The Geopolitics of the Paris Talks

The Web of Alliances Behind the Climate Deal

By Nick Mabey, December 13, 2015, FOREIGN AFFAIRS

World headlines blare the news that negotiators in Paris have reached a global climate change agreement. Yet underneath the soaring rhetoric were hard politics that can tell a lot about the longevity of the deal.

As the Paris climate negotiations moved toward their final days, delegates’ focus shifted from the technical to the political. The negotiating text had been stripped of its most baroque complications, and what was left reflected core differences among countries.

Navigating this phase of the talks requires an understanding of the shifting alliances among nearly 200 countries, dramatized through the fierce public battles over how to even characterize the talks in Paris. India and South Africa tried to solidify developing country alliances by accusing the United States of undermining the fundamental negotiating principle of equity. The United States and the European Union talked up the emergence of an informal “High Ambition Coalition” among countries spanning the traditional rich-poor divide.

By defining the narrative of the negotiations as a fight for either “climate equity” or “climate ambition,” countries hope to focus political and media pressure on those who, they claim, are blocking progress. This is tactically understandable but obscures what is really going on.

Climate change negotiations are too often described as a kind of environmental cold war between developed and developing countries. But this dynamic has not held for over a decade. The implications of climate change, and its solutions, are too central to countries’ core national interests for them to base their negotiating positions just on some abstract sense of “historic responsibility.” Countries’ interests are likewise too diverse for them to make permanent alliances simply on the basis of levels of per capita income. Oil producers, forested nations, high-tech trading centers, and low-lying or desert countries all have distinct interests to protect.
Environmentalists hold a banner which reads, "Crank up the Action" at a protest demonstration near the Eiffel Tower in Paris, France, December 12, 2015.

A better analogy for Paris is major European powers’ alliance building and periodic conflicts in the late nineteenth century. All major powers had a shared interest in maintaining stability, but they struggled to reconcile their long-term goal with the temptations of securing tactical advantages of power or territory. The mismanagement of these tensions led—inadvertently—to the disastrous wars of the twentieth century. Shared strategic intentions do not automatically lead to successful tactical diplomacy.

The “major powers” in this case are China, India, the United States, and the EU. On the opening day of the Paris talks, leaders from all of these countries committed to delivering a binding agreement to keep global warming well below 2 degrees Celsius. There was no reason to doubt their sincerity. Given the rush of bilateral talks among those powers leading up to the Paris...
meeting, publicly blocking an agreement would incur significant geopolitical costs. But below broad strategic intent lies a range of tactics based on national interests and how they interact.

Only time, and the implementation of commitments, will show how durable this new alliance is in practice. In the United States, things have changed a lot since the Bush years, when the United States and the EU were at odds while China and India worked closely together. In the run-up to Paris, the United States and EU positions have moved closer together. Both have high ambitions for a strong, enduring climate agreement that brings in the major developing countries on (relatively) equal footing. U.S. President Barack Obama needs such a victory to secure his legacy and protect Democratic domestic energy policy. The EU needs it to show its public a return on years of climate leadership.

China, meanwhile, is steering a careful course between shouldering the responsibilities of an emerging superpower and its traditional role as defender of the developing countries. China fears an overly restrictive agreement and intrusive monitoring of its domestic progress. Even more, it wants to avoid blame for any failure in Paris. India felt vulnerable to ending up with a deal that constrains future growth. Paris commits countries to review climate action every five years, and India knows it will soon be under intense pressure to follow China’s commitment to peak emissions.

None of the major powers could decisively shape the Paris deal just by working with their closest allies. Each pair makes up only around 30 percent of global emissions. They all need to align with other groups. The largest are the Least Developed Countries (LDC) Group and the (overlapping) Africa Group. These two have historically focused on trying to win funding to help them adapt to climate impacts. A powerful new player was the Climate Vulnerable Forum (CVF), which brings together countries most at risk from sea level rise and extreme weather events, from middle-income Barbados to large low-income countries such as Bangladesh and the Philippines. The CVF also wants funding, but its main priority is to secure binding action to limit climate change to below 1.5 degrees Celsius. The CVF complements the more established Small Island Developing States (SIDS) Group, which has similar goals but less political clout, in trying to avoid a low-ambition tradeoff among the large powers.
The slogan "No Plan B" is projected on the Eiffel Tower as part of the World Climate Change Conference 2015 (COP21) in Paris, France, December 11, 2015.

This crowded field organizes into a core triangle of relationships. In one corner are China and India, trying to persuade the LDCs and Africa that working together puts more pressure on richer countries to give assistance. And so they talk up “equity” and “differentiation.” Through this alliance, they hoped to resist pressure for stronger rules progressively limiting developing country emissions. This dynamic was exemplified by the outrage at one U.S. suggestion that emerging economies could—voluntarily—help poorer countries financially. The suggestion was condemned as an attack on the core principle of equity that underlies the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC): that developed countries should help poorer countries because they had “historic responsibility” for emitting more carbon, and growing rich, in the past. The impact of their protest was rather undermined, though, by the fact that Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi and Chinese leader Xi Jinping had announced support packages for poorer countries only a few days before.
In another corner, the United States and EU are aiming to attract the CVF, Africa Group, and SIDS with the prospect of a strong emission reductions treaty covering all major emitters, where every five years countries would have to submit increased targets in order to drive global emission cuts nearer to 1.5 degrees Celsius. They also promised a larger share of funding to help aligned countries deal with climate change. The United States and EU hoped that such offers would forestall demands for sharply increased funding after 2020 and weaken arguments for compensation for climate damage.

This competition for the affection of the developing country groups puts them in a strong position. There is always a temptation to play both sides, but that would be a dangerous and difficult game. These groups are loosely knit coalitions of countries with wildly different balances of interests. Many Africa Group countries are also OPEC members. They are thus more analogous to the fragmented Holy Roman Empire than to Chancellor Otto Bismarck’s Germany. Countries have different regional allegiances, and the sheer number of members makes quick political decision-making very difficult. Under pressure, they have a tendency to splinter into smaller regional groupings like the East Africa states. Individual countries also come under intense diplomatic pressure from major countries with which they have strong commercial ties to shift position.

If developing country groups tried to overplay their hand, they could have forced an alliance to form along the final side of the triangle, the one between the United States and China. If those two powers dictated the final deal in order to prevent total failure, it would most likely have resulted in a worst-case scenario of weak mitigation rules and low financial commitments.

As the negotiations neared the end, there was an intense war of rhetoric among major countries attempting to claim the moral high ground over whether “climate ambition” or “climate equity” defined the negotiations. However, underneath the smoke of battle, the final geometry of alliances proved to be dominated, at least temporarily, by the so-called High Ambition Coalition. Although it is a rather fragile structure, in the end, it attracted over 100 countries, including the United States, the EU, Brazil, SIDS, and the CVF to rally around an ambitious agreement of tough mitigation rules and moderately increased funding pledges. It was this alliance that shaped the final deal, despite some last minute hard bargaining by China to weaken oversight of the transparency rules.

The endgame politics in Paris suggests that there is now a core majority of countries in the UNFCCC that see their national interest as maximizing global efforts to control climate change, even at the expense of aid funding or strict “equity” in the deal. For them, the benefits of preventing dangerous climate change clearly outweigh the costs of phasing out fossil fuel use. These national interest dynamics, not abstract principles, are the political foundation—strong or weak—on which the Paris Agreement is built. Only time, and the implementation of commitments, will show how durable this new alliance is in practice.