

The Adaptation and Development of Multilateralism from the Perspective of the Paris Agreement

Beijia Qiao

*Tongji University, Shanghai, China
2609151462@qq.com*

Abstract: The Paris Agreement, as the core framework of global climate governance in the 21st century, has not only reshaped international cooperation models but also become a typical case for studying the adaptability and developmental pathways of contemporary multilateralism. By analyzing the institutional design, implementation effects, and future trends of the Agreement, this paper reveals the innovations and limitations of multilateralism in addressing global challenges. The findings indicate that: first, the Agreement has constructed a new cooperative model combining inclusivity and flexibility through the “Nationally Determined Contributions” (NDCs) mechanism and transparency framework, covering 97% of global carbon emissions; second, its practice has exposed structural contradictions such as insufficient enforcement of voluntary commitments, interference from major power politics, and the North-South fairness deficit; third, future multilateralism must achieve institutional innovation through differentiated cooperation in “climate clubs”, digital technology empowerment, and nested multi-level governance. This paper argues that the Paris Agreement reflects both the transformation of multilateralism from “rigid rules” to “flexible governance” and the adaptive dilemmas of the global governance system under the constraints of sovereign states. Its experience provides critical insights for the international community in addressing climate change and other transnational challenges: effective multilateral cooperation requires balancing national autonomy with collective action capacity while continuously promoting the synergistic development of technological empowerment and institutional innovation.

Keywords: Paris Agreement, Multilateralism, Global Climate Governance, NDCs, Institutional Innovation

1. Introduction

In contemporary foreign relations, where the world management system is tasked with difficulties, multilateralism, a crucial mechanism for coordinating interests and participation among nations, has attracted much attention for its potency and adaptability. The 2015 publication of the Paris Agreement serves as a framework for the global environment scheme and as a case study of the expansion of modern multilateralism. This article examines the creation, implementation, and potential changes to the Paris Agreement to know how multilateralism responds and what actions it takes in response to international difficulties.

Under the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC), the Paris Agreement is one of the most important international climate agreements. Its primary goals are to

lower global warming above pre-business degrees by significantly less than 2°C and to maintain it below 1.5°C. The implementation of the Agreement embodies the dialogue between the international community regarding how to deal with climate change and key features of multilateralism in global control [1]. In order to leverage flexibility and bindingness using international review and transparency tools, the Paris Agreement uses a bottom-up commitment system based on the nations “Nationally Determined Contributions” (NDCs). This cross-sectional system exposes new growth patterns in contemporary foreign integrating systems and demonstrates how multilateralism has changed from forced norms to volunteer involvement.

Choosing the Paris Agreement for examining multilateralism has considerable theoretical and practical relevance. Theoretically, the Agreement reflects the practice of “new multilateralism” in international relations theory, and its creative governance structure offers rich material for examining international cooperation mechanisms. Practically, climate change is a typical global public goods issue, characterized by transboundary, long-term, and complex features, making it an ideal test for the effectiveness of multilateralism. Moreover, the challenges and coping strategies exposed during the implementation of the Paris Agreement offer valuable lessons for reforming the future global governance system.

This report analyzes the beneficial implications of the Paris Agreement for the development of multilateralism, followed by an analysis of its innovations in global climate governance and the fundamental challenges it has revealed, and then determines the energetic pathways and possible trends of multilateralism.

2. The development and innovation of multilateralism under the Paris Climate Agreement

One of the most significant administrative developments of the Paris Agreement lies in its application of the “Nationally Determined Contributions” (NDCs) foundation, a commitment system, which fundamentally transforms the type of international setting control. The NDC mechanism allows each member to establish its own emission reduction targets and application techniques based on global issues and growth cycles, in contrast to the Kyoto Protocol’s “top-down” required emission reduction unit. This flexible design has generated a range of important outcomes. On one hand, it respects the distinguished demands of developing countries, addressing the long-standing issue of applying the principle of “common but differentiated responsibilities” in climate negotiations. On the other hand, it lowers the entry barrier for major emitters, enabling the Agreement to ultimately secure signatures from 195 parties, including the United States, China, and India. This innovative duty method reflects meaningful advancement. This national sovereignty combined with collective action demonstrates how multilateralism can foster widespread engagement without using worldwide police [1].

Creating a comprehensive transparency and global stocktake system under the Paris Agreement, which establishes a new basis for international cooperation, is another major advancement. The “global survey” system under Article 14 handles thorough assessments of social development every five years. In contrast, the “enhanced transparency framework” under Article 13 of the Contract requires countries to evaluate emissions data and growth on reductions frequently. Countries are constantly motivated to increase their pledges to the environment due to the moral and political force created by data transparency and eye examination, despite this view having a specific “soft constraint” [1]. Solid social shaping power has been demonstrated in practice by addressing power issues in international cooperation and, more importantly, establishing a new understanding and translation mechanism that enables multilateralism to achieve powerful modifications through regular evaluations.

The Paris Agreement’s multi-level governance technique, which includes non-state actors, is its another significant commitment to multilateralism. Through platforms like the “Non-State Actor Zone for Climate Action” (NAZCA), the Agreement formally incorporates cities, regions, businesses,

investors, and other subnational and non-state actors into the climate governance architecture [2]. Breaking the state-centric limits of normal multilateralism, this innovation creates a richer control habitat. The robustness of this system was fully demonstrated during the U.S. treatment of the Paris Agreement in 2017-2021. The “We Are Still In” Agreement, which consists of state governments, businesses, and places in the United States, pledged to accomplish the Agreement’s goals. Despite nationalist concerns, this “decentralized” control product demonstrates that multilateralism can function beyond national operational constraints and offers dogged management training for international cooperation.

These advances make the transition from treaty-based multilateralism in the 20th century to a more accommodative, distributed management strategy more suitable for today’s fragmented global order. Falkner claims that a “new multilateralism” is emerging where transparency systems and multi-stakeholder participation combine liberty with transparency mechanisms, respect national independence, and create a new management ecosystem. This institutional innovation opens up fresh pathways for international cooperation in the twenty-first era and provides practical solutions to pressing global problems like climate change [3].

3. Structural dilemmas of multilateralism exposed by the Paris Agreement

Although the “Nationally Determined Contributions” (NDCs) mechanism of the Paris Agreement successfully achieved broad participation, its voluntary nature also introduced severe collective action dilemmas: the lack of binding compliance mechanisms and penalties reduces the internal motivation for countries, especially major emitters, to enhance their ambitions continuously. This “low-level equilibrium” phenomenon confirms Falkner’s concern that, in the absence of mandatory constraints, countries tend to adopt a “lowest common denominator” strategy, resulting in collective action outcomes that fall far short of actual needs [3].

When delivering global public goods, a deeper issue is that the NDC method fails to address the “free rider” problem adequately. Countries, particularly energy exporters (such as Saudi Arabia) and industrialized countries (such as India), have financial opportunities to formally increase emissions cuts because the benefits of climate control are non-excludable. Due to this important debate, the effectiveness of the Paris Agreement depends on nations’ willingness to cooperate. This reliance becomes increasingly fragile due to growing geopolitical tensions.

The United States’ departure from the Paris Agreement and eventually return to it have demonstrated how vulnerable global structures are to tremendous power politics. Even democratic states may renounce multilateral agreements when international obligations conflict with domestic political and economic priorities. This policy change is more than just an isolated event. Because the Agreement lacks legally binding enforcement mechanisms, international cooperation in the environment is constantly resilient to disruptions brought on by local political cycles. The “climate club” concept by Keohane and Victor may encourage collaboration among smaller groups, but it risks further fracturing global climate governance. The actions of America raised concerns about “climate protectionism among creating nations”. Growing these concerns could lead to competing factions within the global climate governance system, undermining the Paris Agreement’s shared global framework [4].

The biggest sustaining issue with applying the Paris Agreement is the gap between wealthy and poor countries regarding money and technology transfer. Economically, developing nations’ financing for climate change falls short of their management standards. Worse still, most funds come as loans rather than grants, inadvertently increasing recipients’ fiscal burdens. Functionally, developing nations must purchase low-carbon systems for astronomical prices due to commercial interests and intellectual property rights, significantly expanding the “green divide” [5].

The Paris Agreement's challenges present significant fundamental conflicts of interest for contemporary multilateralism. These conflicts are part of a more significant issue that fashionable world authority institutions do not only experience in terms of cultural management. In the twenty-first era, multilateralism is experiencing an "effectiveness issue" [6]. On the one hand, globalization-related problems necessitate greater international cooperation. On the other hand, state-centric approaches to leadership challenge to address these issues. Therefore, as the experience of the Paris Agreement suggests, combating these inconsistencies requires substantive institutional innovation, rather than sophisticated changes within existing systems.

4. Possible guidance for multilateralism in the Paris Agreement framework

The "climate club" model is developing as a major complement to improve the efficacy of international collaboration in order to overcome the shortcomings of conventional multilateral frameworks. This proposal entails building higher-standard cooperative procedures among like-minded states within smaller groups, paired with differential measures for non-members, potentially solving the enforcement issues of the present NDC system. A pragmatic illustration is the European Union's Carbon Border Adjustment Mechanism (CBAM), which discourages "carbon leakage" by pricing the embedded carbon in imported products and motivates trading partners to hasten low-carbon transitions [4]. They have the advantage of exceeding the consensus limitations of the Paris Agreement and improving implementation efficiency through small-scale cooperation (e.g., the EU carbon border tax), but risk exacerbating North-South disagreements and triggering trade conflicts. Such clubs can either complement the multilateral system through technological diffusion or weaken global governance through rule fragmentation. As a manifestation of "selective multilateralism", the climate clubs challenge the consensus principle of the UNFCCC, but at the same time provide a sample of flexible reforms for the rigid multilateral mechanism. In the future, a balance needs to be struck between the efficiency of the club and multilateral inclusiveness, such as the establishment of an open access clause and a compensation mechanism for developing countries, to realize its positive value as a transitional governance tool [7].

The rapid advancement of contemporary technologies like blockchain, AI, and big data provides text resources to address the issues of global climate management in terms of transparency and confidence. The "digitally empowered management", Tamper-proofing is becoming a reality thanks to the use of blockchain to raise the credibility of national emission inventories significantly [6].

These technological advancements are altering how international climate control operates, reducing confusion in information for more accurate and timelier world stocktakes, strengthening social monitoring by allowing non-state actors and the general public to quickly examine compliance, and accelerating policy responses to emission anomalies. Over the next five decades, as satellite remote sensing, IoT, and distributed processing systems progress further, there may be an "innovative governance" period characterized by real-time, data-driven, powerful changes.

The "nested multilateralism" is manifested through the deep connection between the activities of non-position actors (such as places, companies, and civil society groups) and situation-led international processes via institutional channels, forming comparable control layers. Non-position actors, on the one hand, help close the "emissions area" by promoting the validity of local climate goals through solid emissions cuts, plan innovation, and technological transformation [2]. On the other hand, their social mobilization abilities and show effects favour the inclusion of non-state steps in the Paris Agreement's worldwide framework known as the "Lima-Paris Action Agenda". However, its limitations lie in its reliance on national policy coordination (e.g., avoiding double counting), insufficient participation from developing countries, and limited resources in international coordination mechanisms (e.g., High-Level Champions). "Nested multilateralism" expands the traditional state-centric management design, increasing diversity and flexibility by combining

“bottom-up” and “top-down” techniques. It examines the ability of the international system to connect non-state activities while shifting multilateralism away from special status negotiations to joint efforts by different actors. More efforts are required to handle disjointed software and imbalanced images to achieve more effective international collective action.

By combining state-centric and multi-actor engagement strategies and blending popular frameworks with distinguished plans, multilateralism in weather leadership will show “hybrid organizational” characteristics. By adjusting the multilateralism process rather than rejecting it, this development addresses the “trilemma” of global public goods delivery by balancing account, security, and fairness with changing situations.

These developments highlight how crucial online systems are for successfully implementing high-standard rules established by weather organizations, how blockchain-verified mitigation results may encourage the participation of non-state actors, and how multi-level governance websites provide testing grounds for technological advances. This constructive discussion might lead to a pliable global climate governance framework and provide insights for international cooperation in different areas. According to the natural mobility of the Paris Agreement, the potential power of multilateralism lies not in pursuing equivalent administrative forms but rather in developing different assistance models that are appropriate for different problems and areas. Multilateralism’s most significant self-reinvention has ever been experienced as it grapples with climate change, which is always the most urgent global concern. Its success significantly influences how resilient society will be in the face of an economic crisis.

5. Conclusion

The Paris Agreement demonstrates the effectiveness and limitations of contemporary multilateralism. Through dynamic leadership, operational improvements have improved previous versions and resulted in a fantastic presence. However, widespread considerations are revealed by ongoing compliance and investment issues.

Context-sensitive execution and general norms are necessary to develop cross-architecture. Using technology to improve transparency while considering each person’s situation and encouraging various actors without sacrificing cooperation is necessary. The Agreement’s most significant factor might be as a model for this fluid multilateralism, demonstrating how businesses can embrace world-specific threats while accepting philosophical risks.

The resilience of multilateralism, as demonstrated by the Paris Framework’s ability to evolve in response to escalating climate challenges, suggests that the future of global cooperation hinges not on perfection, but on a dynamic balance between innovation, inclusiveness, pragmatism, and shared responsibility. The defining test of this approach will be whether it can overcome inertia and dependence to drive sustained global transformation.

References

- [1] *Paris Agreement (UNFCCC, 2016)*
- [2] T. Hale, “The Role of Sub-state and Non- state Actors in International Climate Processes,” *Global Economic Governance Programme*, Dec. 2018. Accessed: Apr. 15, 2025. [Online]. Available: <https://www.geg.ox.ac.uk/publication/role-sub-state-and-nonstate-actors-international-climate-processes>
- [3] R. FALKNER, “The Paris Agreement and the new logic of international climate politics,” *International Affairs*, vol. 92, no. 5, pp. 1107–1125, Aug. 2016, doi: <https://doi.org/10.1111/1468-2346.12708>.
- [4] R. O. Keohane and D. G. Victor, “Cooperation and discord in global climate policy,” *Nature Climate Change*, vol. 6, no. 6, pp. 570–575, May 2016, doi: <https://doi.org/10.1038/nclimate2937>.
- [5] OECD (2022), *Climate Finance Provided and Mobilised by Developed Countries in 2016-2020: Insights from Disaggregated Analysis, Climate Finance and the USD 100 Billion Goal*, OECD Publishing, Paris, <https://doi.org/10.1787/286dae5d-en>.

- [6] F. Biermann et al., "Transforming governance and institutions for global sustainability: key insights from the Earth System Governance Project," *Current Opinion in Environmental Sustainability*, vol. 4, no. 1, pp. 51–60, Feb. 2012, doi: <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.cosust.2012.01.014>.
- [7] UNFCCC Secretariat, *Synthesis report on the aggregate effect of the intended nationally determined contributions*, FCCC/CP/2015/7, 30 Oct. 2015, <http://unfccc.int/resource/docs/2015/cop21/eng/07.pdf>.