**50 Years of Global Climate Change Debate: What’s Next?**

December 3rd marks the 50-year anniversary of when climate change was first discussed in the United Nations (UN) General Assembly. The Swedish UN Ambassador, Sverker Åström, warned in his speech about climate change and called for international action. The anniversary of this speech almost perfectly coincides with the opening of the next round of global climate change negotiations in Katowice, Poland.

The report by the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change on meeting the 1.5 degree Celsius target underscores the critical need for urgent action. The recent U.S. fourth national climate assessment details many negative economic, human health, and environmental impacts, and its first key finding highlights that “global action to significantly cut greenhouse gas emission can substantially reduce climate-related risks.”

It is imperative that the next 50 years of multilateral cooperation make much more progress in addressing the climate crisis than what was achieved over the past five decades – and several national and sub-national political trends may come together to make this a reality.

**Past disagreements**

Several basic scientific points that were raised by the Swedish UN Ambassador in the General Assembly speech remain remarkably pertinent.

He stated that “one well known example of pollution is the rise in the concentration of atmospheric carbon dioxide,” as he noted that “the increase in the proportion of carbon dioxide may have certain effects on the radiation balance of the earth and thus on world climate.” Referring to the greenhouse effect, he concluded that “man has already rendered the temperature equilibrium of the globe more unstable.”

Lingering political disagreements, however, have rendered it impossible to formulate a unified response to an increasingly stark climate crisis.

It is ultimately about responsibility. It is about which countries bear the greatest responsibility for the climate crisis, which countries should take the lead by cutting their greenhouse gas emissions and by how much, and how much financial and technical assistance should be provided to help developing countries move away from fossil fuels and adapt to a changing climate.

The Paris Agreement’s emphasis on voluntary contributions by all countries together with promises of more climate finance led many to hope that the divide between countries would shrink. Yet, the negotiations on the “Paris Rulebook” to operationalize the treaty show that much of the past 50 years of mistrust and disagreement remains intact.

**Future trends**

After 50 years of political finger-pointing and foot-dragging, three political developments may offer opportunities to break out of the entrenched national positions that so far have halted progress.

First, China is looking to take on a greater global role in climate change cooperation. Certainly, this may not necessarily lead to more collaborative and progressive outcomes, but it is increasingly not in China’s interest to play the same blocking role that it has in the past. The time scale of significant decreases in Chinese emissions remain uncertain, but China is increasing its diplomatic activities in search of new policy solutions.

Second, large developing countries like India, Indonesia, and Nigeria that are at the forefront of experiencing climate impacts will grow rapidly in population over the next decades. This does not automatically re-shape the climate change negotiations, but a larger political and economic influence by countries impacted by climate change can help to elevate the urgency of climate change while supporting domestic energy transitions.

Third, an increase in transnational climate governance networks provides a momentum for heightened ambitions and helps to showcase and diffuse concrete implementation measures. In the United States, many states, cities, businesses, and universities are stepping up their climate change efforts. This is creating a stronger domestic platform for action when, rather than if, the United States once again returns to multilateralism.

**Is it possible?**

The past 50 years of global climate change debate represent a series of lost opportunities to limit the most severe risks of climate change, as both global GHG emissions and temperature have continued on an upward trajectory.

The next five decades of climate change cooperation will be shaped by whether or not the world’s countries are able to support the growing range of local and transnational initiatives to cut emissions and build more climate resilient societies.

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