The Contest for Leadership to Address Climate Change Impacts

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Countries across the Global South, are already affected by a litany of damaging climate change impacts and have fewer resources to help them cope, which is cause for collective concern.

Midway through the 28th UN Conference of the Parties (COP28) climate negotiations in Dubai, Ephraim Mwepeya Shitima, the Zambian chair of the African Group of Negotiators, publicly registered disappointment with the direction of the conference while attempting to shift the outcome. He saw the climate change adaptation emergency facing Africans as the central issue and sought greater assistance from world leaders, noting, “Adaptation is a matter of survival for us in Africa, it is a life and death issue.” A similar echo came at the conclusion of the conference from Saber Hossain Chowdhury, the envoy from Bangladesh, when he also underscored adaptation as a “life and death issue” while urging, “We cannot compromise on lives and livelihoods.” As the United States and the People’s Republic of China continue to grapple for partnerships across developing countries to shape regional trajectories and the global order in their strategic interest, calls from the Global South to avert, reduce, and address climate change impacts will only grow in the coming year and beyond. Leadership in this space is an issue on the rise that is as relevant for global alliances as it is for moral, economic, and security interests.

In the context of climate change, adaptation is not about stemming or reversing greenhouse gas emissions. The latter has been, and continues to be, a focus of international negotiations and essential societal and industrial shifts. However, as ambitious mitigation goals continue to slip out of reach—and even if the world does achieve them—billions of people in places highly vulnerable to climate change-induced hazards will continue to be dramatically affected for decades. The impacts of climate change on malnutrition, malaria, diarrhea, and heat stress alone are projected to cause around five million additional deaths between 2030 and 2050. Countries across the Global South, in particular, are already affected by a litany of damaging climate change impacts and have fewer resources to help them cope, which is cause for collective concern. As the 2022 U.S. National Security Strategy observes, climate change poses a major risk to national security and is associated with “increasing humanitarian need, food insecurity and health
threats, as well as the potential for instability, conflict, and mass migration."

Adaptation is a banner that stretches across varied activities ranging from enhancing climate information services and developing disaster early warning systems to building climate-resilient infrastructure, boosting sustainable agriculture, and providing innovative insurance coverage. Public and private investments in these activities are prudent and can be highly effective. For example, $1 billion of adaptation investments to protect assets from coastal flooding could yield $14 billion in savings through reduced economic damages. Additionally, a recent study of companies shows that the benefit-to-cost ratios for resilience-building investments may range from 2:1 to 15:1. For companies in emerging markets and developing economies seeking to continue business operations even as regular water sources are compromised, the benefit-to-cost ratio of implementing alternative water collection measures may be as high as 50:1.

Nonetheless, paying the costs to attain compelling benefits can be tricky. Recent analyses forecast that within the current decade alone, developing countries around the world would collectively have to spend between $215 billion and $387 billion each year in investments to adequately adapt to climate change. Since many countries across the Global South are burdened by debt-exacerbated financial crises, it is no wonder they use diplomatic opportunities and multilateral forums to demand greater climate finance from wealthier nations far more responsible for climate change in the first place. Assessments show developed countries spend less than $25 billion annually on climate change adaptation finance for developing countries. Even though such tallies may be incomplete because some countries and programs are not included, the gap between current contributions and global need is certainly daunting.

For its part, the U.S. government has already begun its salvo in the realm of adaptation and resilience support for developing countries—a field of influence and competition poised to grow. Most recently, on the multilateral front at COP28, U.S. vice president Kamala Harris pledged $3 billion on behalf of the United States to the Green Climate Fund, hoping to add to the $2 billion the United States already provided to the largest international fund supporting climate-vulnerable developing countries as they adapt to the impacts of climate change and transition to cleaner energy.

The U.S. administration has also been building a signature American initiative, the President’s Emergency Plan for Adaptation and Resilience (PREPARE), since President Biden first announced it in 2021. PREPARE is billed as a U.S. effort to assist more than half a billion people in developing countries as they adapt to and manage the impacts of climate change by 2030. To do this, the initiative mobilizes 19 agencies of the U.S. government and a growing number of private sector partners to collaborate and focus on actions like boosting the availability of reliable climate information, strengthening early warning and emergency management systems and building climate-resilient infrastructure. These initiatives and other recently branded U.S. efforts all hinge on funding subject to congressional appropriations. So bipartisan congressional understanding about the foreign policy and national security implications of supporting the Global South to better manage climate risks is essential.

China’s government is also highly engaged in countries across the Global South through its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), South-South Cooperation Assistance Fund, and other diplomatic efforts. When taking into account other official flows in addition to official development assistance, Beijing has outspent Washington by a factor of more than two to one in developing countries since the launch of BRI, and even though such spending from China is down significantly from the middle of the last decade, China is still the largest single source of international development finance. Although the many infrastructure investments directed by the People’s Republic of China around the world offer ample opportunities to incorporate climate-resilient approaches, and even though China is effectively eighth in the world among climate-related finance providers via multilateral development banks and multilateral climate funds, it may be a challenge to grasp the extent of China’s climate change adaptation support. That challenge is,
in part, because under the UN climate regime, China is not on the 1992-era list of wealthy countries responsible for climate finance. Quite self-servingly, China is not part of the development finance reporting systems used by the United States and many other leading economies. The Paris Agreement on climate left the lines between developed and developing countries blurry, and even though language on “common but differentiated responsibilities” ostensibly meant China and other countries that have developed dramatically in recent decades could be official, transparent contributors to climate finance targets, they have not taken that step.

The United States and China will have near-term opportunities to step up their responses to climate change adaptation needs in the Global South. Much of the focus of international climate-related negotiations will gravitate back to questions of who can offer how much to assist highly vulnerable countries. Since the current internationally agreed annual climate finance target expires in 2025, the preparations for and events of COP29, which will take place in Azerbaijan toward the end of 2024, will be marked by even more vociferous calls by developing countries to help them defend against calamitous impacts on populations, the environment, supply chains, health, and stability, with global ripple effects. Given its status as an economic powerhouse and the world’s largest current emitter of greenhouse gases, China’s role as a contributor will again be on the table.

As Senegal’s climate minister Madeleine Diouf Sarr noted on behalf of the group of least developed countries, the consensus reached in Dubai in 2023 “highlights the vast gap between developing country needs and the finance available” given debt crises and “fails to deliver a credible response to this challenge.” In the eyes of the Global South, powerful countries that help the world craft a more credible response will be better positioned to lead on many other pressing international issues. Ideally, this situation will spur competition while also prompting pragmatic collaboration—as encouragingly glimpsed through the recent U.S.-China Sunnylands agreement—because the scramble to manage climate change impacts is about more than just a charm offensive for greater alliances with the Global South. Poorer resilience to the impacts of climate change around the world will have direct and costly implications for conflicts, economic shocks, the spread of diseases, and other transnational threats.

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