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Palgrave Macmillan
2018-06

Kopra , S-K 2018 , China, Great Power Management, and Climate Change : Negotiating Great Power Climate Responsibility in the UN . in T B Knudsen & C Navari (eds) , International Organization in the Anarchical Society : the Institutional Structure of World Order . Palgrave Macmillan , Cham , pp. 149-173 . https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-71622-0_7

<http://hdl.handle.net/10138/315197>

https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-71622-0_7

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China, great power management and climate change: Negotiating great power climate responsibility in the UN

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In: Tonny Brems Knudsen & Cornelia Navari (eds.), *International Organization in the Anarchical Society. The Institutional Structure of World Order*, 149–173. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.

In this chapter, I explore the notion of great power responsibility in the context of international climate politics. I do not discuss climate responsibility from a moral or legal theory point of view; on the contrary, I examine the way in which notions of climate responsibility are negotiated by agents, especially great powers, in secondary institutions (i.e., international organisations and regimes). I argue that climate responsibility constitutes an international norm that began to evolve in the late 1960s, was institutionalised in the 1990s, and now approaches the stage of assimilation. Its development has been shaped by many international events, agents, and political struggles involving discourses of responsibility (cf. Falkner 2012; Falkner and Buzan 2017). However, primary institutions of great power management and sovereignty, notably the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC), have framed the evolution of climate responsibility as well. In particular, I demonstrate that the rise of China to great power status has significantly influenced the historical process of the constitution and regulation of climate responsibility. I argue that, in contrast to its traditionally reluctant role in international climate negotiations, China recently began to promote climate responsibility as an attribute of great power responsibility. China's changing notions of responsibility reflect the historic transformation of the country's values, identities, and interests, all of which are constrained by the interests of other international agents.

In the English School (ES), the most advanced theoretical account of change in primary institutions has been provided by Tonny Brems Knudsen, whose “pre-theory of fundamental institutional change” points out that international organizations are central to the “reproduction and working [of primary institutions], and therefore also to changes in their working” (Knudsen 2013, 18; see also Navari 2016). Knudsen's model, however, does not theorise the way in which agents shape processes of institutional change and hence cannot thoroughly explain the evolution of the mentioned international practices and norms (but see Knudsen 2016, 103). In response, I suggest that we pay attention to the role of agency in processes of institutional change (cf. Navari in this volume; Spandler 2015). In addition to state agency, subnational and non-state actors participate in the institutionalisation processes of secondary institutions in many ways and are therefore important subjects of change (Clark 2007; Epstein 2008; Falkner 2012). In this chapter, however, I deliberately focus on state agency, especially the agency of great powers, whose role is decisive in the evolution of international practices. In short, powerful agents seek to advance international rules that serve their (domestic) interests and values (Clark 2011; Simpson 2004).

My argument proceeds as follows. First, I outline the relationship between primary and secondary institutions and theorising the role of the UNFCCC in the construction of climate responsibility. Second, I look at China's rise and its implication for ideas of great power responsibility. My focus is on responsibility as a rule of practice of great power management: I discuss what kind of requirements China must fulfil to become an accepted member of the “great power club” and how China has begun to perceive climate responsibility as an important attribute of its growing great power responsibility. Lastly, I explore the generation and evolution of international norm of climate responsibility. I am especially

interested in how the UNFCCC has historically defined and distributed general and special responsibilities and how great power management and sovereignty have shaped these processes. In addition, I pay particular attention to China's contribution to the process.

Secondary institutions, responsibility, and institutional change

Inspired by Knudsen (2013; 2016), Navari (2016), Friedner Parrat (2014), and Spandler (2015), I define *secondary institutions* as stable, goal-oriented international bodies intentionally designed by international actors to manage and regulate common problems in specific areas of pragmatic issues and to govern cooperation according to collectively settled norms and rules, whether legally codified or not. Secondary institutions include international organisations and regimes, as well as international rules that have incrementally evolved into established practices (cf. Keohane 1989, 3–4). Although secondary institutions always mirror power politics and the shared values of international society during a particular era, that function does not mean that they are merely arenas for international power struggles. Since secondary institutions are deliberately established to respond to global problems, states are usually willing to compromise in such institutions in order to agree on viable solutions. Put differently, states' involvement in secondary institutions is motivated not only by self-interested calculations, but also by a belief that participating is the right thing to do. At the same time, participation in international organizations and regimes is not a "resolution to perform any particular substantive action" (Oakeshott 1975, 58). As such, though no direct link between participation in secondary institutions and state behaviour exists, a state's identity and interests influence the kind of organisations in which the state will take part, as well as what kind of role it is willing or capable to take within those organisations.

As Knudsen (2013, 34) points out, secondary institutions are the "most important frameworks for the reproduction and change of fundamental institutions, and thus for the maintenance and development of international order and justice". Therefore, they constitute the primary platform of international politics of responsibility, chiefly by offering an important forum in which states and non-state actors can negotiate the definition, distribution, and implementation of rights and responsibilities, as well as monitor their fulfilment. Nevertheless, those negotiations are shaped and constrained by primary institutions. Since international responsibilities are neither given nor static, participants in secondary institutions themselves are the ones who negotiate the responsibilities of all participants, the ethical grounds upon which they are distributed among participants, and the mechanisms through which they are implemented and monitored. Although some responsibilities are formulated as legal obligations in international treaties, most state responsibilities are merely uncodified and operate as informal norms.

I propose that secondary institutions, and especially their constitutive documents, are the key forums for obtaining empirical data about how primary institutions sustain and organise modern international society. They connect primary institutions and everyday politics exercised by state and non-state agents in a bilateral relationship. For one, secondary institutions anchor primary institutions in the day-to-day workings of international relations. In that sense, I concur with Barry Buzan (2004a; 2014) and Kal Holsti (2004) that secondary institutions are largely empirical manifestations of primary institutions. However, that view is somewhat oversimplified, for it bypasses agency and interests in general and those of great powers in particular. That oversimplification leads to my second point—namely, that secondary institutions also anchor changes in everyday politics in primary institutions. Via secondary institutions, the domestic practices of powerful states and, moreover, power shifts in international relations can induce change in primary institutions. For example, China's rise might not only shape day-to-day politics of secondary institutions, but also gradually transform the constitutive principles of primary institutions.

Moreover, non-state actors can shape existing primary institutions and advance the generation of new ones, as demonstrated by the cases of international environmental and human rights, via their participation in secondary institutions. Secondary institutions therefore function as links between international society and world society (Buzan 2004a; Clark 2007; Williams 2014).

Clearly, climate responsibility relates to the interplay between global and domestic practices. Without the international sphere, states would not know what *climate responsibility* means, while without the national and local spheres, operationalising the concept would be impossible. Climate responsibility cannot be located in any international organisation, though many secondary institutions exist in which participants can negotiate climate responsibility or its dimensions. At the same time, the UNFCCC plays a more central role in the construction of climate responsibility than any other secondary institution. It assembles state and non-state actors, offers a “common reference-point” (Sending and Neumann 2011, 236) for climate responsibility, and both coordinates and enables international climate practices. It also establishes the infrastructure for derivative sub-practices, including those of climate finance and flexible market mechanisms. The UNFCCC, however, is not a standalone actor and does not have much, if any, power as such. Thus, the power relations among participants and other international practices shape the UNFCCC, and power shifts in the UNFCCC, in turn, can shape the constitutive principles of climate responsibility over time. Yet, it should also be noted that climate responsibility does not materialise from the global framework of the UNFCCC. On the contrary, it has to be implemented as national policy and acted upon at the grassroots level.

Practices of great power responsibility

Instead of offering a clear-cut definition of *great powers*,¹ ES literature describes several important requirements that a state need to fulfil in order to be and be seen as a great power (e.g., Bull 2002 [1977]; Buzan 2004b; Cui and Buzan 2016; Hurrell 2007; Jackson 2000; Jones 2014; Simpson 2004; Wheeler 2000; Wight 1999 [1946]). In short, the ES maintains that even if a state reaches a certain level of material capacity and has a certain national identity, it does not automatically become a great power, but instead needs to be recognised and accepted by other recognised great powers. In particular, a great power has to be constituted as an accepted member of a so-called “great power club”, the qualifications for which change over time—for, due to anarchical nature of international society, rights and responsibilities of great powers cannot be formalised or made fully explicit (Bull 2002 [1977], 221).

Since the Congress of Vienna (1814–15), at which Austria, France, Great Britain, Prussia, and Russia established the first great power club in ES terms as a so-termed “Holy Alliance”, responsibility has constituted the key ideological basis for the joint rule of great powers (Simpson 2004, chap. 4; Clark 2011, chap. 4). At the Congress of Vienna, the five great powers were “conscious of themselves as constituting an institution which was separate from other states and in possession of special responsibilities as well as rights vis-à-vis international society” (Brown 2004, 7). According to F. R. Bridge and R. Bullen, that status formed an implicit social contract between great powers and smaller states, for “just as the great powers claimed special rights for themselves, so the small states claimed that the great had special responsibilities for their well-being” (quoted in Bukovansky et al. 2012, 27). However, that contract was not written in international law, meaning that great power management constituted an informal practice in those days. Later, the League of Nations also gave special status to

¹ However, see Gerry Simpson’s (2004, 68) definition of *legalised hegemony*, as well as Ian Clark’s (2011, 4) definition of *hegemony*.

great powers but did not form an “institutional/ideological unity” similar to the Concert of Europe (Brown 2004, 8).

In 1933, Great Britain, France, Germany, and Italy signed the Four Power Pact, which declared them to be “conscious of the[ir] special responsibilities” (Bukovansky et al. 2012, 29). In 1943, in reference to Great Britain, the Soviet Union, and the United States, British Foreign Secretary Anthony Eden insisted that “special responsibilities do rest on our three powers” (quoted in Bukovansky et al. 2012, 29). In 1944, he moreover proposed the formalisation of the special responsibilities of great powers by establishing a new world organisation that would “make it possible for them [the Four Powers] to carry out the responsibilities which they will have agreed to undertake” and therefore that “they must be given . . . a special position in the organisation” (quoted in Bukovansky et al. 2012, 30). In the final months of World War II, when “everyone” was talking about responsibility (Bukovansky et al. 2012, 29–30), US President Franklin D. Roosevelt (1945) wrote, “we have learned in the agony of war that great power involves great responsibility”, and President Harry S. Truman (1945) told the US Congress—and reiterated it at the UN General Assembly in San Francisco in April 1945—that

While these great states have a special responsibility to enforce the peace, their responsibility is based upon the obligations resting upon all states, large and small, not to use force in international relations except in the defense of law. The responsibility of the great states is to serve and not to dominate the world.

In its contemporary form, the great power club was institutionalised by the establishment of the UN Security Council in 1945 (Simpson 2004, chap. 6). Great powers—the United States, the United Soviet States of Russia, Great Britain, France, and the Republic of China—were appointed special responsibilities under the Charter of the United Nations (Article 24), which formalised their “primary responsibility for the maintenance of international peace and security”.² That responsibility was based largely on great powers’ material capabilities, because, according to British Foreign Secretary Eden, “the more power and responsibility can be made corresponding, the more likely it is that the machinery will be able to fulfil its functions” (quoted in Bukovansky et al. 2012, 31). However, when the Cold War broke out soon after the foundation of the United Nations, no collective understanding of the practical responsibilities of great powers had been established. During the Cold War, UN Security Council membership represented predominantly symbolic status that indicated neither power nor responsibility, as illustrated by the Republic of China’s (Taiwan) maintenance of its status as a permanent member of the UN Security Council for 20 years after its regime’s defeat on mainland China (Brown 2004, 9). In Western international society, the United States took on a “new position of world responsibility” and became the “principal protector of the free world” (Truman 1948). Such responsibility, however, was not tied to the collective responsibility of the great powers but the global capabilities of the United States as a singular hegemonic actor (Brown 2004, 11–13; Clark 2011, chap. 6; Ikenberry 2009, 76–79).

After the end of the Cold War, the idea of great power responsibility was resurrected. In particular, Gareth Evans’s (1990) conception of good international citizenship, as well as Francis M. Deng and colleagues’ (1996) conception of sovereignty as responsibility, generated a wider debate over ethics and foreign policy in the late 1980s and early 1990s. When human rights emerged as a new “standard of civilization” (Donnelly 1998), it situated humanitarian intervention and “responsibility to protect” as key attributes of

² Although China was not regarded as a great power in those times, it acquired a permanent seat in the UN Security Council mostly due to its large population and status as a key representative of developing countries.

great power responsibility (e.g. Wheeler 2000). At the same time, ideas of environmental security also began to develop as a common approach to international security. The UN Security Council (1992) noted that “non-military sources of instability in the economic, social, humanitarian and ecological fields have become threats to peace and security”. In the mid-2000s, many “securitizing moves” to promote climate change mitigation were taken (Trombetta 2008, 594–595), and since then, the relationship between climate change and violent conflicts has been studied widely (e.g., Lee 2009; Mazo 2010; Welzer 2012). Those developments generated debate about the UN Security Council’s role in mitigating climate change, which, if seen as a threat to international peace and security, can and should be added to the Council’s agenda. In 2007, the Council held the first-ever debate on the relationship of climate change, energy, and security, although some members, including China, doubted whether the Council was an appropriate forum for the discussion (United Nations 2007). Four years later, the UN Security Council (2011) adopted its first-ever statement on climate change that expressed concerns over the phenomenon’s possible security impacts. In 2013, the Security Council held informal talks on climate change but failed to define it as an international security threat due to resistance from China and Russia (Krause–Jackson 2013). Even though the Council has still not made any concrete decisions on climate change, the fact that it has discussed climate security has already upgraded the status of climate change on the global political agenda. That development can be regarded as a sign that climate responsibility is becoming an attribute of great power responsibility.

Since the beginning of reform era in the late 1970s, China has experienced a profound change in identity from an isolated communist state to an emerging great power, which has dramatically changed its notions of state responsibility and its role in international society (Buzan 2010; Chen 2009; Foot 2001; Jin 2011; Jones 2014; Scott 2010; Xia 2001; Yeophantong 2013). Though a member of the Security Council, only after the end of the Cold War did international society begin to regard China as a new potential great power. On the one hand, states called for China’s integration into international society (Zheng 1999, 126–128); on the other, theories of a Chinese threat started to take shape after the incident at Tiananmen Square in 1989 as the United States, Japan, and Taiwan speculated whether China was beginning to pose a threat to international society (Deng 2006). As China’s economic wealth and international status increased significantly during the 1990s, Chinese intellectuals began to debate the country’s international role and other countries’ expectations of the nation in that role (Shambaugh 2013; Xia 2001). At the same time, the Western world began to worry whether China would comply with established international norms, especially those regarding democracy and human rights (cf. Buzan 2010; Shambaugh 2013). When human rights began setting criteria for membership in international society, China ended up signing two major international human rights conventions in the late 1990s in order to polish its international image and legitimise its international status (Foot 2001; Suzuki 2008). Notably, the debate over China’s global responsibility heated up when US Deputy Secretary of State Robert B. Zoellick introduced the concept of being a responsible stakeholder to international politics in 2005 (Zoellick 2005; cf. Commission of the European Communities 2006) and when China surpassed the United States as the largest carbon dioxide emitter in the world in 2006.

Since no formal criteria of great power responsibility exist, neither do any clear rules that China has to follow in order to be and be recognised as a great power. Due to its hegemonic status in the post-World War II era, the United States has succeeded to formulate contemporary social rules of the great power club almost entirely by itself (Clark 2011). Since Zoellick’s speech in 2005, the United States has maintained responsibility as the central ruler of the great power club (Zoellick 2005; Donilon 2012; Steinberg 2009; White House 2009). By contrast, China’s “irresponsibility” can thus be viewed as the chief reason that it has not been treated as a social equal or legitimate member of the club (Patrick 2010;

Suzuki 2008), which has made China a “frustrated great power” that seeks social recognition in all international forums (Suzuki 2008). Although China did not officially comment upon Zoellick’s speech, it has since emphasised its peaceful development strategy and persistently portrayed itself as a responsible stakeholder in international politics. In particular, China has taken an active role in the United Nations and heightened its participation in UN peacekeeping operations (Foot 2014; Suzuki 2008). Since Chinese President Xi Jinping took office in March 2013, however, China has begun to define and implement its so-called “grand strategy” in a more determinate way than ever before. Notably, it has started to construct and promote its own concepts and ideas, including “harmonious world” (和谐世界), “the China dream” (中国梦), “the Asia-Pacific dream” (亚太梦), “the new type of major country relationship” (新型大国关系), and “the new type of international relations” (新型国际关系), all as means to reform international society in a “responsible manner” so that international norms will become “less Westernized” and better accommodate Chinese values and interests (cf. Buzan 2010, 29–33). In that way, China could come to considerably shape the rules of the great power club over time.

Moreover, China increasingly identifies itself as a great power in world politics. In June 2013, Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi delivered a rare comprehensive statement of China’s foreign policy titled “Exploring the Path of Major-Country Diplomacy with Chinese Characteristics” (Wang 2013), and in November 2014, President Xi presented the conception of “major-country diplomacy with Chinese characteristics” at a high-level foreign policy conference in Beijing (Xinhua 2014). Due to its autocratic governance system and strong doctrine of sovereignty, however, China has not fully supported human rights and other standards of civilization that the United States promotes as attributes of great power responsibility. China’s conception of the new type of great power relationship focuses above all on “core interests”, largely in order to persuade the United States to respect China’s sphere of interest in East Asia. By contrast, China does not advance common understandings and values that could be translated into new notions of great power responsibility in the near future, largely because, despite its rising status, China continues to also emphasise itself as a developing country in world politics. Accordingly, it regards its national responsibility to promote its domestic core interests such as economic development as its primary responsibility on the global stage.

International climate politics offers an interesting case of China’s emerging notions of great power responsibility, particularly because China has increasingly identified itself a great power with great responsibilities and formulated ambitious climate policies to live up to those responsibilities. At the same time, the Chinese government often refers to the size of the country when speaking on the world stage about its global responsibilities. As President Xi (2015a) has described that dynamic, “Being a big country means shouldering greater responsibilities for regional and world peace and development, as opposed to seeking greater monopoly over regional and world affairs”. However, the Chinese concept of 负责任大国 could also be translated as “responsible great power”, not a “responsible big country”. In recent years, China has explicitly called itself a major power in international negotiations on climate policy. In September 2014, Special Envoy Zhang Gaoli declared at the UN Climate Summit that “responding to climate change is what China needs to do to achieve sustainable development at home as well as to fulfil its due international obligation as a responsible major country” (Zhang 2014). Moreover, at the 2014 APEC Forum, President Xi (2014) announced that as “its overall national strength grows, China will be both capable and willing to provide more public goods for the Asia-Pacific and the world”. Although he did not specify what he meant by “public goods”, but clean air is a typical example of goods that everyone can consume without decreasing in availability to others. Indeed, a few days later, President Xi and US President Barack Obama issued their historic joint statement, in which China announced that

it would halt the growth of its carbon emissions by 2030 (White House 2014). The statement sent a strong signal to international society that both the United States and China acknowledged their responsibility to lead international efforts to tackle climate change. On the one hand, it seems China has indeed made key climate commitments in reference to its great power status. Notably, China has published all of the important climate policies outlined in joint statements with the United States (White House 2014, 2015, 2016a, 2016b). In accordance with its “international responsibilities and obligations as a new type of major country”, China has also deepened its South–South cooperation and pledged to offer more financial and technological assistance to developing countries in order to aid them in meeting their own climate objectives (*China Daily* 2016a). On the other hand, China continues to emphasise its status as a developing country and the principle of development first. As a case in point, China’s “Intended Nationally Determined Contribution to the UNFFCC” published in June 2015 described China as a developing country and made no reference to any great power responsibility.

By all accounts, China played an influential role at the 2015 UN Climate Change Conference in Paris. For the first time ever, China’s head of state, not its premier, participated in climate negotiations and presented China as both a responsible stakeholder and determined facilitator of international climate agreement. After the Paris conference, Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Hong Lei (2015) praised “China’s sense of responsibility as a major country in tackling climate change.” Notably, China was among the first countries to ratify the Paris Agreement in September 2016, which certainly accelerated the willingness of other states to ratify as well. However, in early November 2016, only a few days after the Paris Agreement entered into force, climate sceptic Donald Trump was elected US president, which has continued to raise global concern over the US commitment to the pact. The Trump administration’s reluctance to shoulder climate responsibility could elevate China to a new role of leadership in international climate politics. Indeed, it seems that China might be ready to take that position, for after Trump’s election, the Chinese climate delegation deputy head convinced the world that China would not “change its stance on climate change” despite the potential US withdrawal from the Paris Agreement (*China Daily* 2016b). Moreover, at the World Economic Forum in Davos, President Xi stressed that “all signatories should stick to it [the Paris Agreement] instead of walking away from it as this is a responsibility we must assume for future generations” (World Economic Forum 2017). In his speech at the UN Office in Geneva, President Xi (2017) also sent a strong signal to the world and to President Trump in particular about China’s firm commitment to tackle climate change. In contrast to other attributes of great power responsibility, including norms related to humanitarian intervention that counter the basic values of the party–state (Foot 2001, 17–18), climate responsibility does not hamper China’s core national interests. Conversely, it might support them, if not also increase the legitimacy of the party–state by reducing air pollution, improving energy security, enhancing the state’s international image, and promoting low-carbon economic growth.

Great power management and the institutionalisation of climate responsibility

International practices and norms neither emerge from thin air nor derive from any single treaty. Although the 1992 Rio Conference marked an important event for the institutionalisation of environmental norms, it would be mistaken to assume that the norm of climate responsibility began to evolve there. Conversely, resolutions made by the UN Conference on the Human Environment (UNCHE) in Stockholm in 1972 have largely guided how *climate change* has been defined, what kind of responses have been deemed appropriate, who have been critical actors, and how global responsibilities have been allocated, among other issues. At the UNCHE, sovereignty was non-negotiable, though environmentalists had expressed their concern over the clash of sovereignty and global environmental

problems since the late 1960s. As a result, sovereignty formed the foundation of the definition of *state environmental responsibility*. At the same time, sovereign rights were constrained by a state-centric “no harm” principle. Although noteworthy that the United States played a role as leader in the early stages of international environmental politics (Falkner 2005, 590), it is similarly worth noting that China, under the leadership of Mao Zedong, made substantial contributions to paragraphs 2, 4, and 5 of the Stockholm Declaration (Greenfield 1979; Sohn 1973). Those paragraphs not only linked the quality of the environment with human well-being and economic development, thereby outlining the foundations for the concept of sustainable development, but also managed to express all governments’ general legal obligation to protect the environment. As Sohn (1973, 440) points out, it was a “striking accomplishment” given that similar suggestions for solidarist general responsibilities of governments had been made several times in the early drafting phases to no effect.

The scientific consensus on climate change emerged during the 1970s and 1980s. In the late 1980s and early 1990s, a series of non- and intergovernmental conferences focussing on the scientific and political dimensions of climate change were sponsored by the United Nations and other inter- and non-governmental organisations. In 1992, the UN Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED) in Rio de Janeiro confirmed several emerging environmental norms of international society: the mentioned “no harm” principle (Principle 2), the precautionary principle (Principle 15), the polluter pays principle (PPP) (Principle 16), the common but differentiated responsibilities (CBDR) (Principle 7), and the principles of sustainable development (Principles 1, 4, 5, 6, and 8). It also formulated the UNFCCC with the aim to establish a legal framework to hold certain parties liable for climate-related harm and, in turn, to facilitate effective solutions for tackling climate change. Today, the UNFCCC remains the most important secondary institution related to climate change. Although negotiated rapidly—in about two years—which indicates a universal concern over and willingness to tackle climate change, the speed of the process also illustrates that the UNFCCC was not perceived as a powerful regime that would somehow limit sovereignty and the national interests of states. Therefore, it is unsurprising that whereas the UNFCCC enjoys the nearly universal participation of international society, later negotiations on the Kyoto Protocol of 1998 and the post-Kyoto Protocol turned out to be far more complicated and slower negotiation processes.

Sovereignty has been the central primary institution to constrain efforts to construct common understandings of climate responsibility in the UNFCCC. It has prevented international society from advancing solidarist notions of the environmental responsibilities of states and from establishing liability rules about environmental harm. The UNFCCC defined *climate responsibility* in accordance with Rio Principles 2 and 7; it underscored sovereignty and the CBDR principle, both of which were preconditions for reaching an international agreement with China and other developing countries. CBDR acknowledges that developed and developing countries cannot be subjected to the same standards, but that climate responsibility has to be tied to their national circumstances and capacities. Despite its relevance to climate change, the PPP was not written into the UNFCCC, for, on the one hand, developed countries were concerned about the costs of the PPP. On the other, developing countries preferred that CBDR emphasised historical responsibility, whereas PPP would have also made poor polluters pay (Bukovansky et al. 2012, 128).

It has been difficult to reach consensus on the special climate responsibilities of developed countries. Debate within the UNFCCC framework has been characterised by two tensions. The first concerns the scope of the emissions reduction commitments of the United States and other industrialised countries. At the UNCED, though states acknowledged the necessity of emissions cuts, the United States refused to

accept an emissions reduction target. Guided by the CBDR principle, the UNFCCC thus stated that developed countries have to take the ‘lead in combating climate change and the adverse effects thereof’, though it failed to set any binding requirements for them. Since the United States had ratified the UNFCCC in 1992, it accepted the CBDR principle, at least in spirit. Later, the Kyoto Protocol operationalised the CBDR principle by committing developed country members to reduce greenhouse gas emissions, and US President Bill Clinton signed the agreement in 1998. However, his successor, President George W. Bush, refused to ratify it because he did not want to sacrifice economic growth. In particular, he found the Kyoto Protocol to be unfair because it did not assign special responsibilities to major developing emitters such as China and India (Bush 2001; 2002). Evidently, US withdrawal from the Kyoto process ended its role as leader in international environmental politics and weakened the scope of climate responsibility norms in international society. The second tension concerns developed countries’ special responsibility to support the capacity of developing countries to mitigate and adapt to climate change, as stated in the CBDR principle. Since the assistance obligation was not called aid but a “responsibility”, it marked a “significant step in the development of normative international relations” based on the “fact that everyone, including developed countries, will benefit from such transfers which cannot therefore be regarded as charity” (Jackson 1996, 185–186). Over the years, states have created diverse institutional arrangements to coordinate and implement the special assistance responsibility; however, no real progress in climate finance has been made.

Prior to the UNCED, China launched a campaign to elevate itself to the unofficial position of leader of developing states in international climate negotiations. In 1991, it organised the Beijing Ministerial Conference on Environment and Development, which issued the Beijing Declaration that included all of the objectives of China’s environmental diplomacy: sovereignty, opposition to interference in internal affairs, the responsibility of developed countries, the development rights of developing countries, foreign aid, and technology transfer. At the UNCED, China strictly opposed the proposition that climate protection would be a general responsibility of all states. For China, the UNFCCC was indeed a great diplomatic success; all of its objectives had been incorporated into the regime, and no responsibility was targeted to China or other developing countries. Indeed, China fulfilled its international responsibility by attending the conference and by ratifying the UNFCCC, even though until the 2007 UN Climate Change Conference in Bali, it refused to shoulder any responsibility for climate change mitigation and urged developed countries to take full responsibility for historical reasons. At Bali, China committed to implement “measurable, reportable and verifiable” nationally appropriate mitigation actions. Its commitment was a remarkable step in the post-Kyoto climate negotiation process, for China had by then become the largest carbon emitter in the world, meaning that without its participation, climate change mitigation would be difficult, if not impossible. At the 2009 UN Climate Change Conference in Copenhagen, however, China underscored its sovereignty, opposed external reviews of its voluntary climate actions, and indeed prevented developed countries from setting ambitious emissions reduction targets for themselves (Christoff 2010). Consequently, China became a target of harsh international criticism at Copenhagen, and its pursuit of a more favourable international image has been an important element of its climate policy ever since (Kopra 2012). Since the 2011 UN Climate Change Conference in Durban, China has taken a more constructive attitude toward international climate negotiations. Although China continues to refuse to commit to legally binding emissions targets at an international level, it has issued many ambitious strategies to make major structural changes and reduce emissions in energy and the construction, transportation, and agriculture industries, as well as to develop significant value-added manufacturing and less energy-intensive service sectors, among other things, since the late 2000s.

The UNFCCC has not defined special responsibilities for great powers but all developed countries. In practice, however, such apparent inclusiveness does not mean that all developed states are expected to shoulder similar responsibilities. For one, small developed countries such as Portugal and Cyprus are not under the same pressure as the United States and Great Britain to take action, largely given their different material capabilities and national circumstances, which have consistently been key points in the negotiations process (Bukovansky et al. 2012, 131). However, another reason is that great powers are expected to play a role in leading global governance, meaning that whether climate change is governed in the UN Security Council, great powers have a responsibility to lead the global effort to combat climate change. Nevertheless, the CBDR principle and other unambitious notions of climate responsibility endorsed by the United States have continued to dominate post-Kyoto climate negotiations. For instance, the George W. Bush administration pursued the replacement of the CBDR approach with a “mutual-burden sharing” approach that denied the historical responsibility of developed countries and focussed instead on reducing future emissions intensity via technological innovation (Bukovansky et al. 2012, 144). After the US presidential election of Obama in 2008, hope for greater US climate responsibility rose, which President Obama largely fulfilled at the Copenhagen conference when he “renewed” the US role of leader in international climate negotiations. Unlike his predecessor’s, Obama’s administration acknowledged the special climate responsibilities of the United States based on its historical responsibility and material capabilities, as well as took measures to live up to that responsibility (e.g. CNN 2009; Obama 2014; 2015). At roughly the same time, China began to formulate wide-ranging domestic climate policies and in 2013, in collaboration with the United States, acknowledged the importance of US–Chinese cooperation against climate change as a “powerful example that can inspire the world” (White House 2013). In September 2014, Obama explicitly linked climate responsibility and great power status by saying that the United States and China “have a special responsibility to lead” global efforts to tackle climate change because that is “what big nations have to do” (Obama 2014). However, those special climate responsibilities of developed countries do not come with corresponding special rights or privileges, nor do great powers have any privileges under the UNFCCC. Those reasons are likely why the United States, which usually supports multilateral treaties if they contain exemptions, failed to ratify the Kyoto Protocol (Chalecki 2009, 152). Flexible mechanisms make it easier as well as cheaper for developed countries to fulfil their special responsibilities, but they can hardly be understood as privileges. Besides, flexible mechanisms were negotiated three years after the CBDR principle was adopted in Rio.

The recognition of great powers’ special climate responsibility has not materialised in international climate politics. Both China and the United States have opposed legally binding targets for emissions reductions and emphasised nationally determined climate strategies instead. Due to the resistance of the US Congress, the United States would not commit to a legal climate obligation at the Paris Conference in 2015. Therefore, the Paris Agreement is based on sovereign states’ self-determination and defines nothing but that developed countries “*should* continue taking the lead by undertaking economy-wide absolute emission reduction targets” (emphasis added), although earlier drafts had used “shall” instead of “should”. The Paris Agreement is thus guided by the CBDR principle though it does not distinguish the responsibilities of developed countries from developing ones. The Paris Agreement also does not specify a legally binding target for emissions reductions for any state but is based on states’ voluntary, nationally determined contributions instead. As such, it creates a common framework for international climate responsibility; it notes that developing countries should also make efforts to mitigate climate change and are “*encouraged* to move over time toward economy-wide emission reduction or limitation targets in the light of different national circumstances” (UNFCCC 2015, emphasis added).

The Paris Agreement also states that developing countries need assistance with implementing national climate action plans and that their emissions peaks may manifest more slowly than those of developed countries. That formulation was strongly supported by China, which together with the BASIC countries (Brazil, South Africa, India, and China) and like-minded developing countries on climate change, including Argentina, Bolivia, China, Cuba, El Salvador, Ecuador, Iran, Nicaragua, Venezuela, Malaysia, Vietnam, Saudi Arabia, and India, resisted legally binding emission reductions for developing countries. Both groups oppose different subcategories between developed and developing countries because such categories would obviously harm their interests in international climate negotiations. Nonetheless, China no longer focusses only on the historical responsibility of developed countries. In his speech at the Paris Climate Change Conference, President Xi (2015b) called for all states to “assume more shared responsibilities for win–win outcomes”. For China, which prefers moderate voluntary commitments to legal international obligations, the Paris Agreement was an appealing approach to climate responsibility. In that way, there is no fear of failure, and China can set relatively unambitious national objectives and thereby gain face by exceeding global expectations.

Great Power Climate Responsibilities?

Although the norm of climate responsibility has not made international society humanist or ecocentric, its emergence nevertheless indicates a profound normative change in international society: that there is a collective responsibility to guard the planet from ecological degradation (cf. Falkner 2012; Falkner and Buzan 2017). That change has occurred primarily via international regimes, and the role of great power management has been critical, for great power action has shaped the idea of climate responsibility at the United Nations. Considerable international normative change occurred between the 1960s and early 1990s when the United States pioneered international environmental politics, whereas hardly any progress in international negotiations was made during the 2000s since the United States had withdrawn from the Kyoto Protocol. The norm of climate responsibility began to take concrete form only when President Obama announced at the Copenhagen Conference that the United States respects its special responsibility for climate change, which convinced China to change its traditionally reluctant attitude toward international climate negotiations.

Moreover, China’s agency has been crucial in the institutionalisation of climate responsibility. For a long time, its conception of climate responsibility was highly retrospective; it focused exclusively on the historical responsibility of developed countries and assigned less, if any, responsibility to developing countries, including itself. However, as China learned that it has a stake in supporting international action and taking domestic measures to tackle climate change, it began to cooperate with the United States on climate change and to compile domestic climate strategies in the late 2000s. By the 2015 Paris Climate Change Conference, “responsibility” had indeed been internalised into the Chinese discourse. Although China has prevented the UN Security Council from taking action on climate change, the norm of climate responsibility is now a central element of China’s search for legitimate great power status. Climate change offers China not only economic opportunities for clean technologies, but also the rare opportunity to make moral claims and prove to the world its great power responsibility. For China, climate responsibility is an attractive alternative to liberal political solidarist norms of human rights as a new standard of civilization” and a moral basis for great power responsibility.

Nevertheless, neither the United States nor China has agreed to formalise its special responsibility by international climate regulation within the UN climate change regime. At the same time, the Paris Agreement frames climate responsibility as a general responsibility of all states and does not explicitly

mention the CBDR principle. That shift limits the claim that climate responsibility is a necessary great power responsibility. However, it should also be noted that climate responsibility has become part of great power responsibility as an attribute of the Security Council's peace functions. Great power responsibility for climate change is thus an informal social norm that assumes that, regardless of international law, great powers are expected to fulfil their special responsibility, yet primarily to maintain international peace and security. Unlike previously, they are now being asked to do so by undertaking effective domestic climate actions. From the perspective of climate responsibility, domestic action is thus a precondition to be recognised as a legitimate great power. If the Trump administration fails to fulfil national climate objectives consummated by the Obama administration, then it will end US great power leadership on climate change. At the same time, China's international rank will increase if it succeeds in implementing and enhancing its national climate policies, as pledged by its 13th five-year plan. If it succeeds, then international society might also become more willing to recognise China's mounting great power status in other political circles as well. Great powers' contribution to international organisations, as well as their domestic interests and actions, could thus have wider implications for international order and fundamental institutions of international society.

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