



U.S.-China Climate Diplomacy in the Leadup to COP29 – What It Means for India

Event Summary

Tuesday, September 24, 2024

- The Centre for Social and Economic Progress (CSEP) hosted its 27th Foreign Policy and Security Studies Tiffin Talk on 'U.S.-China Climate Diplomacy in the Leadup to COP29 – What It Means for India' with **Edmund Downie**, PhD candidate in Public Affairs, Science, Technology, and Environmental Policy program, Princeton School of Public and International Affairs.
- The discussion examined how U.S.-China climate diplomacy has evolved over the past decade and the current state of the relationship focusing on its significance for Indian climate diplomacy in the run-up to COP29.
- The discussants were **Robert Mizo**, Assistant Professor, Department of Political Science, University of Delhi and **Shayak Sengupta**, India Program Lead, Center on Global Policy, Columbia University. The talk was moderated by **Pooja Ramamurthi**, Associate Fellow, CSEP.
- This series of closed-door research seminars is curated by Constantino Xavier, Senior Fellow, CSEP and Shivshankar Menon, Distinguished Fellow, CSEP. It focuses on contemporary, evidence-based research with policy relevance to bridge Delhi's scholar-practitioner divide.

The nature of U.S.-China climate diplomacy

The discussion focused on the evolving nature of climate diplomacy between the United States (U.S.) and China, examining how these two actors have negotiated at multilateral and bilateral climate negotiations over the last decade. As the world's largest emitters, their cooperation or divergence plays a critical role in shaping the success of meeting the goals of international climate agreements.

Both the U.S. and China view bilateral climate talks as a stabilising factor in their broader, often precarious, relationship. As mentioned by various speakers, climate is often viewed as a 'benign' topic, outside the realm of hard politics. The discussion began with an analysis of the early 2010s, when U.S.-China diplomacy was at its peak, allowing for climate negotiations and interest to culminating in the Paris Agreement in 2015. At the time, the U.S. and China had an alignment of economic priorities and working on climate was seen as a public good. However, this cooperation hit a major roadblock post-2016 under the Trump administration with the U.S. pulling out of the 2015 Paris Agreement and imposing trade barriers to China, leading to a plummet in diplomatic engagements. Though there

has been a slight change of stance in the last few years with limited re-engagement on climate issues, the diplomatic landscape remains fragile, and heavily reliant on the relative stability in U.S.-China relations.

Reconciling their substantive climate goals has become increasingly difficult. While the U.S. has previously pushed for greater economic engagement, including technology transfer and market access, it now is focusing on a more protectionist industrial policy. China remains focused on maintaining its technological leadership, particularly in clean energy sectors like solar and battery production. The two nations remain unable to reconcile differences on key issues, particularly climate finance, which is expected to be a major point of contention at the upcoming COP29. As areas of substantive engagement have shrunk over time, climate remains a relatively open issue for the bilateral relationship.

Methane diplomacy: A potential avenue for India?

The discussion touched on the topic of non-CO₂ greenhouse gases, which have emerged as the most productive areas of cooperation between the U.S. and China. Methane emissions were highlighted as an area of relevance,

especially for India, whose methane emissions stand at an average of 9% and are among the highest globally. Stemming from agriculture which contributes to about 75% of India's methane emissions. Mitigating methane from solid waste (which contributes about 15% of India's methane emissions) into clean energy for cooking and reducing air pollution provides health and environmental co-benefits. The discussion noted that both China and India have not yet signed on to the Global Methane Pledge initiated by the U.S. As pressure mounts at COP29, India may need to revisit its stance on methane and other non-CO2 greenhouse gases, given the growing importance of these issues in international climate diplomacy. Speakers discussed if the focus on methane abatement, could be framed within a biofuel alliance, a broader agenda pushed by India under its G20 presidency. The discussion concluded that targeting low-hanging fruit sectors such as methane ablation through solid-waste management is still a win-win situation to achieve cumulative emission reduction through a series of successful smaller scale cooperative projects.

India's climate diplomacy with U.S and China

The bilateral relationship between the U.S. and India was also a key point of discussion, with a focus on their clean energy supply chains. Both nations are working on expanding cooperation in solar, battery, and other clean technologies, areas where India has seen considerable growth. However, negotiations in other areas, like the Just Energy Transition Partnership (JETP) between India and the G77, have stalled, reflecting the broader difficulties in achieving consensus on climate issues within multilateral forums. This fragmentation has led some speakers to question whether multilateralism is the most effective framework for addressing U.S.-India climate cooperation, suggesting that more focused, bilateral or regional approaches might yield better results. Strategic interests, particularly in sectors like defence, were also noted as drivers of U.S.-India cooperation, raising the broader question of whether climate diplomacy can truly be decoupled from larger geopolitical issues.

The event underscored that, despite rising tensions between China and India, particularly after the Doklam (2017) and Galwan (2020-201) border standoffs, there remains room for climate cooperation. The historical align-

ment between India and China on climate issues, particularly in the lead-up to the Paris Agreement, was noted, though it has since diminished due to strategic and economic skirmishes.

Climate finance, COP29 and fading multilateralism?

Climate finance emerged as an important issue during the discussion. The global target of transferring one trillion US dollars annually from the Global North to the Global South for climate-related projects was seen as a lofty goal, fraught with disagreements over which countries should bear the financial burden. A central debate was over the classification of developing countries, with China, despite approaching high-income status, continuing to position itself as part of the Global South. India, Brazil, and South Africa have supported China's stance, resisting any moves to expand the "developed" category. The importance of studying climate diplomacy in the backdrop of broader security, geopolitical and economic interests of countries was noted.

The discussion brought to focus the need for private-sector involvement in meeting the financial commitments necessary for meaningful climate action. The concept of blended finance—where public and private funds are combined to fund climate projects—was seen as critical, particularly as public funding alone is unlikely to meet the enormous financial requirements. Speakers emphasised the importance of public money in unlocking private investments, noting that without strong public-sector commitments, private capital will be reluctant to enter the climate space.

The conversation also explored the fragmentation of global climate diplomacy, particularly in light of the challenges facing the UNFCCC process. While COP remains the primary platform for setting international norms, smaller, more flexible platforms like the G20 are emerging as important venues for climate discussions, especially those related to finance. G20 finance ministers have played a significant role in setting standards and building platforms that facilitate climate agreements outside of COP. The discussion also highlighted the rise of minilateral and plurilateral groupings, where countries engage in specific, issue-based cooperation that bypasses the complexities of broader multilateral negotiations.

All content reflects the individual views of the participants. The Centre for Social and Economic Progress (CSEP) does not hold an institutional view on any subject.

*This summary was prepared by **Anindita Singh**, Research Analyst, CSEP.
For queries, please contact **Gurmeet Kaur**, Events Manager, CSEP.*

Centre for Social and Economic Progress (CSEP)

6, Second Floor, Dr. Jose P. Rizal Marg, Chanakyapuri, New Delhi, India



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