Chapter 18

The Environmentalism and Politics of Climate Change: A Study of the Process of Global Convergence through UNFCCC Conferences

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ABSTRACT

This study examined the environmentalism and politics of climate change by undertaking a study of the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) focusing on the Kyoto Protocol document and the UNFCCC conferences held after Kyoto that has centered on how to garner consensus on the way forward for the global community. The study also probed why the agreement at Kyoto, Japan started having problems when a change of government occurred in the United States with a Republican President that leaned towards the interests of big business most of whom would bear the most costs if the policies as articulated in the Kyoto protocols were to be executed and why the Democratic presidency of Barrack Obama has been slow in pushing forward the agreement at Kyoto. The study concluded that national political interests of the major powers seem to have stalled the implementation of the Kyoto protocol but a change in the dynamics of global leadership spectrum can have a significant impetus in producing an agreement on climate change.

INTRODUCTION

In 1997, the world gathered at Kyoto, Japan with the agenda to discuss an issue of global proportion which was considered urgent. That issue was the danger posed by emission of greenhouse gases (GHG) and the consequences of that to planet earth. Another important objective of the meeting was to map out strategies to mitigate the effects of climate change. Though the protocol which emerged from that meet-
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The Kyoto Protocol, which came into effect in 2005 after Russia ratified it, the manner in which major industrialized countries led by the United State foot-dragged on implementation over their demand that developing nations such as India and China should be made to extract commitment on reducing emission smothered the fire that produced the Kyoto protocol. The Copenhagen Climate Change Conference (COP15) of 2009 raised a lot of hope that the issues that stalled the implementation of the Kyoto protocol would be settled and every country carried along in a concerted effort at saving planet earth through a legally binding treaty that member states would domesticated. But in Copenhagen the polarization between developed countries, emerging countries such as India and China and the rests of developing countries could not lead to a meaningful conclusion. Instead, a rushed agreement that shifted the attention of environmental activists to Cancun Mexico the next venue of climate summit (COP 16) that held in December 2010 was what delegates took home. That conference in Cancun came without any concrete pathway towards arriving at agreements that would halt the rapidly changing climate generally seen as endangering the planet. Scientists, researchers, intergovernmental organizations, nongovernmental organizations and even concerned individuals all agree that the changes are due to the activities of man. Industrialization, power generation, deforestation, transport and agriculture among others contribute to emission of greenhouse gases including water vapors, carbon dioxide, methane, ozone.

Climate change caused by anthropogenic greenhouse gases has emerged as one of the most important environmental issues facing the international community. For instance greenhouse gases-particularly fossil fuel-based carbon dioxide emissions accumulates in the atmosphere as a result of human activities. The progressive increases in greenhouse gas concentrations raise the global average temperature and cause other changes to the climate (Bohringer, 2003). Its effects on weather and other natural environmental heritages have become increasingly felt since the 1990s. This view has raised the bar of climate change as one of the most significant challenges facing the world. Its projected impacts on the environment and society are unprecedented and better imagined that real. However scholars of climate change provided the scientific background to what is now a deeply political problem by the suggestion that global greenhouse gas emissions must decline rapidly to mitigate the impending consequences resulting from increase in temperature (Shanahan, 2009).

Thus, climate change has become a long-term international challenge requiring a resolute and concerted international effort, and stressing the need for urgent action by the global community. The periodic conferences on the subject matter is aimed at getting the world’s major greenhouse gas emitting countries to set targets and make commitments to significantly reduce their emissions, and to support the most vulnerable countries to adapt and address the impacts of climate change. Not doing anything implies that global citizens in almost every continent of the world automatically morph into stateless ‘climate refugees’ at the eclipse of an adverse natural disaster. Earthquakes, volcanic eruptions, tsunamis, cyclones, hurricanes, landslides, floods and storm including recent trends off cloud burst are all natural phenomena that have intensified across the world as a consequence. Climate change threatens our way of life, our rich culture and traditions and to Klein (2009), it is a benign form of genocide. Climate change is undoubtedly a critical theme for today’s international politics and cross border relations. The near universal recognition of the seriousness of the climate change challenge for the future of the world and support for a binding international agreement to address it have become of grave importance. Unless this problem is tackled soon, it could transform the planet earth, making the climate (earth’s weather patterns) much more erratic thus, forcing many species into extinction and making life much