



Negotiator Briefs on Cognition and Climate Change

Global Power Structures – (How) Do They Matter?

By Manjana Milkoreit

Power is distributed unevenly in the international system. For some, this statement captures an unchangeable truth, is a source of scholarly debate, or is a major cause of injustice. For some, it is a reason – maybe *the* reason – why the climate negotiations are stuck. This *CCC Brief No. 4* explores the relevance of global power structures for the climate negotiations under the UNFCCC umbrella, but its findings apply to all international efforts to create climate governance instruments that focus on mitigation and international resource transfers.

Thinking about power raises a lot of intriguing and important questions. What is power in a climate change context and how do negotiators think about power? How do their perceptions of the current distribution of power among negotiation parties shape the negotiation process? If power structures are obstructing progress, can anything be done about that? Can anything trump power-based arguments? Is the role of power static or can power distribution change and over what time scale?

This *CCC Brief* will begin to answer some of these questions. In particular, I will describe three different beliefs different negotiators currently hold concerning the role of global power structures in the UNFCCC process. References to COP 19 in Warsaw will illustrate the relevance of these beliefs for progress on various agenda items running up to Paris in 2015. *Brief No. 5* will take a step back from this empirical exploration and ask more conceptual questions, including how power should be defined in the context of global climate change. If there are different forms of power, who is powerful? Are they wielding their power effectively?

Power Theory

Power is a fundamental concept in theories of international relations. Traditionally power is defined in terms of control over material resources: the larger a state's economy and its military and natural resources, the better it can pursue its self-interest by forcing its will upon others. The next *Brief* will dive into some deeper definitional issues, including soft power and the power of ideas.

Key Lessons

- A power perspective is necessary to understand the negotiation dynamics in the UNFCCC. Most negotiators believe that current global power structures provide major obstacles to progress.
- Traditionally, power is defined in terms of a state's control over material resources that can be leveraged to pursue national interests: the size of the economy, access to natural resources and military capabilities.
- Negotiation participants make three distinct arguments concerning the role of global power structures in the UNFCCC, each referring to a different set of power-wielding actors:
 - Competitiveness concerns of economically powerful states as disincentive for cooperation,
 - Domestic influence of vested interest groups, seeking to maintain the status quo,
 - A global power transition from North to South stifling ambition.
- All three power dynamics could be observed at COP 19 in Warsaw and will shape the road to the 2015-agreement.



Realism and international system-level theories suggest that power explains everything that matters in international politics. The interests of states and the actions taken in pursuit of these interests range from trade agreements to war. Realists have long argued with liberal institutionalists whether states care about absolute or relative gains in power. In other words, do they merely seek benefits compared to their own present situations or do those benefits have to maintain or even improve their situation in comparison to other states? Both theoretical camps embrace the rational-choice framework outlined in [CCC Brief No. 1](#): the existing power structure guides decision-making by helping actors determine their own position in the system of power and the rational – benefit-maximizing – choices available to them.

Lately, more scholarly attention has been given to the power of non-state actors, for example, financially well-endowed corporate actors, but also NGOs, scientists or transnational networks of legislators. Their power often has a different currency than that of states. It can be rooted in economic, social or political structures – the current configuration of institutions, rules and practices – or in the ideas and norms they hold and promote.

Beliefs about Power

Negotiators tend to focus on one of three distinct arguments about the role of power in the climate negotiations, each concerning a different type of power-wielding actor. These three arguments speak to

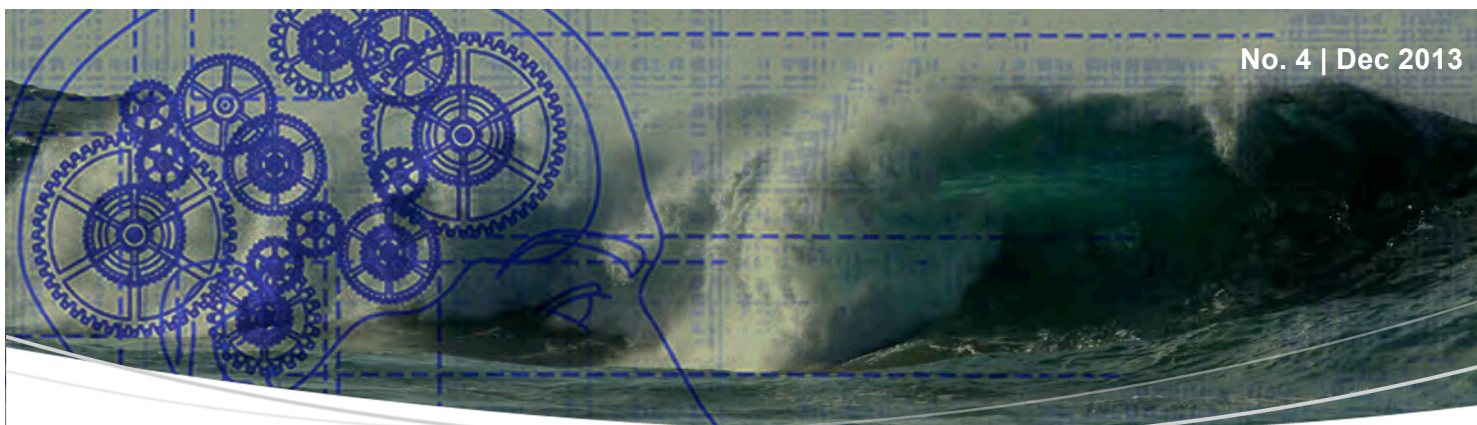
- The economic interests of individual states,
- The role of vested interest groups at the domestic level, and
- The relationship between two groups of countries: the developed world and the emerging economies.

Loss of Competitiveness

First, some individuals believe that the concerns of states concerning competitiveness (presumably at the international level) are a major driver of the negotiation dynamics. These individuals do not elaborate on the concept of competitiveness, but presumably the idea implies that climate action imposes unequal costs on participants in international economic transactions. Expected disadvantages for a country's economy – its industries, sectors or firms – in comparison to those of other countries would lead to a loss of competitiveness and consequently economic damage, for example, a reduction of GDP, a high unemployment rate or a reduction in taxable income. Many negotiations participants believe that these expected costs are the main reason why developed and emerging countries are not willing to act decisively on climate change.

This loss-of-competitiveness argument is linked to concerns about carbon leakage, the current structure of major economies and the energy-efficiency of their industries, stranded assets, and the idea of keeping a level playing field for all global economic players. This argument strongly links the climate issue to global economic governance. In a broader sense it is a system-level argument concerning the current balance of economic power in the international trade system. While some might desire to maintain that balance, others might desire to change it, or at least be indifferent to such changes in relative power.

Competitiveness concerns are believed to have motivated US resistance to the Kyoto Protocol, and they continue to shape the negotiations of the 2015-agreement. If this future agreement were to impose economic burdens on all parties to the UNFCCC, and not just on some, it could presumably maintain a 'level economic playing field'. That is the equity condition for many developed countries, who find it challenging to garner domestic political support for any international agreement that is costly rather than beneficial.



Vested Interests

Second, some participants argue that domestic vested interests – fossil fuel industry lobbies in particular countries – play an important role because they have large amounts of financial resources and access to the political system. Presumably they use their money and connections to prevent domestic climate action, indirectly hampering progress in the international negotiations. For example, corporate actors can seek to influence domestic climate politics by funding political campaigns and pressuring national legislators, or by funding non-profits and media campaigns to spread doubt about the reality of climate change. Vested interests exert their influence not only at the national scale, but organize transnationally, for example through industry associations like the World Coal or World Steel Organizations.

While the competitiveness argument outlined above suggests that international climate policy might be desirable and possible if a level economic playing field can be maintained, negotiators believe that vested interests oppose any kind of policy change. They seek to preserve the status quo in order to protect their own profitability and expected income flows in a business-as-usual future.

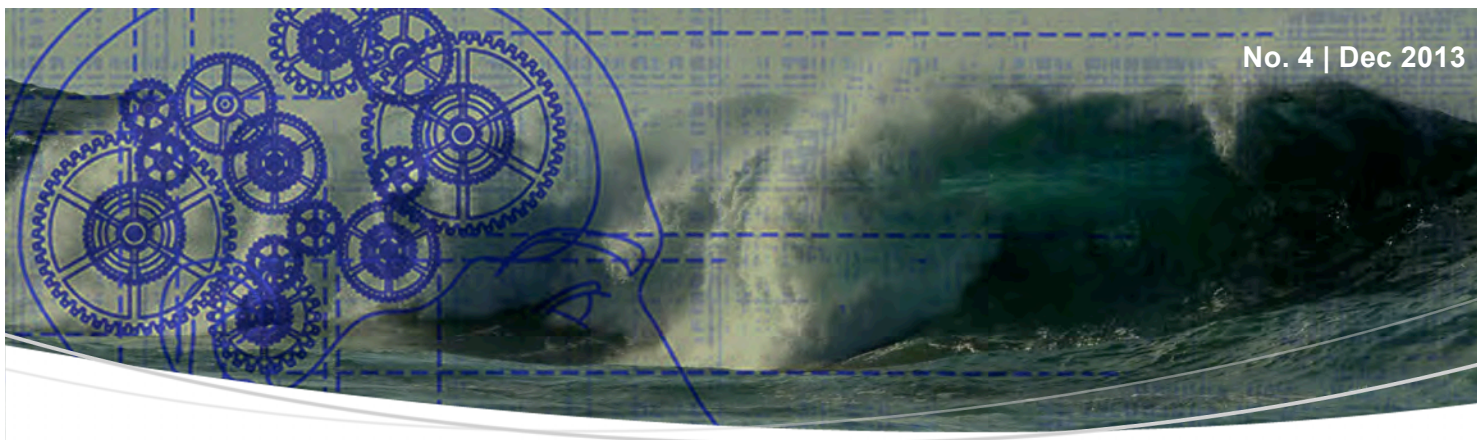
At COP 19, the engagement of the fossil-fuel industry in the UNFCCC process was more palpable than ever before. The fact that the Polish government embraced corporate sponsorship and decided to host the World Coal Summit at the same time as the COP gave rise to heated conversations during the negotiations, at least among civil society participants. Even if it is impossible to point to a specific influence of a specific corporate actor on any part of the negotiation outcomes, the obvious corporate involvement had discernible effects, ranging from the political pressure on UNFCCC Executive Secretary Christiana Figueres to speak at the coal summit and the implicit legitimization of the coal industry through this speech, to the raised media attention given to the role of industry players, and the disenchantment of civil society, especially youth representatives, motivating them to stage a massive [walk-out](#).

Global Power Transition

Third, some negotiators believe that the world is currently undergoing a major power transition with economic power shifting from the developed world to the emerging economies. This presents a significant constraint for the climate negotiations because it exacerbates the competitiveness concerns of both of these groups. The developed countries, who are already seeing their power wane, are not interested in speeding up this power loss by imposing costs on their own economies while other big emitters do not face similar constraints. The emerging economies are not interested in curbing emissions at a point when they are finally catching up with the developed world and rely on growth to maintain social stability at home. Based on this argument, climate politics is an instrument of power politics—managing systemic changes that are perceived as threats or opportunities by different state actors.

At COP 19 these concerns played out in the ADP and in discussions over climate finance. More generally, the power transition perspective is at the root of the growing expectations of the BASIC (Brazil, South Africa, India and China) countries to make more significant contributions in a future climate regime, one that matches their growing economic weight and evolving role in the international system. These expectations have been growing not just among developed countries, but also among small island states, the Africa Group and the least developed countries.

To sum up, a power perspective is necessary, useful and its internal logic is intuitively appealing to most political actors. But if your mind is stuck within this decision framework, it seems close to impossible to find a path towards an ambitious future multilateral agreement. What should motivate powerful actors to accept the loss of economic competitiveness, upset vested interests, or lose their relative power status? Answering these questions requires breaking out of the material-power framework and looking for other sources of political motivation. *CCC Brief No. 5* will begin to do that.



About this document

This document is part of the publication series "Negotiator Briefs on Cognition and Climate Change" that builds on research conducted by Manjana Milkoreit since 2011. The series is co-sponsored by the Walton Sustainability Solutions Initiative (WSSI) at Arizona State University's Global Institute of Sustainability (GIOS) and the Waterloo Institute of Complexity and Innovation (WICI) at the University of Waterloo in Canada.



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About the Rob and Melani Walton Sustainability Solutions Initiatives

The Rob and Melani Walton Sustainability Solutions Initiatives are the result of a \$27.5 million investment in Arizona State University's Global Institute of Sustainability by the Walton Family Foundation. Within the Walton Sustainability Solutions Initiatives, diverse teams of faculty, students, entrepreneurs, researchers, and innovators collaborate to deliver sustainability solutions, accelerate global impact, and inspire future leaders through eight distinct initiatives.

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