change, how states respond to the issue greatly depends on whether it is seen through the realist, liberalist or constructivist lens. And since the interests of different states vary, they may clash at many levels, thus limiting the chance of a collective agreement. So, as realism does not promote cooperation and liberalism and constructivism contrarily do, the chances of a consensus can fall. However, when realists securitize climate change, liberals forge cooperation through institutions and constructivists spread the norm of sustainable development, this shall create a point of intersection of interests and it is at this point that a consensus among states is possible. However, equally important is committing to the agreement, monitoring its implementation and punishing the lawbreaker for a robust mechanism to fight climate change.

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