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# When policy-makers stood still to follow the interests of humankind

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**Abstract**: *This paper is a theoretical discussion about the how classical paradigms of international relations relate to new challenges in general. In particular, we are interested in how classical paradigms perceive and understand the extreme events described through climate changes in the framework of international policy. For this, we develop an argument that the joint impact of global agenda issues and the pursuit of traditional policy logic in globalization will only create "losers" in the long term.*

**Keywords:** *Climate change, realpolitik, global agenda issues, national interests, public-private partnership.*

**Sommario**: *Nell'articolo l'autore svolge una discussione teorica su come i paradigmi classici delle relazioni internazionali si riferiscono alle nuove sfide in generale. In particolare, all'autore interessa capire come i paradigmi classici percepiscono e comprendono gli eventi estremi descritti attraverso i cambiamenti climatici nel quadro della politica internazionale. Per questo, sviluppiamo un argomento che l'impatto congiunto delle questioni di agenda globale e l'impresa della logica politica tradizionale nella globalizzazione creerà solo "perdenti" a lungo termine.*

**Parole chiave***: Cambiamento climatico, realpolitik, questioni per agenda globale, interessi nazionali, partenariato pubblico-privato.*

## Introduction

Until the beginning of the last century, human communities interacted in a large world where in general the only interaction bounds were geographical ones. And the effect of human activity remained relatively confined to regional levels. Under logic of globalization, at the beginning of the fourth Industrial Revolution human society evolves and develops in a more limited space in which political frameworks, international activities (including trade) and environmental issues make societies more interconnected and more sensitive to the behaviour of others. The space constraint in particular means that regional events may become global crises which arouse public concern. International actors thus need to connect their agendas to a global one which is made up of a variety of issues without a characteristic hierarchy (Keohane and Nye 2011).

As expected, global issues have taken on a new character which describes various levels of risk for human life on a global scale. Trade with nuclear materials, systemic crises, possible pandemics, and continuous environmental degradation (Western 2001; Gaan 2005) are just some of these.

Under the influence of these factors, the planet is embarking on a period of fundamental change (Butlin 1989), which at the same time degrades the quality of the environment, with irreversible effects on the evolution of humankind (Johnson *et al.* 1997).

In this new international "environment" between the political framework, international activity and environment issues a triangle has been created where the asymmetry is comprised in negative effects on the planetary environment produced by the advantage created for humanity through international activity. In this relationship, policies have became a constant which are revealed through the issues approached by decision makers and the philosophy used to maintain states' interests at the domestic and foreign levels (Vasquez 2004). However, the political framework is also correlated with the impossibility of sustaining national interests in global competition and managing environment risks at the same time. Because of this, in the last decades the climate change issue has become more and more a subject which is discussed in the international agenda. And because the public perception of risk is an extremely important component of the domestic-political context within

which political makers operate, the climate change issue has been strongly polarized politically in an attempt to cover up the problem in the name of the national interest.

In the pages that follow, we try to make a comprehensive survey of how the projection of national interests through global policies accelerates the development of climate change problems. In particular, we will approach the role of *realpolitik* in systemic change which is due to the individualism of state actors in the development of International System.

For this we bring into question the role of resources in the new order and how their consumption is perceived in foreign affairs to support stability and influence development. Additionally, we put under scrutiny the importance of the lending by society of resources for consumption and its sources in International Relations.

## How is *Realpolitik* related with the new type of issues?

To answer to this question, we need to look back in modern history, and to observe that under the survival instinct, two dimensions in particular dictated interaction between communities; military and economic. In modernity, these two have played an essential role in the expansion of the International System, which increased links between actors and raises pressure on behaviour, but also on internal organization (Buzan and Little, 2009). The result was a systemic mechanism which imposed adaptation on actors to improve their power and influence, and which in the new international structure would revolutionize interactional capacities, thus increasing inequalities.

In this context, the political framework had to face two issues related to the new global process. First, to respond to the security dilemma from the states' perspective in a manner that could satisfy expectations about outcomes associated with structural changing of an *anarchic system* (Waltz 1979). This neorealist perspective dominated foreign affairs for more than three decades, a period in which state actors tried to improve their response capabilities in the international political system. In this case, the following of national interest determined global interaction in a manner that created a possible general result that nobody wanted. The consequence was a race among states to oc-

cupy a better position in the international structure which amplified the need for more resources, without anyone being concerned about the impact on the ecosystem. This is perceived ultimately as survival in an environment characterized by violence and polarities (Taliaferro 2009).

In these conditions scholars and practitioners of International Relations understand that the overriding goal of state actors was to survive – this became the main interest in foreign policy and a domestic ideology. It follows that the only way to do that reasonably was to increase their power in relations with others. To achieve this objective, state actors needed various kinds of resources, which can be divided into two main categories: existing resources and developed ones. In the first includes those that state actors own due to their geographical position, including their demographic one. And the latter class includes the innovation and creativity that the state can use through its population.

In the Cold War era, these two classes were subjected to *raison d'etat* more than other domains as a result the need to assure that national security and state interests could be pursued in the international race. For this reason, instead of national interest being subordinated to global issues the link was reversed.

Additionally, to interpret the political framework as a response to geopolitical dynamics means focusing on the causes and effects of the very sensitive issues on global agenda and to perceive it as a moral philosophy. This attitude constituted the expression of a political scepticism which attended to basic concepts of policy: power, fear, domination. And it placed the national interest first in the goal to preserve community existence.

The second set of issues to which the political framework needed to respond was the development of national capabilities. The classical approach focused on states as a barrier between international affairs and the domestic sphere. This separation represents in fact a distinction between anarchy and order, in which the latter must support and advance the national interest. In this view, the political framework had the role of correlating domestic groups' interests and the government's adoption of favourable policies (Putnam 1988) so as to maximize their own abilities at an international level. For all these reasons, governments perceived and understood the link between power and domestic policy in terms of material gains in their capacity to turn national resources to their advantage. This meant that governments following domestic groups'

interest tried to sustain innovation and development at the domestic level in a manner that would assure competitiveness in international interaction and the image of a great power.

Following this framework, the development of national capabilities under different policies and ideologies meant developing new technology, using resources in an aggressive way. The idea was to minimize the difference in development through increasing technological support (Abramovitz 1986) and thus finding an equilibrium between these two domains. The focus on technology and the possibility to develop it as a force for growth with which to assure national capabilities, was brought to the political framework as a crucial new domestic objective to succeed in international competition. According to this perspective, countries had to redirect their resources to developing technological capabilities (Linsu 1997) and complementary elements in the attempt to catch up with their competitors. However, the adoption of the innovation approach at a domestic level to pursue the state interest meant an almost total subordination of resources to new growth and security theories in terms of *realpolitik*. Consequently, there developed a medium-term economic thinking which was based on the reckless use of natural resources in ideological and military competition, where innovation was translated into "capabilities" which supported national interests.

## Dealing with climate change

The advent of the digital age has meant to an increasing attention to aspects of creativity and development which make interconnectivity more complex and multidimensional.

In this new step in human evolution, the relationship between the economy and the environment has become increasingly interdependent; because of climate change, new opportunities appear for the global economy in terms of access to natural resources. And in the long-term economic prosperity depends on environmental sustainability (Gore 2015). Additionally, relatively cheap access to emerging technology means that society and different groups make themselves increasingly heard in the international field or themselves become international actors. All these factors make dealing with global issues

increasingly complex and with very different ideas about how to solve them. More specifically, economic globalization and global interaction exercise a collective process which will confront us with a *double exposure* (O'Brien and Leichenko 2000).

As with the now dominant concept of *terrorism*, *economic crises* and *climate change* are powerful concepts which occupy the global agenda and establish sensitive links between national security and global stability. However, a further understanding of International Relations from a perspective influenced by *Realpolitik* maintains the states' interests most often as the main point of foreign affairs in the global agenda, and does not change the nature of global agenda. This position match neatly the ideological tussle between defensive realism and neoliberalism. The diffusion of meaning and the strong connections between these ideologies – in a global world –using security and economic elements as a bridge, becomes a key in promoting climate change more as a powerful *force multiplier* rather than a global threat (Chaturvedi and Doyle 2015).

The environment deterioration of the last decades has posed the environmental issues at the top of the most important subjects on the global agenda. But as Brown and Kutting (2008) show, there is very often a gap between the political compromises that design an international agreement and the ecological demands of particular situations. Thus, since specific policies such as the Kyoto Protocol have been ratified, they have been considered increasingly politicized and that has made the climate change issue a focus of political polarization (McCright and Dunlap 2011). However, the assertion of power through advanced technologies and economic consequences by the propagation of vulnerability and high consumer demand have not stopped the process, they have deepened it as a necessary condition for overseeing development and reducing risks.

This political polarization around climate change is in stark contrast to the scientific consensus; today this controversy is a version of neoliberalism (Antonio and Brulle 2011). In fact, this is a discussion about how much we can assume that the development of certain advantages through the exploitation of natural resources under the economic umbrella and sustained through different policies will certainly affect the ecosystem. Because the climate change issue has a great number of political ramifications, the approach of this discussion in an institutional framework in such a manner as to satisfy the domestic

agenda and national interests is almost impossible. This situation is related with the state of the International System, which forces actors into more competitive and aggressive behaviour to assure the achievement of their individual interests. Second, the population increase of emergent and developing countries will seriously put to the test the capacity of actors to coexist and develop relatively through the consumption of natural resources on long term.

## What can we do?

Bolin (2002) argues, as a possible scenario, that combating climate change means developing cooperation between developed and developing countries. This scenario emphasizes the need at international level for the majority of countries to harmonize their national agendas and interests in order to solve a global issue. From many perspectives, including the political one, in a competitive environment it is practical impossible that nation states be in total agreement to achieve their own objectives by joining a framework which will create a gap between their state and others.

However, global environmental problems and the prospect of irreversible effects on humankind accelerate the procedure of collaboration at an international level including non-state actors. Nevertheless, the institutional steps continue to be slow and national agendas have to adopt strategies with a particular character.

On the other hand, globalization offers an alternative solution to climate issues through its nature and its next steps. Under this phenomenon, the global interconnectivity of society means that the public perception of global risks is much more accentuated due to social factors (Leiserowitz 2006) and to the possibility to share personal experiences. Thus, globalization makes possible the mobilization of global society for climate change mitigation and encourages collective actions and the exertion of pressure on the policy regime. However, the differences of development and access to services between different areas of the globe may be a variable which will strongly influence global mobilization.

Also, the easier and cheaper development of technologies, thanks to innovation and creativity shared all around the globe, provides the possibility of

an easier deployment of advanced technologies at a global level. This trend is sustained by the fact that technology occupies a wide range of human activity makes it easier for people to simplify their lives. Thus, digitalization creates the premise for information and research to be spread faster and used for different purposes. In this context, the attention offered in general to technologies based on creativity, especially those which are friendly to the planet, has to occupy a growing place in human evolution.

Lastly, the new global policies need to accelerate public-private partnerships through the involvement of technology developers, society and unconventional actors which will supervise the needs of humankind from a global perspective and not on a national level.

This new type of construction is related with two major problems that humankind needs to resolve in the medium term. The first is the impossibility of International System expansion in a limited space, namely Earth. The tendency to expansion comes from the "nature" of the human impulse for exploration and subordination, but in a condition when humanity is growing exponentially in a limited space with limited resources, two classes of scenario are possible sooner or later. The first is that there will come a point when there are so many people on the planet with a long life expectation that the planet's resources will no longer suffice for everyone. Therefore, in an *anarchic system,* nation-states and non-state actors will begin a global fight for resources that will take place in all fields. The second is that climate issues pass the critical point and humankind will no longer be able to reverse the global process, which will result in massive human migration for resources and for a temperate climate. In this scenario the international system will need to be reconfigured.

The second issue is the political framework, in which national agendas have polarized global probelms and try to solve them through national coping strategies. In this context, policies no longer sustain the future of communities or create sustainable advantages with which to help human evolution. Because of this, international policies and state intervention need to be redefined and political regimes to be more in balance with alternatives to growth and global markets as we have known them. All of this may sound unpalatable, but under globalization the International System and the world have changed and become more interdependent and smaller. In this new world, maintaining the consumption of resources under the national interest to satisfy com-

munities' needs and the national interest in the international competition for abstract objectives such as power and influence simply cannot be sustained in the medium-long term in the interests of humankind.

## Conclusions

In this paper we argue how the adoption of *Realpolitik* in climate change has led to to an accelerated development of the problems. First, the implications are related to the global agenda, where the stability of the International System was an image of nations competing for the consumption of resources, previously related to the dilemmas of the security debate.

This difference of perspectives on the meaning of global issues has further related to large concerns regarding the sensitivity and new vulnerably of International Relations. However, this link raises deeper perception issues and controversies about world perspectives in the context of globalization. Evidence of this is the existing gap between developed and emergent nations. Or more simply, the difference between degrees of development and economic expectations which exist in the world.

The second question is the implications of different dimensions of security and how these dimensions produce different visions under *Realpolitik*. This linkage throws up doubts about the relevance of *Realpolitik* to domestic policy thinking and how to influence social behaviour in a hyper-connected world.

In the survey presented I show that *Realpolitik* was relevant when decision makers theorized the state in the International System and how to follow their own interests through international dynamics. But when it is necessary to construct and implement a complex solution on global level *realpolitik* fails.

Finally, this paper assesses how countries' behaviour in a cynical race informs the substantive concept of environmental issues and what these patterns tell us about the future link between the approach to climate problems and the construction of a global agenda. In this paper we argue that the involvement of *Realpolitik* in policy construction and in PPP perception cannot function in an optimal way to develop a solution which is needed to produce a global effect. But we can formulate the premise with which to conduct to an evolutionary state of the International System – a planetary system.

This part of the paper concludes that the emergency in domestic policies and global security suggests that a new approach on environment issues is required equally both at a public-private level and in security communities. Identifying the good practices in the purpose and substance of environmental policies from a security point of view depends, however, on how countries, societies, international institutions and stakeholders will define and relate to the overall security dimension. Otherwise the future of humankind may very well to pass from risk to the certainty of a bad ending.

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