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Harnessing Climate Diplomacy for Power: A Comparative Study of China and South Korea

Nabeeha Wafa

Senior Editor, Ehlam Magazine

Munazza Khalid

Lecturer, Department of Politics and IR, International Islamic University Islamabad

Maria Asad

BS Student, Department of Politics and IR, International Islamic University Islamabad

Abstract

This article explores how states strategically use climate diplomacy to enhance their influence, specifically focusing on a comparative analysis of China and South Korea. Using China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and South Korea's Green New Deal (GND) as core case studies, it is analyzed how states with different political systems and power statuses integrate environmental policies into their foreign affairs and policies. Applying neo-classical realism to China and Constructivism to South Korea the findings show that climate diplomacy of China' is state-led diplomacy that is oriented toward economic expansion and geopolitical leverage. On the other hand, South Korea promotes norm based, identity driven diplomacy that is rooted in transparency, innovation, and international cooperation. While both nations use climate diplomacy to enhance soft power, their strategies, instruments, and international receptions show significant divergences. The article contributes to a deeper understanding of how climate diplomacy is shaped by domestic governance and ideological frameworks. It also aligns with the SDG 7 (clean energy), SDG 8 (decent work and economic growth), SDG 9 (innovation of industries and infrastructures), SDG 11 (sustainable and resilient cities), SDG 13 (climate action), SDG 16 (peace, justice and strong institutions), and SDG 17 (partnership for goals), highlighting the relevance of climate initiatives to global partnerships and sustainable development.

Keywords: *Climate Diplomacy, Green Diplomacy, Middle Power Diplomacy, Global Environmental Politics, Belt and Road Initiative, Green New Deal, China, South Korea, Neo-classical Realism, Constructivism.*

1. Introduction

This century has so far unfolded numerous and unprecedented challenges that the world has ever witnessed, climate change being one of the most pressing ones amongst these. Its widespread impacts transcend national boundaries and threaten global stability which has successfully sought attention of the world. As urgency to address the climate change intensifies, countries worldwide have turned to climate diplomacy. This type of diplomacy can be attributed as a strategic subset of international relations that seeks to address environmental issues through dialogue, negotiations, and cooperation. However, beyond mitigating environmental rises, climate diplomacy has become a tool for nations to project their power and influence, build alliances, and reframe geopolitical dynamics.

In the ever-evolving arena of climate governance, the significance of understanding the deeper interests of states engaged in climate diplomacy cannot be emphasized enough. Not only is it a concern for international climate regimes but also for individual states to look into their unique historical and geographical context and translate those into their domestic

climate policies and international commitments. With the competing interests amid varying power statuses in today's increasingly multipolar world, it is not odd for states to engage proactively at all diplomatic fronts, including climate diplomacy, to turn the tides in their favor.

This article examines the intersection of climate diplomacy and power politics through a comparative analysis of China and South Korea. It explores how the two nations, a great power China and a middle power South Korea, utilize climate diplomacy to enhance their power and influence geopolitical relations. China and South Korea are significant countries located in East Asia region. Both have successfully adopted climate diplomacy, ascribing a big portion of their foreign policies to it. China leverages its economic power to lead green initiatives across the globe, whereas South Korea has positioned itself as a pioneer in sustainable innovation and technology through its Green New Deal concept. Both countries aim to harness the potential of climate diplomacy to strengthen and reinforce their international standing. Their approaches, motivations, and outcomes, however, vary significantly.

With the aim to explore these variances, a comparative analysis is carried out in order to investigate how China and South Korea's climate diplomacy strategies aim to enhance their geopolitical power and influence in the region and beyond. The specific methods and tools used by both countries to assert power, such as the technology transfer, climate finance as well as international negotiations, are also examined closely. Their key initiatives Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) of China and the Green New Deal of South Korea, are analyzed, focusing on their geopolitical aspect. Moreover, their respective roles in shaping global climate governance are considered exploring on how the two countries leverage their advancements in green technology to enhance their global standing.

2. Literature Review

Climate change has become an issue of great concern for scientists, researchers, policymakers as well as the common man. The United Nations has defined climate change, "a change of climate which is attributed directly or indirectly to human activity that alters the composition of the global atmosphere and which is in addition to natural climate variability observed over comparable time periods" (UNFCCC, 1992).

Origins of climate diplomacy root in the warnings put forward by the climate scientists in October 1985 at Villach Conference in Austria. This conference was convened jointly by World Meteorological Organization (WMO), United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) and International Council for Science (ICSU) to discuss the role greenhouse gases in climate change and the impacts it entailed ((WMO), 1986). This conference ultimately led to the convening of two significant and influential conferences on climate and resultantly establishment of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) in 1988. United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) was also being negotiated and was opened for signatures at Rio Earth Summit, in Brazil, in June 1992. However, it was only a framework not imposing any binding obligations on emission reduction to its parties. Overall, the negotiations for the Framework were a battle of interests between the developed and developing nations, causing the principle of 'common but differentiated responsibility' be preserved in UNFCCC, that later became central to environmental negotiations' stance of

developing countries (Desai, 2018). The subsequent Kyoto and Paris Climate agreements' signing formalized binding provisions for its signatories (Rihmo, 2020).

The climate diplomacy has since evolved from legally binding frameworks to now an intricate web of overlapping agreements and voluntary initiatives (Allan, 2018). The global climate governance run by state and International governmental organizations, has broadened to include non-state actors as well where the actors have divergent interests. The divergent views led to the counter-institutionalization evident through the rise in minilateral forums and hybrid coalitions of climate initiatives (Dikmen, 2020). Minilateralism is increasingly prevalent in the framework of a growing multipolar world, where rising powers are acquiring new capacity and responsibility in international regimes as leaders and norm setters and challengers. This non-traditional approach sits well with China's custom of forming coalitions through informal negotiations with like-minded states, such as the BASIC group (Kobayashi & Sánchez, 2017). Climate diplomacy motivations involve geopolitical interests in addition to the environmental concerns. As in the case of BASIC countries (Brazil, South Africa, India and China), these motivators are primarily ideational and material factors, encompassing domestic policies as well as international positioning (Jayaram, 2021).

Climate diplomacy and geopolitics are indispensably connected in the 21st century where the urgency of addressing and combating climate change has forced states to collaborate and confront shared challenges, all the while introducing new aspects of competition and complexity to their relations (Munge, 2023). European Union's (EU) soft power practices in Green Diplomacy were studied, where it was acknowledged that the organization's Green Deal can be a driver in not only its internal transformation but also its positioning globally. EU's legitimacy as one of the leaders in the multilateral climate action framework roots and depends on the extent of effectiveness on how it achieves consensus among the many member states and how it supports true climate action initiatives at the local levels (Volintiru, 2020).

Joseph Nye, who is considered as the pioneer of Soft-Power Theory, noted that in the modern world the relevance of soft power cannot be overstated as it aligns with global shifts towards non-military (Nye, 2004). Many have agreed to Nye in this regard and have went on to associate climate diplomacy as a soft-power tool (Mokdad, 2025). Climate negotiations are linked to game theory where 25, of the hundred and forty four 2x2 games, are strictly relevant to climate problem. Which game complements to the actual state of the world depends on the severity of risks related with climate change as well as the perceptions of the governments involved in negotiations (DeCanio & Fremstad, 2013).

In the 1970s, it came to the public's knowledge that environmental protection would lead to high economic costs when industries will transition to adopt energy-sufficient technologies and install pollution-control technologies. These arguments though persist, it has become clear today that there are ways environmental protection can actually produce real economic benefits in terms of energy conservation, technological innovation and advancement and job creation (Haas, 1992). These persuasive arguments about the economic benefits of climate action transformed preferences in favor of policy commitments at both levels, national and international (Dimitrov, 2016). For states to effectively and efficiently respond to climate change, they must build internal capacities for successful conduct of their climate diplomacy. Now that the consequences of climate change are being witnessed by everyone and citizens

are raising their voices to address the issue, modern day states cannot act amateurishly in climate diplomacy area of foreign policy (Bojić, 2022).

China, as the world's largest greenhouse gas (GHG) emitter, has been a prime player in global climate negotiations. For China's domestic policy-making process and international climate efforts, external perceptions of China's role in these climate negotiations are important, which has significantly evolved since 2009. Once regarded as a "dead weight" or even a "wrecker" at the Copenhagen conference, China transformed itself into being recognized as a global climate leader at the Paris conference. Gao's study shows a significant explanation of China's evolving image in international climate negotiations, particularly between Copenhagen and Paris climate negotiations. China, as the world's largest greenhouse gas (GHG) emitter, has been a prime player in global climate negotiations. For China's domestic policy-making process and international climate efforts, external perceptions of China's role in these climate negotiations are important, which has significantly evolved since 2009. The external perceptions of China's role evolved based on the criteria of acceptability, credibility and constructiveness (Gao, 2018).

South Korea was internationally recognized as economic middle power with its membership in Organization for economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) in 1996. The South Korean foreign policy, however, specifically mentions "middle power" or *jung-gyun-guk*, which became a widely circulated trend in the Lee Myung-bak administration in 2008. The Lee government highlighted the global agendas, such as development assistance, peacekeeping operations, and climate change, to a higher degree than under the previous governments. This was done through increase in related budgets and introducing new concepts as "green growth", all under the slogan of "Global Korea". The South Korean foreign policy has adopted middle power diplomacy strategically in order to enhance the country's national status in the world and playing bigger role. For this, Soft power, network power, and public diplomacy has been usually employed in assisting its middle power diplomacy (Lee, 2012).

Pardo, expanding on South Korea's foreign policy posture, shows that given the unprecedented growth and development of South Korea, it is expected that the South Korean government might be called upon to take a leading role in certain gripping foreign policy issues. As seen from the examples of certain other middle powers who take the role of 'policy-entrepreneurs', South Korea could try to do so in the areas of its specializations where it has a comparative advantage, such as digital governance and green growth, etc. (Pardo, 2022).

De Dominicis gives a classical realist critique of South Korea's carbon trading system by highlighting its bargaining leverage in climate governance. South Korea being a middle power, has attempted to play a prominent leadership role in the fairly recent developments in global climate governance. Awareness of interdependence a bargaining lever that South Korea seeks to harness for its own national security objectives in the context of Northeast Asian security context (DeDominicis, 2017).

South Korea however faces obstacles in realization full potential of its middle power diplomacy as it relies on regionalization (to counter North Korean threat) as well. South Korea must address its domestic challenges and align national interests with foreign policy strategies in the long-run. Sustainability of its middle power diplomacy requires strong

domestic support that goes beyond goodwill or commitment, ensuring domestic alignment with the national interests (Karim, 2018).

While existing research on climate diplomacy offers a range of insights over theoretical frameworks, institutional dynamics and soft power analysis, much of the literature remains fragmented as some studies focus on general modelling or international negotiations without basing them on specific national context. Moreover, while various works explore either China or South Korea, there is a notable lack of comparative, theory driven research that examines in detail how both states incorporate climate goals with broader geopolitical objectives. Most of the literature discusses the technical aspects of their climate initiatives and their implications. This article is aimed at filling the gap by comparing and analyzing the converging and diverging aspects in objectives, approaches and impacts of China and South Korea, two powers of different global status. Furthermore, it will provide significant insights into the power dynamics involved around the climate initiatives of both countries.

3. Theoretical Framework

This article adopts a dual-theoretical approach, based in International Relations theory, to analyze the climate diplomacy of China and South Korea. Specifically neo-classical realism is applied to interpret China's climate diplomacy, and constructivism to understand the climate approach of South Korea.

In contrast to traditional realism that relies heavily on how the external factors affect the foreign policy of a state, neo-classical realism puts significance to the internal working of the states (Heffron, 2015). Neo-classical realists, in other words, posit that it is the internal structure of states that ultimately affects how they will react to the threats. It further suggests that foreign policy behavior of states is not shaped solely by the anarchic international system, but also by the domestic factors such as regime type, elite perceptions, and internal political priorities. The neo-classical realist perspective is used to explain how China has integrated climate diplomacy into its broader strategy for power projection, regional dominance, and regime legitimation, specifically through its Belt and Road Initiative.

South Korea's climate diplomacy on the other hand is analyzed through the lens of constructivism, which posits that identities norms, and values shape the state interests and behavior. One of the key proponents of this perspective, Alexander Wendt challenges the traditional realist assumption that anarchy inherently leads to self-help and power politics, by arguing that anarchy is a product of social construct and that state behavior is shaped by interaction and shared ideas instead of being dictated solely by the structural conditions the states find themselves in (Wendt, 1992). Constructivism is used to explain the South Korea's climate diplomacy practices. As a democratic middle power, South Korea has pursued a norm-based climate diplomacy strategy framed prominently through its Green New Deal.

4. Research Methodology

This article follows a Desk research approach, where the focus is on conducting research on Secondary data. It mainly involves gathering and analyzing data from already available resources, rather than collecting new data. The data therefore is secondary which may contain, journal articles, books, websites, reports, news, conferences etc. that is published. Additionally, a thematic comparative analysis of power dynamics is incorporated to investigate how China and South Korea's climate diplomacy strategies aim to enhance their geopolitical power and influence in the region and beyond. The specific methods and tools

used by both countries to assert power, such as the technology transfer, climate finance as well as international negotiations, were examined closely. Their key initiatives Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) of China and Green New Deal (GND) of South Korea will be analyzed, focusing on their geopolitical aspect. Moreover, their respective roles in shaping global climate governance were studied exploring on how the two countries leverage their advancements in green technology to enhance their global standing.

5.1. Climate Diplomacy of China

China, although considered a late comer to the climate leadership, has rapidly progressed its climate diplomacy. China began to participate in the earliest climate discussion with the government's formal engagements with climate change beginning in 1988 at UN's IPCC inauguration. "Climate Change Coordination Leading Group" was established for the coordination of China's participation in the IPCC. The group composed of various stakeholders including several related ministries such as those responsible for energy, science and technology planning, environmental protection, and foreign affairs. This multi ministerial engagement model proved to be quite practical, enhancing the significant link between international climate governance and domestic climate governance. A significant accomplishment of its environmental delegation was to thaw the relation with the West following the G7 sanctions imposed on China in 1989, as it was the first to engage at a high level with the Western countries (Teng, 2021).

With the Kyoto Protocol coming into force in 2005 and the Emission Trading System was formalized, the Clean Development Mechanism (CDM) was promoted in China. The CDM was one of the flexible mechanisms recommended by the Protocol, for buying and selling of carbon credits generated through emissions reduction projects. The implementation of CDM contributed to the evolution of China's Climate governance (Chen, 2008). The Chinese Companies got familiarized with the concept of climate change through CDM implementation which encouraged them to build GHG monitoring capacity and by 2015 over 3800 projects were registered in China. Viewing the efficacy of such projects, the value of energy efficiency and emission reduction under the market mechanism frameworks was recognized (Lu et al., 2025). Resulting in the establishment of carbon markets in China in 2013 (Yang et al., 2019). While progress was seen at domestic level with regards to climate change, with the implementation of pilot ETS, CDM and GHG monitoring, not much of a shift was noticed in the China's stance over climate change internationally. The passive stance at international climate negotiations continued, given that China prioritized its economic development at the time over environmental protection and climate mitigation pledges, which would need the country to cut its emission. Finally in 2007, after facing immense backlash from the international community for overtaking U.S. to become world's largest carbon emitter, National Programme to Address the Climate Change was declared, which brought climate change on the agenda for the decision-making at the highest level. This paved way for the country to create institutional space for climate policy as well as address the inherent need of the country for emission reduction and conservation of energy. A more flexible role was played by China in the subsequent climate change negotiations, as now the Chinese climate change policy process integrated international climate change negotiations with the domestic responses.

With the President Xi Jinping's rise to power in 2013, the climate change was elevated within foreign and domestic policy priorities to frame it as an opportunity for innovation and geopolitical influence. China's international climate diplomacy evolved towards embracing a leadership role, away from emphasizing its status as developing country. It sought to redefine the CBDR principle in its own way to better show the recent global dynamics, by advocating for flexibility in the interpretation of historical responsibility while promoting south-south cooperation. It thus played a key role in the events of Paris Agreement, reshaping expectations for global cooperation by working closely with the United States. It received a different international response than it had before, now that shifts were observable within the domestic policy priorities from "growth first" to "protection first" (Xie, 2020).

The concept of "ecological civilization" was introduced in the 2017 Parties' congress. Though some consider it to be a political or moral ideology, it has served as an important conceptual framework for the environmental laws and future climate governance within the country (Teng, 2021). Many have considered the establishment of ecological civilization indicators as closely related to the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). While it may seem new to people unfamiliar with China, the term ecological civilization (*Shengtai Wenming*) has been used in China for decades (*Ecological Civilization*, 2024). The concept of ecological civilization was written in the constitution of China in 2018, after gaining widespread attention, which suggested systemic changes. The recent years continue to see climate change increasingly framed as a geopolitical and security issue from the instances of the Belt and Road Initiative beginning to integrate green principles, and ecological civilization becoming core element of the national rejuvenation.

5.2. Climate Diplomacy of South Korea

Post signing of the UNFCCC (in 1992), South Korea mainly behaved as a passive actor. Although it became a member of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) in 1996, which signaled some upward shift in its development status, South Korea continued to claim "developing country" especially in UNFCCC and then the Kyoto Protocol. Accordingly, it avoided taking strong leadership roles in climate governance. During the tenure of Kim Dae Jung (1998-2003), some active response towards the climate issue was seen, witnessing his efforts in creating "Committee for Climate Change Convention". A comprehensive national plan on climate change was also devised. However no notable diplomatic achievement was observed. South Korea's insistence on retaining developing country status, hampered much of what it could actively do. Then again climate was not that big of a concern given that the country was recently recovering from the Asian financial crisis (1997-1998), and its growing economy positioned it as one of the largest GHG emitters around the globe. It was internationally perceived as too rich and advanced to act as a developing country, but too passive to lead developed world efforts (Kim, 2014).

Presidential Committees on Sustainable Development were formed during the Roh Moo-hyun Tenure (2003-2008), which only mainly focused on initial studies on GHG emissions. The country was still cautious in its participation and avoided any legally binding emissions reduction proposed by the international climate regime.

It was under the President Lee Myung-bak's tenure (2008-2013) that the South Korea made unprecedented strides in the climate change landscape. President Lee Myung-bak managed to find a gap, after considering the years of climate deadlock globally; no country was

completely leading the newly emerging “Green Growth” narrative yet. On top of that the developed countries of the world were swept up in a global economic crisis (financial crash of 2008), leaving plenty of opportunity for South Korea to act (John, 2014).

He launched the East Asia Climate Partnership (EACP) in July 2008 to help the Asian countries in fighting climate change. Myung-bak administration declared “Low Carbon, Green Growth” as a national vision in August of 2008, seeking to create national brand image around the concept of “Green Growth.” This translated into South Korea becoming a recognized “green” leader in the international climate landscape. The primary reason for such exceptional success was its moving voluntarily into climate leadership despite not being required under the provisions of the Kyoto targets.

President Lee Myung-bak announced five-year green growth plan, declaring South Korea’s aim to be in the top 7 green economies of the world by 2020, and top 5 by 2050. The plan consisted of 10 policy directions and identified 50 action measures to undertake, emphasizing on three strategic goals that included energy independence while adapting to climate change, green industry development, and enhancing quality of life and global standing.

Several significant legislations with regard to climate change were also carried out, including Smart Grid Promotion Act, Green Building Construction Support Act and Act on Allocation and Trading of GHG Emissions. Framework Act on Low Carbon Green Growth (2011) formally institutionalized climate policy planning and policy making (Chung & Lee, 2022). Moreover, South Korea committed to annually invest 2% of its national GDP into green R&D and infrastructure. This was highest investment commitment globally, for a developing country at the time.

The groundbreaking step that brought South Korea’s climate change efforts into recognition internationally was voluntarily assigning Greenhouse gas targets. South Korea declared to reduce its GHG targets by 30 % below Business-as-Usual (BAU) by the year 2020. This was the highest target set among the non-Annex I countries of the Kyoto Protocol. The Global Green Growth Institute (GGGI) was launched in 2010 in Seoul and became an international organization in 2012. It specialized in transferring green growth policies to developing countries, thus sharing research-based information to the global south (O’Donnell, 2012). South Korea played its crucial role and pioneered the Non-Annex I Mitigation Action Registry (NAMA). The primary aim was to assist developing countries (the non-annex I members of Kyoto protocol), in defining their climate pledges and taking mitigation actions. South Korea adopted a mediator’s role between developing and developed states, implementing bridge diplomacy (Kim, 2014).

6. Discussion and Analysis

6.1. Strategic Intent

6.1.1. Strategic Intent of China

The BRI was launched as an instrument for the economic transformation of China (Yu, 2024). The Green BRI narrative was promoted by the country only after it had to face backlash from the international community for creating economic constraints over the smaller countries and LDCs (debt-trap) on top of the environmental disruptions caused by the over-exhaustion of energy resources for the projects under the BRI initiative.

The climate was not a primary objective of BRI. The BRI aimed at achieving geopolitical outreach by offering economic and infrastructural benefits to the members of the initiative

(China Power Team, 2024). The Green goals were later integrated into the already established diplomatic frameworks and processes.

The BRI being a case of state-led expansionism, introduced the climate goals under Green BRI under impressive concepts such as “Ecological Civilization” to legitimize its approach by addressing climate concerns and presenting China as a responsible Great power (Zhai, 2021). The integration of climate goals by introducing ETS and market mechanisms and incorporating the concepts of energy security in the BRI can be viewed as an effort to justify its economic expansion.

China’s climate diplomacy practice as observed under its BRI, aligns with China’s strategic pursuit of national power under an international system that is anarchical. Neo-classical realism posits that states act on their perceptions of systemic threats and opportunities that are filtered through internal domestic structures as well as elite interpretations (Firoozabadi & Ashkezari, 2016) (Schweller, 2004). China’s BRI, while seemingly cooperative, in fact reflects a realist goal that is to restructure global order in its favor through building influence and infrastructural dominance. The leadership of Chinese Communist Party (CCP) interprets the international pressures for decarbonization as both a challenge to its legitimacy and an opportunity to expand its global presence and influence, which explains the green branding of BRI.

6.1.2. Strategic Intent of South Korea

The Green New Deal (GND) of South Korea on the other hand was introduced with Climate change being central to it. Though introduced as part of the broader economic recovery plan launched for dealing with the effects of Covid-19 (Lee & Woo, 2020). The launching of an exclusive initiative for climate change reinforced the previously claimed identity of South Korea as a responsible climate leader, portrayed through the consistent Green Korea image. GND was derived from the previous Green Growth strategy, where South Korea made efforts to extend its middle power diplomacy realizing its unique position in the international order to act as a bridge between the developing and developed states. The GND was also driven by the middle-power diplomacy and the desire of South Korea to lead in norm entrepreneurship in the international climate change scenario. Through the identity built around Green Korea, GND became instrumental in the soft power projection of the country (Wang & Yan, 2024). South Korea was able to bridge the Global South and North by maxing its Green identity and by offering a replicable model for climate mitigation and adaptation for other countries to follow. South Korea opted for a norm-based approach to multilateralism, where it presented its ideas and experiences and shared those for collective action.

From the primary purpose of the two case studies, the ideological divergences are clear. On one hand, China keeps its national interest and economic expansionism at the core of BRI, South Korea on the other hand promotes its national identity being Green Korea having climate policy at the core of the GND. This might be considered as prioritizing ideational goals over pragmatic ones. Considering that South Korea has had climate policy given a higher priority in the decision-making processes, it is only understandable for it to have climate goals being central to the GND.

The South Korean Green New Deal depicts identity formation as a responsible, norm-promoting middle power. It aligns with the idea of constructivism that asserts that norms and identity shape the behavior of state (Ahmad, 2020). Korea’s strategic intent lies in shaping

global environmental governance through values such as inclusivity and innovation. The branding it has achieved so far as a bridge between the global North and South is a socially constructed diplomatic identity South Korea has carved for itself, rather than a material necessity. This, however, has assisted the country in directing its diplomatic actions and approaches in international relations.

6.2. Domestic Drivers

6.2.1. Domestic Drivers of China

The climate policy took a longer time to get integrated into the decision-making processes of China. However, taking into consideration that the country follows a centralized authoritarian political system, with the CCP being the only party, it was easier for the implementation of climate policy decisions domestically. The formal decision-making takes the top-to-bottom route, facing less friction in implementation of the decisions. The climate policy, similarly, was formulated and coordinated at top governmental levels (Sandalow et al., 2022), such as National Development and Reform Commission (NDRC) and Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA), and had little civil input (Mizo, 2022).

The government rolled out climate policies under its 5-year economic plans, underlining the importance given to economic advancement. The insufficiency of appropriate human capital to engage in climate negotiations internationally highlighted the gap in the institutional capacity of the country. The introduction of market mechanisms and the launch of the Carbon Market of China in 2013 enhanced the understanding of the climate issue as the state-owned enterprises were incorporating emissions accounting and monitoring apparatus and emission reduction mechanisms. The pilot ETS for carbon trading helped raise economic sectors' engagement with the climate change (Teng, 2021).

Internal elite consensus and state strength are among the key factors shaping China's external behaviour and foreign policy (Minxin, n.d.). The dominance of CCP and the bureaucratic capacity through bodies such as the NDRC allow China to use and mobilize massive resources towards achieving foreign policy goals such as the BRI. With less civil input, and greater institutional cohesion this mobilization becomes smoother, allowing for rapid climate branding. As noted by Shivshankar, "Today, China's foreign policy behaviour extends to seeking "discourse power" internationally, a desire to control the narrative on China, both in China, and on the international stage" (Menon, 2022). This aligns to the Neo-classical realist ideas where decision-making elites get to interpret climate diplomacy as a tool for great power projection, that is extensively shaped by domestic economic as well as security calculations (Firoozabadi & Ashkezari, 2016).

6.2.2. Domestic Drivers of South Korea

South Korea remains dedicated to its consensual democratic system where input from all sectors across the country along with the public opinion is taken into consideration when formulating policies. The country incorporates a mixed approach of top-to-bottom and bottoms-up in its decision-making processes. Civil society and the public have considerable input in these processes. The climate policy in South Korea involved multiple stakeholders such as Minister of the Environment (MOE) and Green Growth Committee, all the while taking inputs from the civil society and field experts (Zhou & Mori, 2010). Being a democratic country, South Korea has to face public scrutiny over its projects and policies, making it cautious of its decisions and approaches as a responsible country.

South Korea's attentiveness to climate change scenarios was unforeseen at the time. It was quick to find a niche in the climate scenario that could've been filled with a middle-power diplomacy approach. Making climate central to its national identity, South Korea sought to enhance its presence on the global stage as a responsible climate leader. The earlier recognition of such ambitions allowed Korea to adopt Climate Acts and launch economic plans that had climate action synchronized. The climate frameworks and policies involved multi-ministerial coordination across the country, allowing the setting of climate and green goals that were feasible and implementable without any discontent. The resulting policies though get legitimized through such consensus, this can be time-consuming. The GND was launched rather smoothly, the primary reason for which was it being an extension of the previous Green Growth plan in place. The country formally pledged to achieve carbon neutrality, with net-zero carbon emissions by 2050 (Lee , et al., 2023), and was supported by the enactment of the Carbon Neutrality Act in 2021. Apart from the carbon goals, the GND was built to position the country as a pioneer and initiator in sustainable innovation as the domestic transformation was a prerequisite to South Korea affirming a more proactive climate role internationally, allowing it to reinforce domestic legitimacy as a basis for its external influence.

The climate diplomacy trajectory of South Korea is marked by changing domestic beliefs, democratic participation, and societal values, which supports the Constructivist's assumptions (Ahmad, 2020). The climate leadership emerges not from top-down power assertion but from internalized responsibility and desire to set moral and technical precedents globally. The Youth-led climate litigation moved the constitutional courts to recognize climate change as a constitutional rights issue and the rights of future generations of the Republic of Korea, reflecting the internalization of climate issue at different societal levels (Phillips, 2024). The strong environmental consciousness of the public and the democratic structure allow norms to shape the country's foreign policy.

6.3. Diplomatic Instruments

6.3.1. Diplomatic Instruments of China

China seeks to expand its economic influence in the region and beyond, for which BRI is an instrumental tool. The climate financing and investment for building institutional capacity under the BRI are some of the means adopted by China. The introduction of concepts such as ecological civilization in its economic growth plans has decreased the environmental concerns raised by the international society, in addition to providing guidelines for the developmental projects under BRI. Moreover, the Green BRI narrative has further provided China to look for avenues for investment through clean and renewable energy projects, such as solar parks and hydropower projects which have seen a rise of 77% to cover the overall energy-related investments under BRI (Nitza-Makowska, 2025). China also tends to engage in bilateral commitments with the countries under BRI for better maneuvering overall for its benefit, such as CPEC in Pakistan.

The China's use of concrete tools such as loans, infrastructural projects, and carbon markets control is often tied to strategic returns. It has given state-backed loans and investments to low and middle income countries, ensuring long-term control over strategic and mineral resources of these countries (Ko & White, 2025). These tools match the logic of neo-classical realists who tie diplomacy to material capabilities. The neo-classical realism highlights how

the state uses diplomacy such as the climate diplomacy to secure influence and control systemic competition, especially against the West (Firoozabadi & Ashkezari, 2016). By leveraging economic tools and rolling out environmental initiatives, China seeks to enhance its global influence and ultimately reshape the international order in its favor (Mohamed, 2024).

6.3.2. Diplomatic Instruments of South Korea

South Korea has used GND to act as a bridge between the Global North and South. It undertook capacity-building initiatives under the GND in Asia and Africa through the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MoFA) and Green Technology Center (Chung & Lee, 2022). This can be considered part of its public diplomacy, where Korea aimed to achieve greater recognition as a responsible climate leader. GND being a replicable model, allows for other countries, particularly the middle powers, to imitate the model in their journey of economic growth that is consistent with the environmental protection pathways. The technology and research transfer are also carried out under this initiative by the GGGI and Korea International Cooperation Agency (KOICA). Moreover, the dissemination of related experience and ETS knowledge sharing, especially among the global south enhances South Korea's credibility among developing states (Oh et al., 2016). South Korea emphasizes multilateral engagement for collective action against climate change and promotes itself as a climate leader in such settings (Hardy-Chartrand, 2016).

South Korea, contrasting to China primarily uses ideational tools such as norm diffusion, policy-sharing, knowledge exchange, and leadership in global institutions like GGGI. It has used soft mechanisms of climate finance training, ETS knowledge and international climate summits hosting, to seek influence through emulation instead of coercion. This practice is in line with the constructivist's emphasis on norms over material capabilities (Ahmad, 2020).

6.4. International Reception and Outcomes

6.4.1. Outcomes for China

The BRI has been criticized for its disproportionate economic dominance in the region and beyond. The initiative has received backlash for ecological and environmental degradation which further fueled the backlash. With the introduction of the Green BRI narrative, which aimed to address climate concerns, skepticism remained as some viewed China as an opportunist and cunning enough to steer public sentiment through the narrative building (Politi, 2021). While the Green BRI received a positive reception from the countries of the Global South, as it offered them resources and infrastructural development, feelings of mixed trust prevailed. The world has also raised concerns over these investments, loans, and projects under BRI, citing fears of debt-trapping and over-dependency on China (Davidson, 2025), which is never appreciated particularly considering it as a great power and member of the P5.

China faces increasing skepticism from around the globe, with regards to the BRI especially in the Global South, where Strategic intentions tend to overshadow BRI's environmental contributions. By exporting its development model and establishing economic dependencies, China can be observed as seeking to enhance its influence and challenge Western dominance (Firoozabadi & Ashkezari, 2016). This perception of China results in backlash and resistance, despite the extensive green branding of the BRI.

6.4.2. Outcomes for South Korea

South Korea has established itself as a credible climate leader by prioritizing climate policy domestically and attributing it as its national identity. By adopting Voluntary mitigation targets in 2008, it had already received approval internationally, for being a responsible country. The subsequent adoption of climate acts and policy frameworks and the Green Growth plan only enhanced South Korea's credibility and trustworthiness. It has remained true to its international commitments, and with the launch of GND garnered applause from the countries from the Global South and the North. More so for taking capacity-building initiatives and providing a replicable model for emerging economies to imitate and follow. The international climate regimes commend the efforts of South Korea for being a developed country that is middle power, yet assisting developing countries in integrating climate within their economic frameworks. Its green development and responsible governance branding further help position it as a strong player in the international climate scenario (Wang & Yan, 2024).

South Korea's efforts towards addressing climate change and leadership in climate justice discourses as well as the Partnering for Green Growth and the Global Goals 2030 (P4G) summit, GGGI, have enhanced its reputation. It has widely been perceived as a norm entrepreneur and bridge builder, where it created its model and pathway for achieving growth while preserving the environment (Hardy-Chartrand, 2016). From a constructivist perspective, this reputational capital is viewed as a form of power rooted in legitimacy instead of coercion (Brooks & Wohlforth, 2008). The legitimacy cannot be separated from the overall concept of power, but it is a source of power itself (Kelley, 2017), which is reflected in the wider acceptability of South Korea's climate diplomacy and initiatives.

7. Conclusion

The article explored how China and South Korea, irrespective of clear differences in political systems, power status, and global positioning, both leverage climate diplomacy as a tool to enhance their influence. By conducting a comparative analysis of China's BRI and South Korea's GND, it is concluded that the climate diplomacy is no longer a realm confined to environmental cooperation, rather it has become a strategic extension of foreign policy.

China having a centralized authoritarian regime, utilizes climate diplomacy as an opportunity to extend influence as well as counterbalance the Western dominance. The use of infrastructure finance, green investments, and global carbon projects through BRI demonstrates a realist pursuit of systemic power and strategic gain. On the other hand, South Korea, a democratic middle power, has adopted constructivist approach by positioning itself as a norm-setting actor emphasizing on transparent and inclusive climate solutions. The GND not only enhanced South Korea's green transition at domestic level but also strengthened its identity as responsible and imitable actor on the global stage. Furthermore, the findings are in line with the global sustainability framework defined under the United Nation's SDGs. By framing climate diplomacy as a driver of both influence and responsibility, this article contributes insightfully to the international efforts for sustainable development and inclusive global development.

Climate diplomacy has become a crucial element in contemporary international relations. While China's practice reflects a strategy of enormous scale, economic leverage and calculated influence, South Korea's model emphasizes more on legitimacy, cooperation, and normative leadership. The contrast between these two approaches shows how states,

regardless of their power level, are readjusting their foreign policy strategies in response to the increasing importance of global climate governance.

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