

10.18686/frim.v2i5.4498

The Paradox of Climate Change Issue: An Analysis from the Perspective of Realism

Liheng Zhao

University of Nottingham Ningbo China, Zhejiang China, 315199

Abstract: This paper aims to explore the paradox of climate change from the perspective of realism. As a global issue, climate change not only involves environmental issues, but also involves complex relations at political, economic, social and other levels. Realism, as a theoretical framework that emphasizes the decisive role of power, interests and material factors in international relations, provides a new perspective for understanding the paradox of climate change. This paper first summarizes the current situation and challenges of climate change, and then analyzes the power struggle, conflict of interest and limitations of the international system among different countries and groups in the issue of climate change by using realistic theory.

Keywords: Climate change; Paradox; Realism; Power struggle

1. Introduction

Climate change is indeed a pressing issue that has been acknowledged by many scholars and politicians as an existential threat. It's quite paradoxical that despite this recognition, we have witnessed very limited action on it. As per the realist theory of international relations, this paradox can be attributed to the inherent selfishness of humans, the tendency to pass the buck, and the desire of nations for profit and power. These factors play a crucial role in shaping the response of nations towards climate change and contribute to the limited action taken to address this global challenge.

2. Climate change is regarded as a security Issue

A paper in 2001 by Arnell and others predicted that millions of people would be at risk of hunger, coastal flooding, water scarcity, and malaria due to high temperatures between 2050 and 2080. In 2080, water shortages will be particularly acute, and the population of megacities such as China and India will face the risk of food crises. (Arnell et al., 2001)

Speaking at The UN Headquarters in New York, UN Secretary-General António Guterres said: "The era of global warming has ended; the era of global boiling has arrived." He emphasizes that we are not just dealing with global warming, we are dealing with a global boiling point, he added, "The only surprise is the speed of the change. Climate change is here. It is terrifying, and it is just the beginning." Underscoring once again the speed of climate change, and the horrors to come. (Guterres, 2023)

3. The paradox of "speech" and "action" in the context of climate change

The security of climate change has attracted wide attention and attention in the society and the world. However, this security only brings "speech" attention, and governments have no obvious measures and behaviors to deal with the problem of climate change.

Most of the world's nations are addressing climate change, both verbally and in writing. To deal with the problem of climate change, countries and government organizations around the world have jointly held many conferences. Kyoto Protocol, signed in 1997 to reduce greenhouse gas levels in the atmosphere, consists of 192 parties, of which 37 industrialized countries have committed to reducing greenhouse gas emissions by 5% compared with 1990 levels and by 18% over the eight years from 2013 to 2020. (Kyoto Protocol in unfccc, 2023). The Paris Agreement, adopted by 196 parties at the UN Climate Change Conference in 2015, aims to keep global temperature increases below 2 degrees Celsius over five years. Financial and technical support will be provided to countries in need. (Paris Agreement unfccc, 2023)

What accounts for the paradox between speech and action on climate change? I will expand the narrative from two perspectives of realism: individual and state and analyze the causes and results of paradoxes.

3.1 Realism: Personal perspective

3.1.1 Realism holds that human nature is selfish

Realism holds that individuals and groups are selfish and that selfishness is part of human nature. Energy has benefited our lives, and al-

though carbon dioxide emissions have exacerbated the problem of climate change, giving up energy use means greater losses.

As a beneficiary of energy, it is difficult to get the public to give up benefits that were once within reach. Energy has improved our quality of life and raised people's living standards. Fossil fuels such as coal, oil, and gas are closely related to people's lives, they are used for electricity, heating, and cooking. This is despite fossil fuels, coal, oil, and gas, contributing more than 75% of greenhouse gases and nearly 90% of carbon dioxide emissions. (United Nations, 2023), however, from a personal point of view, climate change does not directly affect our daily life, on the contrary, energy brings us a better quality of life, and it is difficult to give up the welfare and benefits enjoyed for hundreds of years.

3.1.2 Shifting responsibility

It is generally accepted that climate change is not an individual problem and that states and large corporations should take responsibility for it. Here are two examples of how people generally blame others for climate change rather than themselves.

Chinese residents blame the state and big business for climate change. According to the survey results of 1, 611 Chinese citizens conducted by the paper in 2022, more than half of the respondents have realized that climate change will threaten themselves and their future generations. The two most important reasons for not implementing environmental behavior are: "Doing it alone doesn't make any sense" and "People around me do not implement environmental behavior." (Lv et al., 2023) The role of herd mentality affects people's behavior.

3.2 Realism: The National Perspective

3.2.1 National interests at the center

Realism highlights the importance of a state's interests, and according to this theory, the issue of climate change is not in the national interest of a country. Some argue that addressing climate change may hinder a country's development. This is especially true for energy powers, where energy is a crucial component of national wealth.

One way for opinion leaders to bridge differences on specific issues is to create slogans, which are widely disseminated through channels such as mass media and social software and achieve the purpose of controlling public opinion. (Davison, 2023) This video has 210, 000 views and 2, 000 comments. The widespread spread of this view on the Internet gradually brainwashes the public and subtly influences the attitudes and behaviors of American society and residents on climate issues. From the perspective of classical realism, the desire for more power is rooted in the defect of human nature (Elman, 2021, p.16).

3.2.2 Realism holds that the state is rational and trade-offs

Realism sees the state as a rational actor, and national strategy is understood to be rationally determined after considering different options costs, and benefits. (Elman, 2021, p.18) On the issue of climate change, it is a decision that requires huge cost to abandon traditional energy and switch to new clean energy, so it is very difficult to change the energy structure.

Women from Switzerland (Klima Seniorinnen Schweiz) accused the Swiss government of a lack of action on climate change. They asked the Swiss government to set more stringent emission reduction targets as soon as possible and do all it can to keep global temperature rise below 1.5 degrees Celsius. (Kaminski, 2023) Switzerland's move proves that while the Paris Agreement requires monitoring and reporting of carbon emissions, it cannot force a country to reduce emissions. Most actions related to reducing carbon emissions must be passed by legislatures or heads of state. (Nahm, 2023) Out of the consideration of power and interests, the Swiss government chose a silent way to deal with the issue of climate change, although it caused a small amount of dissatisfaction at the social level, from the perspective of realism, it is understandable.

4. Conclusion and Reflection

From the perspective of realism, the selfishness of human nature, the pursuit of national interests, and the weighing of advantages and disadvantages lead to the climate change paradox.

On an individual level, it's common for people to prioritize their own needs and desires. While most individuals are familiar with the issue of climate change and understand the threat it poses, many still prioritize the conveniences of modern life.

From a national point of view, if a country wants to occupy a place in the international community, it cannot give up its interests and power. However, countries cannot turn a blind eye to the increasingly serious problems such as global warming, air pollution, and sea level rise. Therefore, we can indeed see that countries have made various efforts in form.

References

- [1] Arndt, C., Halikiopoulou, Daphne., & Vrakopoulos, C. (2023) The center-periphery divide and attitudes towards climate change measures among Western Europeans, *Environmental Politics*, 32:3, 381-406.

- [2] Arnell, N. W., Fischer, G., Iglesias, A., Kovats, S., Livermore, M., Martens, P., McMichael, T., Nicholls, R., Parry, M., & Rosenzweig, C. (2001). Millions at risk: Defining critical climate change threats and targets. *Global Environmental Change*, 11(3), 181-183.
- [3] D, Trump. [C-SPAN]. (2019, August 27). President Trump on Climate Change [Video]. YouTube. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=p11Rnz4zNkg&t=15s> [Accessed 08 December 2023].
- [4] Davison, W. Phillips (2023, November 7). public opinion. Encyclopedia Britannica. <https://www.britannica.com/topic/public-opinion> [Accessed 08 December 2023].
- [5] Elman, C. and Jensen, M. (2012) "Realism" in Williams, Paul (ed) *Security studies. An Introduction*, pp 15-31. Routledge.
- [6] G, Marshall. [Talks at Google]. (2014, October 22). Why Our Brains are Wired to Ignore Climate Change | George Marshall | Talks at Google [Video]. YouTube. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=726BZat208A> [Accessed 08 December 2023].
- [7] Guterres, A. [Guardian News]. (2023, July 28). 'The era of global boiling has arrived' warns the UN [Video]. YouTube. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xyacrd1d-cU> [Accessed 08 December 2023].
- [8] International Energy Agency (2021) Energy in India today. [online] Available at: <https://www.iea.org/reports/india-energy-outlook-2021/energy-in-india-today> [Accessed 09 December 2023].
- [9] J, Nahm (2023) Failures and Successes of the Paris Agreement. The Alliance for Citizen Engagement. [online] Available at: <https://ace-usa.org/blog/research/research-foreignpolicy/failures-and-successes-of-the-paris-agreement/> [Accessed 09 December 2023].
- [10] Kaminski, I. (2023) Switzerland and France accused of lack of climate action in ECHR hearing. The Guardian. [online] Available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2023/mar/29/switzerland-and-france-accused-of-lack-of-climate-action-in-echr-hearing> [Accessed 08 December 2023].
- [11] Lv, Y., Zhang, Zehong., Zhao, Zuoyan., Chen Liangxian., Wang Yasai. [澎湃新闻] (2023) 极值之下 | 澎湃调查: 对气候变化认知越高, 不意味着行动越多. [online] Available at: https://m.thepaper.cn/newsDetail_forward_21339425 [Accessed 09 December 2023].
- [12] NASA (2023) NASA Announces Summer 2023 Hottest on Record. [online] Available at: <https://www.nasa.gov/news-release/nasa-announces-summer-2023-hottest-on-record>.
- [13] Rio, C. R. D., Toth, E. (2023) Getting climate-ready: cop28 and the global goal on adaptation. [online] Available at: https://unfoundation.org/blog/post/getting-climate-ready-cop-28-and-the-global-goal-on-adaptation/?gclid=CjwKCAiAvdCrBhBREiwAX6-6Uk1L-W1VXeIkDiuLHWqE7zrPceUjQLxVaNxspZIVk1GTgYtCY3_jfFhoCfmwQAvD_BwE [Accessed 09 December 2023].
- [14] The global coordination group of the youth-led climate strike (2019). Climate crisis and a betrayed generation. The Guardian. [online] Available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2019/mar/01/youth-climate-change-strikers-open-letter-to-world-leaders> [Accessed 08 December 2023].
- [15] Two Degrees Institute (2023) Climate Levels. [online] Available at: <https://www.climatelevels.org/?pid=2degreesinstitute&theme=grid-light>