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Evaluation of the Paris Agreement from a Realist and Liberalist Perspective

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One of the greatest questions in international relations is how states can work together towards common goals despite having competing interests. This issue is central to the international effort to mitigate climate change. To this date, 185 parties have ratified the Paris Agreement to limit the rise in global temperatures to 1.5 to 2 degrees Celsius. Although this agreement has so far received widespread international support, implementation has proven difficult. Climate change poses a threat to all countries as it can cause natural disasters and decrease food production around the world. However, combating this phenomenon would require states to employ costly mitigation efforts that could slow their pace of industrial development, both of which may cause them to fall behind economically. Due to this conflict, the effectiveness of the Paris Agreement will depend on the international system's ability to balance the shared objective of preserving the environment and each country's desire to remain competitive. A realist perspective suggests that the anarchic nature of the international system will make it difficult to take effective action. Although states that would be heavily impacted by climate change have a significant incentive to enforce the agreement, most states may be reluctant to enact pollution controls and risk economic slowdown since any states that disobey the agreement would come out ahead in the short term. In contrast, a liberalist perspective

would predict that states will eventually choose to cooperate since the long-term consequences of climate change would be much worse than the short-term economic losses. While realism better explains the complications of past climate agreements, the liberal perspective seems to more accurately describe the current status of the Paris Agreement as most states remain committed to upholding it nearly three years after its enactment.

From a realist perspective, the success of the Paris Agreement depends on whether most states decide that the benefits of enforcing it outweigh the costs. According to prominent realist Hans J. Morgenthau, international politics is ultimately a struggle for power, and the immediate aim of all states involved is to acquire more power [1]. Therefore, it is important to understand how the Paris Agreement would redistribute power among states. For instance, states whose influence would be significantly damaged by climate change would be more willing to cooperate. This is especially true in Latin America, where island countries are threatened by rising sea levels, and rising global temperatures would greatly reduce the amount of arable land [2]. Since Latin American countries are a major source of world food production, this loss would not only make it more difficult for states to provide for their citizens, but it would also weaken the states' leverage in the world economy as they would have less

food to export. Given how much these states have to lose, it is not surprising that three-quarters of Latin American residents view climate change as a serious problem [2].

While states that depend on agriculture have a great incentive to uphold the agreement, states that rely on industry have little reason to do so. In fact, developed countries, such as the United States, could suffer losses of at least 1-2% of GDP from mitigation efforts [3]. These countries also face less risk from climate change as their economies are more diversified, so they are less likely to view the economic shock as a reasonable tradeoff. This could partly explain why the United States is seeking to renege on the Paris Agreement [4]. Unfortunately, the industrial countries that have the least reason to engage in climate mitigation are also the countries that contribute the most emissions [3]. As a result, climate change may progress until the consequences are severe enough for these states to justify the cost, at which point it may be too late to react.

Although realism is rather pessimistic on the outcome of the Paris Agreement, it is important to note that this perspective makes several problematic assumptions. To begin, realism assumes that all states are rational actors who accurately weigh the consequences of each decision. This would imply that all decision-makers are aware of human-made climate change and its implications. In reality, many people are unaware of the effects of global warming and even deny its existence. Additionally, realism's view of states as unitary actors fails to explain the partisan division on this issue in many countries. This is very applicable to the United States, where Democrats are supportive of corrective action while Republicans are more likely to be skeptical of climate change. This would explain why the United States helped draft the agreement under a Democratic President only to reject it when a Republican took office [5]. The United States' decision to exit the agreement was not the rational conclusion of a unitary actor, but rather a consequence of shifting political support in the nation.

Despite these shortcomings, the realist perspective provides insight into why effective political action on this issue has proven elusive in the past. One of the major disagreements in the Rio de Janeiro Earth Summit of 1992 was which countries had

to take responsibility for correcting climate change. Additionally, China has historically tried to avoid emissions restrictions as it feared such restrictions would harm its economy [6]. While such controversies do not indicate that cooperation is impossible, they do suggest that one of the greatest obstacles to fighting climate change is convincing states to start fighting it.


In contrast to realism's cynical view of the Paris agreement, liberalism holds that the Paris agreement can be effective as long as states realize the long-term implications of climate change. According to Immanuel Kant, people are inherently cooperative not out of a sense of altruism, but because they are "rational devils" who realize that cooperation will be beneficial for all involved [1]. In the case of climate change, the consequences of inaction would include widespread destruction from natural disasters as well as food shortages due to droughts and changing weather patterns. Therefore, states would eventually realize that upholding

the Paris Agreement would be the optimal option as a short-term economic loss of 1-2% is much less severe than the disastrous effects of global warming.

So far, this prediction has held for most states in the Paris Agreement. According to Rhea Suh, the president of the Natural Resources Defense Council,

the Paris Agreement marks a turning point in climate negotiations as it signifies that "the world [finally] stands united against the central environmental challenge of our time" [7]. This unity also seems to have survived the United States' decision to exit the agreement as most other states have reaffirmed their commitment to uphold it in response. This near consensus on the Paris Agreement indicates that most states are beginning to realize the threat climate change poses and are acting accordingly.

The greatest challenge in upholding the Paris agreement is ensuring the continued support of all parties. While the Paris agreement includes a transparent evaluation system that prevents states from lying about their progress, it mostly relies on changing international expectations rather than formal repercussions to prevent violations [8]. This approach may prove problematic if a government decides to ignore international pressure as the United States has done. Fortunately, involvement from



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intra-state and non-state actors could allow countries to fulfill their commitments even with the loss of government approval. For instance, over 30 US cities and three states have attempted to negotiate with the United Nations in order to meet the United States' mitigation goals following the federal government's decision to reject it. While these actions do not eliminate the need for government support, they do demonstrate how non-state actors play an important role in climate mitigation.

Compared to realism, the liberalist perspective better encompasses the current outcomes of the Paris agreement. Not only does liberalism's assumption of inherent cooperativity explain the widespread support of this agreement, but its recognition of intra-state and non-state actors accounts for the continued effort of US entities to meet the agreement's goals. These findings contrast significantly with realism, which predicts that conflicting interests would hinder progress and emphasizes the necessity of state approval. Additionally, the liberalist perspective also provides an explanation for the United States' decision to renege which is the international system failing to pressure the United States into upholding the agreement.

However, the liberalist perspective is less useful for explaining the relatively unproductive climate discussions before the Paris agreement. Since climate change negatively impacts all countries, states should be able to efficiently combat it as it is in every country's best interests to stop it. Liberalism would explain this issue through the inability of international institutions such as the UN to reconcile the concerns of all parties, but this failure is reflective of a historical unwillingness to work together on this issue, contradicting this perspective's assumption of inherent cooperation. As a result, liberalism is less useful for explaining the challenges of climate negotiation than it is for describing the recent success of the Paris Agreement. However, it is currently unclear whether this success is a temporary exception or a turning point in the international effort to fight climate change. While the Paris Agreement is an important development in climate negotiation, it is a development that has yet to demonstrate whether it can survive complications.

Taken together, the realist and liberalist perspectives can accurately model the difficulties of past discussions as well as the current status of the agreement. Realism explains the previous disagreements over which countries are responsible for correcting climate change as the result of states trying to pre-

serve their economic power by avoiding costly mitigation requirements, although liberalism also notes the failure of international institutions to pressure countries into acting. For the Paris Agreement itself, liberalism recognizes that most countries would support the agreement as climate change poses a threat to all states. Liberalism also identifies the importance of non-state and intrastate actors (such as businesses and cities) in fulfilling the agreement. Although the long-term viability of the Paris Agreement remains uncertain, the agreement has the potential to effectively mitigate climate change as long as most states continue to prioritize protecting the planet over preserving economic leverage.

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