Climate Change and Foreign Policy Implications for Rising Powers
An Interview with William Antholis

BY ALICE HU

WILLIAM ANTHOLIS is the executive director of the Miller Center of Public Affairs at the University of Virginia, and a nonresident fellow in governance studies at the Brookings Institution. He was the former managing director of the Brookings Institution, and has also served as the director of international economic affairs in the White House.

Considering your expertise in both US foreign policy and climate change, what do you see as the greatest challenge for the US government in addressing climate change?

The challenge is what international relations theorists have long described as the two-level game: one on the level of international diplomacy, and one on the level of domestic legislation and implementation. On the international level, the current administration has chosen to break from the treaty negotiation format, and has moved toward political deals format, which is less legally binding. On the domestic level, they have broken from the mindset that the US Congress was going to pass mandatory climate change budget legislations, and have used the authority under the president to implement regulations. They also need to implement state-level obligations to address climate change, making the effort even more difficult.

It is important for the US to work with the international community in order to move forward on the domestic level. If other countries, such as India and China, are to take on similar responsibilities in addressing climate change, it will be easier to negotiate with the other branches of the government and make transitions that will have heavy costs. On the other hand, the recent executive actions that have cut US emissions dramatically also demonstrate to the international community that the United States is committed to climate action, playing out the two levels of the climate change challenge.

Do you think there is a conflict between energy security and efforts against climate change?

Energy security and efforts against climate change do not necessarily conflict. Countries can pursue energy in a way that regulates and reduces carbon emissions. The United States can pursue energy in a way that is less dependent on foreign powers for oil and more focused on renewable energies, but this requires challenging political compromises and is a path that the United States has not yet been willing to pursue. There is another path to energy security, which may or may not be carbon efficient. It places a heavy emphasis on the exploration and development of...
natural gases; natural gas is a much less costly resource than oil and can reduce carbon emissions.

However, finding natural gas, if done in the wrong way, can cause a high amount of emissions to directly enter the air and can more greatly contribute to overall greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions. Moreover, if the United States becomes too reliant on natural gases, it could run into a situation where natural gases hinder the development of more carbon-efficient sources of energy and the transition to renewable energies—the United States should perhaps view natural gas as a bridge toward a low-carbon economy if it is to balance energy security and efforts against climate change.

As the author of *Inside Out India and China: Local Politics Go Global*, you have done extensive on-the-ground research on India and China, and their increasing importance on the global stage. What is the influence of these two nations on international efforts to address climate change?

China and India are critical to long-term efforts to address climate change. Right now, China and India are the world’s number one and number three GHG emitting countries, respectively. China and India have been major contributors to GHG emissions. But in the last fifteen years, with economic development, these two countries have overtaken the rest of the world as the largest emitters of GHGs, along with the United States. Chinese efforts to reduce GHG emissions are therefore perhaps indicative of efforts underway internationally to address climate change. The recent US-China Joint Announcement on Climate Change, in the context of the 2015 era, is a breakthrough because it indicated that the world’s number one and number two greenhouse emitters would together pledge to stop the growth of both of their emissions.

India has GHG emissions that are approximately one quarter of those of China, and one third of those of the United States. On the other hand, India’s economy has been growing rapidly and is likely to continue to grow as rapidly as that of China, if not more so. Eventually, India’s emissions trajectory is likely to be similar to the one that China has experienced over the last twenty years. The growth in emissions from India would negate the reduction of emissions from the United States and China. India can avoid this trajectory; it has the opportunity to not contribute to the growth of global GHG emissions and prevent local air pollution issues, which have begun to plague China.

India has not made an international agreement on climate change, like the one taken by the United States and China at the end of 2014. In the months before the 2015 UN Climate Change Conference in Paris, the world will be looking to see what stances India takes on climate change and GHG emissions.

The Indian minister of environment recently stated that India will not be cutting its GHG emissions, given that its priorities are poverty alleviation and economic development. In this sense, India seems to be repeating the path of China. Do you believe that this type of economic development, which occurs at the cost of environmental protection, is a stage which all countries must go through?

India is planning on using coal as its top source of power. How they burn that coal and what mix of other fuels is added to the coal are both factors that can impact emissions. India could perceivably use coal in a way that minimizes the amount of emissions—this would be more expensive upfront, but the long-term benefits deserve consideration. To this end, India does not have to repeat the trajectory of China in its economic development.

Do you have any final thoughts that you would like to share with us?

A majority leader in the US Senate once described addressing climate change as the most complex undertaking by mankind. Combating climate change involves overcoming complexities including economic policies, political negotiations, and international cooperation. Regulating the climate of the planet requires solutions to be carried out in a dynamic fashion. The GHGs that we put into the atmosphere today will stay there for 50 or more years; the machinery that puts out emissions into the air will have effects that last for decades. So when you think about any action that affects the climate, such as the building of a coal-powered factory, you need to think about the fact that each year’s operation has a 50-year carbon effect, and a 50-year operation would mean a commitment of centuries. Any international agreement that we make has to take into consideration these long-term consequences. 20 years into the process of grappling with the complexity of climate change as a species, we are trying to design a system that will be sustainable for future generations. What is worth keeping in mind is that we are the first generation to truly understand the impact of climate change, and we are probably the last generation to have the ability to change the direction in which we are moving to prevent catastrophic outcomes. But the future generations will have to remain equally committed.

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