



Climate Diplomacy And Developmental Justice: Evaluating India's Role In International Environmental Agreements

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Abstract

This paper examines India's evolving role in climate diplomacy within major international environmental agreements, including the UNFCCC, Kyoto Protocol, and Paris Agreement. It explores how India negotiates the tension between developmental priorities and increasing global expectations for climate mitigation. The study adopts a qualitative research approach based on secondary data, policy analysis, and academic literature. It argues that India's climate diplomacy has transitioned from a defensive, equity-based position to a more strategic and implementation-oriented approach. However, domestic political economy constraints—particularly coal dependence, energy demand, and financial limitations—continue to shape India's negotiation stance. The study further highlights that India's emphasis on climate justice and equity remains central to its diplomatic identity and contributes significantly to global climate governance debates. The paper concludes that India's effectiveness in future climate diplomacy will depend on its ability to align domestic implementation with international commitments while strengthening its leadership through institutional and coalition-based initiatives.

Keywords

Climate Diplomacy, India, UNFCCC, Paris Agreement, Climate Justice, CBDR, Energy Transition

Introduction

Climate diplomacy has emerged as a crucial domain of international relations where issues of environmental responsibility, economic development, and global justice intersect. In this context, India occupies a unique and complex position. As one of the world's largest developing economies and a significant contributor to global emissions, India faces increasing international pressure to enhance its climate commitments. Simultaneously, it must ensure economic growth, poverty reduction, and energy access for its population.

India's engagement with international climate agreements reflects this dual challenge. Historically, India has emphasized the principle of equity, particularly through the framework of Common but Differentiated Responsibilities (CBDR), arguing that developed nations should bear a greater burden due to their historical emissions. Over time, however, India's diplomatic approach has evolved. Rather than relying solely on resistance and normative claims, it has increasingly adopted a more pragmatic and cooperative stance, particularly in the post-Paris Agreement era.

This paper seeks to evaluate India's climate diplomacy by examining its evolution, domestic drivers, and contributions to global climate norms. It argues that India's diplomacy is not static but adaptive, shaped by both internal constraints and external pressures.

Hypothesis

1. India's climate diplomacy has shifted from equity-based defensive bargaining to a more strategic and implementation-oriented approach after the Paris Agreement.
2. Domestic political economy factors, particularly energy security and development priorities, significantly influence India's negotiation stance.
3. India's emphasis on climate justice enhances its diplomatic legitimacy and strengthens its position in global climate negotiations.

Research Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative research methodology based primarily on secondary data sources. The analysis draws upon peer-reviewed academic literature, international policy documents, UNFCCC reports, and India's official climate commitments. The approach is interpretive in nature, focusing on understanding the evolution of India's diplomatic strategies and their underlying motivations.

The study integrates thematic analysis to identify recurring patterns in India's climate discourse, particularly regarding equity, finance, and energy transition. Comparative analysis is also employed to assess changes in India's approach across different climate regimes, including the UNFCCC, Kyoto Protocol, and Paris Agreement.

Research Design

The research design is descriptive and analytical. It traces the historical evolution of India's climate diplomacy while simultaneously evaluating its effectiveness in contemporary global climate governance. The design enables a multi-dimensional analysis by linking three key aspects:

- India's negotiation strategies across different climate agreements
- Domestic political and economic constraints
- Contributions to global climate justice and norm-setting

This integrated approach allows for a comprehensive understanding of India's role as both a developing country and an emerging global power.

Research Problem

Despite India's increasing prominence in global climate negotiations, there remains a lack of comprehensive analysis that connects its diplomatic strategies with domestic political economy constraints and global justice frameworks. Existing studies often treat India either as a defender of equity or as an emerging power expected to take on greater responsibility. However, few analyses integrate these perspectives to explain how India balances competing demands.

The central research problem addressed in this paper is: How can India's climate diplomacy be understood as a dynamic interaction between its evolving international role, domestic constraints, and commitment to climate justice within an increasingly complex global governance system?

Narration of Core Topic

India's climate diplomacy has undergone a significant transformation over time. During the early phases of the UNFCCC and Kyoto Protocol negotiations, India adopted a strongly defensive stance rooted in equity and historical responsibility. It consistently argued that developed countries should take the lead

in reducing emissions, given their disproportionate contribution to climate change. This position was not merely strategic but deeply embedded in a broader postcolonial critique of global inequality.

However, the global climate regime has evolved, particularly with the introduction of the Paris Agreement, which shifted the framework from legally binding targets to nationally determined contributions. This transition required countries, including India, to adopt more flexible and proactive roles. India responded by recalibrating its diplomatic strategy. While it did not abandon its commitment to equity, it began to integrate this principle with a focus on implementation, credibility, and leadership.

One of the most notable aspects of this shift is India's adoption of a "co-benefits" approach, where climate action is framed as compatible with economic development. Renewable energy expansion, particularly in solar and wind sectors, has become a central element of this strategy. Initiatives such as the International Solar Alliance reflect India's attempt to move beyond negotiation and actively shape global climate governance.

At the same time, domestic political economy continues to impose significant constraints. India's heavy dependence on coal, rising energy demand, and developmental priorities limit its ability to commit to rapid decarbonization. Transitioning away from fossil fuels involves not only economic costs but also social and political challenges, particularly in regions dependent on coal-based industries. As a result, India emphasizes the need for a "just transition," which includes financial support, technology transfer, and capacity building.

Climate finance remains a critical issue in India's diplomacy. The scale of investment required for energy transition far exceeds current domestic and international funding levels. This gap reinforces India's demand for greater financial commitments from developed countries. Similarly, access to advanced technology is seen as essential for achieving ambitious climate targets without compromising development goals.

India's role in climate justice debates further strengthens its diplomatic position. By emphasizing historical responsibility and equitable burden-sharing, India aligns itself with broader Global South concerns. Recent scholarly work on fair-share frameworks supports many of India's claims, demonstrating that developed countries bear a disproportionate share of responsibility. However, debates over fairness metrics continue, highlighting the contested nature of climate justice.

In the contemporary climate regime, India's diplomacy reflects a careful balancing act. On one hand, it seeks to enhance its global standing by demonstrating commitment and leadership. On the other hand, it continues to resist obligations that may constrain its development trajectory. This dual approach allows India to maintain its identity as both a responsible global actor and a defender of developing country interests.

Conclusion

India's climate diplomacy represents a dynamic and evolving engagement with global environmental governance. While rooted in principles of equity and justice, it has adapted to changing international expectations by incorporating elements of pragmatism, cooperation, and leadership.

The study finds that domestic political economy factors play a decisive role in shaping India's negotiation strategies, often limiting the scope of its commitments. At the same time, India's emphasis on climate justice continues to provide it with moral and strategic leverage in international negotiations.

Looking ahead, the effectiveness of India's climate diplomacy will depend on its ability to bridge the gap between domestic implementation and international commitments. Strengthening renewable energy capacity, securing climate finance, and expanding institutional initiatives will be critical for enhancing its global influence.

Ultimately, India's role in climate diplomacy reflects broader transformations in global governance, where emerging powers are not only participants but also key architects of international norms and frameworks.

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