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‘Special Responsibilities, International Leadership and Global Climate Protection:
Understanding the Shifting Roles of the US and China’

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ABSTRACT

The US and China are widely regarded as playing a key role in the forging of the Paris Agreement 2015. Yet the fact that they represent the two most significant great powers, the two biggest emitters (E2) or that they cooperated hardly amounts to leadership or the discharge of special responsibilities for climate change. To assess their respective roles, the ideas of leadership and special responsibilities are revisited and conceptually disentangled. Both leadership and special responsibilities are shown to entail a socially sanctioned distribution of asymmetric roles and responsibilities that enhance collective agency to achieve collective purposes. However, whereas leadership entails guiding, directing or attracting the support of others towards a collective purpose as the defining agential activity, special responsibilities may not necessarily include this type of agency and may instead simply entail a duty to undertake, or not undertake, certain actions that provide collective benefits or prevent collective harms. The special responsibilities of the US and other developed countries to lead in mitigation is identified as a type of positional leadership, which is distinguished from, but can nonetheless enhance, diplomatic leadership in multilateral negotiations. However, there are grounds for arguing that diplomatic leadership itself may be a special responsibility conferred on indispensable states such as the US and China. An examination of the diplomatic roles of the US and China over the period 2013-2015 shows that the US played a more significant diplomatic leadership role than China in forging the Paris Agreement while China saw its primary responsibility as leading developing countries rather than ‘the world’. This suggests that China is unlikely to rush to fill the diplomatic ‘leadership vacuum’ created by the US’s defection from the Paris Agreement.

Key words: Great Powers, special responsibilities, leadership, hegemony, climate change, legitimacy

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Special Responsibilities, International Leadership and Global Climate Protection: 
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Introduction

The demand for leadership is ubiquitous in politics. Indeed, Foley has suggested that ‘there is practically no problem that cannot be attributed to an alleged failure of leadership, and no solution that cannot be achieved through an alternative leadership’ (Foley 2013, 3). The demand for leadership is especially strong in situations of political gridlock, and in collective actions problems. Nowhere is this more evident than in the case of climate change. Writing in the aftermath of the collapse of the Copenhagen negotiations in 2009, Henry Shue declared that ‘[t]he need for global leadership is so desperate that the duty to provide it falls on anyone who has the capacity to lead’ (Shue 2011, 23). Not surprisingly, this demand is most frequently directed to great powers, given their preponderance of material capabilities and high emissions profiles.

The US and China are widely recognised as playing ‘a leading role’ in shaping the Paris Agreement 2015 (Parker and Karlsson 2018, 531), and their joint statement on climate change announced in November 2014 (The Whitehouse 2014) has been widely singled out as the key game changer that enabled the historic agreement. In the wake of the Trump administration’s formal announcement in 2017 of its intention to withdraw from the Paris Agreement there has been intense speculation among negotiators, journalists and scholars about the prospects of China stepping into the ‘climate leadership vacuum’ created by the US’s defection. A New York Times report on the withdrawal typifies this speculation: ‘Trump Hands the Chinese a Gift: The Chance for Global Leadership’ (Sanger and Perlez 2017).

Yet these speculations and observations about leadership beg many important questions about what multilateral or climate leadership means, and how it relates to the responsibilities of the US and China in relation to the global civilizational challenge of climate change. While their status as the world’s two most significant great powers (G2) and the two biggest greenhouse gas emitters (E2) makes their participation indispensable to the success of the Paris Agreement, being ‘great indispensibles’ does not necessarily make them ‘leaders’ or ‘great
responsible’ (Bull 1977, 49). As Hedley Bull has argued, ‘the concept of a Great Power has always had a normative as well as positive connotations’ (Bull 1980, 437). With superior capabilities come claims for special responsibilities that are owed to international society as a whole (Cui and Buzan 2016).

In Special Responsibilities: Global Problems and American Power (2012) (hereafter Special Responsibilities) we provided a systematic exploration and development of the concept of special responsibilities. We argued that the allocation and discharge of special responsibilities is a site of constant political struggle in international relations, and the politics of conferring, claiming and performing special responsibilities are often not in alignment (see also Loke, 2016). But the more the ‘demand’ and ‘supply’ align, the more the distribution of special responsibilities conditions legitimate political agency and action in an anarchic order characterised by formal equality and material inequality (Bukovansky et al. 2012). Special responsibilities operate as a via media between the principle of sovereign equality and balance of power politics, neither of which provide a complete account of how international society has responded to complex collective problems.

The shifting expectations and roles of the US and China in the international climate negotiations provide rich material for understanding the legitimacy contests associated with the politics of conferring, claiming, contesting, shouldering or shirking special responsibilities to address climate change. Much of this contestation has been conducted in the language of leadership. The UN Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) 1992 confers a special responsibility on developed countries to take the lead in mitigation, and to provide climate finance and other support to developing countries. In Special Responsibilities, we singled out the US as having ‘extra special responsibilities’ compared to other developed countries (2012, 131-33). We also argued that leadership and special responsibilities are often conjoined but that they are conceptually distinct (Bukovansky et al. 2012, 60-61). However, we did not provide a systematic account of leadership to defend this claim. Special responsibilities and leadership both entail asymmetric roles and responsibilities vis-a-vis larger constituencies, so in what ways, if any, can they be conceptually distinguished?

Nor did we consider whether diplomatic leadership might itself constitute a special responsibility in relation to ongoing efforts to negotiate a durable agreement. This question
also invites consideration of how procedural legitimacy might relate to outcome legitimacy in
the negotiation of special responsibilities. Great powers have much more freedom to write
their own script for their special responsibilities in exclusive, minilateral negotiations than in
large-n, inclusive, multilateral negotiations which require the consent of all parties. This
suggests that the special responsibilities that emerge from multilateral negotiations are more
likely to be considered legitimate by international society (if not international civil society) if
there are no procedural irregularities or coercive strategies deployed.

This paper explores these unexamined issues in three broad moves. Part one briefly reprises
the key arguments of Special Responsibilities and then analyses the political compromise
over the allocation of special and general responsibilities in the Paris Agreement 2015 to
prepare the ground for an empirical analysis of the US and China’s diplomatic roles. Part
two continues this preliminary work by disentangling the many dimensions of leadership,
offering a general conceptualisation of leadership, and then distinguishing it from special
responsibilities. This part also distinguishes diplomatic leadership in a substantive sense
from national climate leadership in a positional sense. Part three assesses the respective roles
of the US and China in the negotiation in the Paris Agreement. The conclusion draws
together the threads of the argument and reflections on China’s future role in the light of the
US defection.

Leadership, in a substantive sense, is defined as a type of social interaction whereby by one
or more parties (the leaders) exercise asymmetric influence in guiding, directing or attracting
the support, acquiescence or compliance of, other parties (the followers), either directly or
indirectly, in ways that enable collective agency towards the achievement of a collective
purpose in a given community or group. While leadership and special responsibilities both
entail a socially sanctioned distribution of asymmetric roles and responsibilities that enhance
collective agency, not all special responsibilities necessarily entail guiding, directing or
attracting the support of others as the defining agential activity. Leadership in the substantive
sense of guiding others towards a collective purpose is distinguished from front-runners in a
race or performance, which is a form of positional leadership. Developed states that do the
most to fulfil their special responsibilities to lead in mitigation are national climate leaders in
a positional sense, but this does not constitute substantive leadership if it fails to induce
followership from other developed or developing states. Nonetheless, these efforts can
certainly enhance prospects for diplomatic leadership in building support in multilateral
negotiations. Applying this framework to the role of the E2 in the negotiation of the Paris Agreement, it is shown that US played a much more significant diplomatic leadership role shaping and building support for its proposals on special and general responsibilities than China, which played a more defensive role and was less successful in finding universal support for its proposals. This provides important clues to China’s future role following the Trump administration’s defection.

**Special responsibilities and climate change**

Climate change presents a hard case for those IR theories that assume that special responsibilities must necessarily be linked to special privileges or rights, since there are no obvious privileges or rights attached to the special responsibility to reduce emissions. Traditionally, global environmental protection has never featured in the grand strategies of great powers. Indeed, during the Age of Empire, the environmental exploitation of the colonies, or what Alfred Crosby (1986) has called ‘ecological Imperialism’, formed a key component of the foreign policies of European great powers. Today, high historical emissions or rapidly growing aggregate emissions are the by-product of being a great or rising power. While national environmental capabilities are emerging as a new source of international *prestige*, they are very much ‘the poor relation’ to military and economic capabilities for strategic purposes and, in any event, are generally seen as derivative of traditional capabilities. However, since the Cold War, the capabilities of great and rising powers to inflict disproportionate, catastrophic and irreversible harm to the global environment and humankind (such as through the deployment of nuclear weapons, or the failure to curb national greenhouse gas emissions) has directed increasing attention to the human civilizational and normative dimensions of the ‘special responsibilities’ of great powers.

Most IR theories have acknowledged the special responsibilities of great powers. The main area of disagreement can be traced to their different understanding of power. These differences divide between what Falkner (2018, 3-4) calls materialist versus social understandings of power. The former (e.g. realist/rationalist) understands power as material capabilities or assets that are possessed by the holders, and the more military and economic capabilities that are possessed relative to others, then the greater the ability to exert influence in shaping the international order. The latter (e.g. English School and constructivist)
understands power as inherently social and relational, and therefore conditioned by international norms of legitimate agency.

In *Special Responsibilities*, we anchored special responsibilities in legitimate power (2012, 70; see also Loke 2016). We conceived of special responsibilities ‘as a differentiated set of obligations, the allocation of which is collectively agreed’ that ‘provide a principle of social differentiation for managing collective problems in a world characterised by both formal equality and inequality of material capability’ (Bukovansky 2012 et al. 16). The uneven distribution of capabilities shapes the distribution of special responsibilities but what counts as the *relevant* capabilities, and how they may be appropriately exercised, can vary with the nature of the collective problem. Moreover, special responsibilities can take a variety of different forms: they may be positive or negative; universal or particular; formal and codified or informal and based on diffuse understandings; and they may be connected to special privileges, or not. We argued that those that are linked to special privileges are likely to be much more attractive (2012, 57-59).

The negotiation of special responsibilities is best understood as a political struggle to find a workable political compromise that acknowledges the uneven distribution of relevant capabilities to do harm, and to do good, in an anarchic society, and the need to protect collective goods and minimise collective vulnerability and injustices. The compromises that are forged may land anywhere along the intersecting dimensions of solidarist/collectivist to pluralist (Falkner 2018) and legalist (precise/strict obligation) to flexible (open-ended and aspirational).

The long and tortuous debate over the interpretation and application of the climate regime’s core burden sharing principles of ‘equity and common but differentiated responsibilities and respective capabilities’ (hereafter CBDR) are struggles to parse and allocate both general and special responsibilities. The UNFCCC 1992 allocated special responsibilities to developed countries as a universal group, not to great powers or major emitters. These responsibilities entail positive duties to lead in mitigation (by doing the heavy lifting in emissions reductions) and provide climate finance and other support to developing countries (which is a duty to assist). The category of ‘developed country’ (defined as OECD members as at 1992) thus served as a proxy for the ‘relevant capabilities’ that these states are understood to possess (economic and technological capability, financial wealth) to discharge their special
responsibilities to lead and assist. Yet these special responsibilities are not clear and strict legal obligations but rather under-defined aspirations that allow for a wide band of debate about how they should be interpreted and applied. Nor do they come with special privileges. Not surprisingly, they have not been uniformly or enthusiastically embraced by all developed countries.

The Kyoto Protocol 1997 gave greater specificity to special responsibilities by requiring ‘industrialised countries’ to commit to legally binding emissions reduction obligations and timetables. Developing countries had insisted that they should have no formal mitigation responsibilities because of their unmet development needs and developed countries’ historical responsibility for climate change based on their cumulative emissions and their greater capacity. The special responsibility to lead was interpreted to mean not only ‘doing more’ but also ‘going first’. The grand bargain reached at Kyoto was that industrialised countries accepted these special responsibilities in return for greater flexibility to meet their commitments (through international carbon trading and offsetting schemes). This flexibility provided special compensatory rights (as distinct from privileges) to developed countries that enabled special responsibilities to be discharged at least cost.

However, in the post-Kyoto phase of the negotiations further agreement over CBDR proved elusive, and especially between the US and China. The voluntary pledge and review approach of the nonbinding Copenhagen Accord 2009, primarily brokered by the US and the BASIC group (Brazil, South Africa, India and China), provided only a provisional compromise. It also proved to be far too pluralist and flexible for the most climate vulnerable parties, and it only ran to 2020.

The key to the success of the Paris compromise was that it incorporated a voluntary pledge and review approach into a legally binding treaty alongside clear long-term goals and temperature targets that would help to drive the ongoing process of ratcheting up individual and collective ambition. The grand compromise was that developed countries and major emitters won the flexibility to determine their nationally determined contributions (NDCs)

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2 Annex I of the UNFCCC 1992 is made up of OECD countries as at 1992 (developed countries) plus economies undergoing a transition to a market economy while Annex II is confined to OECD countries. Countries that fit into neither of these categories are referred to as ‘non-Annex I parties’ or developing countries, although some of these countries have developed rapidly in the past 25 years, including Singapore, South Korea but especially China.
according to their national circumstances while the more vulnerable parties secured collective
goals and a stronger temperature target that would drive the ratcheting up of ambition.

While the Paris Agreement avoided any reference to the Annexes of the UNFCCC and Kyoto
Protocol, the special responsibilities of developed countries are carried forward and are
clearly distinguished. There is still an expectation that developed countries ‘should continue
taking take the lead’ through economy-wide absolute emission reduction targets while
developing country are expected only to enhance their mitigation efforts (Article 4.4); developed
countries ‘shall provide financial resources to assist developing countries’ (Article 9.1) and ‘should continue to take the lead in mobilizing climate finance to support the
mitigation (and adaptation) efforts of developing counties (Article 9.3), while ‘other parties’
(such as China) are encouraged to provide voluntary support (Article 9.2). However, unlike
the Kyoto Protocol, the Paris Agreement does not impose any legal obligation on the parties
to achieve their domestic targets and no penalties are incurred if they are not met. Instead,
the parties shall pursue their national measures ‘with the aim of achieving the objectives of
such contributions’ (Article 4.2), although each party’s successive NDC ‘will represent a
progression beyond’ the current one, and ‘reflect its highest possible ambition’ in line with
CBDR and in the light of different national circumstances (Article 4.3) (author’s emphasis).
The Paris Agreement also provides much more focus to the general responsibilities of all
parties. That is, all parties are required to conform to a common accounting and transparency
framework to ensure the environmental integrity, transparency and comparability of their
NDCs.

The Paris compromise on special responsibilities is decidedly more pluralist and flexible than
the Kyoto compromise but more collectivist and legalist than the Copenhagen Accord. The
pluralism and national flexibility provided by the Paris Agreement 2015 was crucial to the
buy-in of the US and China. However, before we explore their respective roles in negotiating
this compromise, it is necessary to revisit the meaning of leadership.

**Rethinking Leadership and Climate Change**

The terms ‘leadership’ and ‘leader’ occupy a wide semantic field in the English language,
ranging from democratically elected political leaders to dictators, from front-runners in a
race, and pioneers and innovators in a field, to skilled diplomats, and from successful
bargainers to moral advocates. Nonetheless, I shall show that it is possible to make sense of this diversity of meanings by conceptually sorting leadership into two basic categories: substantive leadership (entailing followership) and positional leadership (a purely relative ranking).

Accounts of leadership in International Relations (IR) pull in many different directions. Studies of hegemonies represent one of the most developed areas of inquiry into leadership, understood as ongoing asymmetric influence by a dominant state or states over secondary states. While there is general acknowledge of the importance of socialisation of secondary states there is ongoing disagreement about the role of coercion and consent, and these disagreements can be traced to materialist versus social understandings of power.

Ian Clark’s International Society perspective on hegemony (Clark 2011), which is grounded in a social understanding of power, comes closest to the account of substantive leadership defended here (see also Cronin 2001) because it clearly distinguishes legitimate and illegitimate hegemony. The former occurs when there is a preponderance of capabilities in one or more states acting in concert and they are exercised in ways that promote collective purposes that are acceptable to a constituency of states (e.g. Clark 2011, 27). Legitimate hegemony is therefore tantamount to leadership whereas illegitimate hegemony constitute domination. Analytically, these two forms of leadership are located at opposite ends of a spectrum of possibilities (rather than posited as a simple binaries), and in the real world they rarely appear in pure form. Clark analyses the composition of hegemony as either singular or collective, and the scope of the hegemon’s constituency as either exclusive (in the form of a coalition) or inclusive (incorporating all or most of international society) (Clark 2011, 60).

Writing before the Paris negotiations began Clark predicted that a singular hegemony on the part of the US would not be sufficient to address a collective action problem like climate change, and that only a collective-inclusive hegemony would succeed in addressing the problem. Grundig and Ward arrived at a similar assessment regarding the indispensability of the US, albeit from a rationalist perspective (Grundig and Ward 2013).

However, just as it is possible to have legitimate and illegitimate hegemonies it is also possible to have hegemonic and nonhegemonic leadership. A general conceptualisation of leadership would need to capture both, and be capacious enough to capture the shifting and distributed character of leadership in large-n multilateral negotiations, which can vary during
different phases of negotiations, and in relation to different packages of items on the negotiation agenda.

Neoliberal institutionalist scholars have paid the most attention to diplomatic leadership inside negotiations, especially in relation to environmental regimes. This work has produced a range of typologies of leadership based on a repertoire of different ‘leadership mechanisms’ that build on the pioneering work of Oran Young (1991) and Arild Underdal (1994). This list has grown to include everything from coercion (threats and sanctions); material inducements; ‘directional leadership’ (i.e., setting an example); instrumental or problem-solving leadership (the exercise of negotiating skill in resolving deadlocks); intellectual leadership; and institutional leadership (supporting institutions that facilitate cooperation) (e.g. Andresen and Agrawala 2002; Skodvin and Andresen 2006; Saul and Seidel 2011). Coercion and material inducements are often grouped together as ‘power-based leadership’ (Skodvin and Andresen 2006, 15) or ‘structural power’ (Saul and Seidel 2011, 903).

This scholarship has provided increasingly fine-grained insights on different leadership mechanisms inside and outside multilateral negotiations. However, less attention has been given to reflecting on differences between leadership and domination. Underdal comes the closest to encapsulating this relationship by defining leadership as ‘an asymmetrical relationship of influence, where one actor guides or directs the behaviour of others towards a certain goal over a certain period of time’ (Underdal 1991, 140). He also acknowledges that leadership cannot rest on brute force alone since it entails shared values (Underdal 1994, 179). But this sits uncomfortably with his ‘all of the above’ approach to leadership mechanisms, which include coercion. Likewise, Joseph Nye understands leadership as ‘the power to orient and mobilize others for a purpose’ (Nye 2008, 19). However, much of his work has focused on how leaders can best get their way, as if accommodating the concerns of others is somehow a failure, or weaker form, of leadership.

Leadership can be clearly distinguished from success in bargaining since pure bargaining treats the preferences of other parties to the negotiations merely as constraints on the strategic pursuit of the bargainer’s individual interests. As Malne has argued, a leader acts on behalf of a larger group and seeks to promote collective goals (Malne 1995: 92) rather than exclusively pursue their own interests. This is not to say that leaders must be completely altruistic (their own interests can be folded into these collective goals) or that reaching
compromises through bargaining must be ruled out. Rather, it is to argue that the leader’s proposals must be perceived by other parties to be sufficiently workable and in alignment with collective goals to warrant their support.

The key to legitimate leadership is that it facilitates collective agency towards the achievement of collective goals in ways that are collectively empowering. Dictatorships facilitate collective agency towards collective goals, but in ways that expand the agency of leaders and reduce the agency of many if not all followers. Legitimate leadership presupposes that followers or supporters have social agency, understood as the capacity and opportunity to provide, withhold or withdraw their consent. The opportunity is institutionally provided, albeit in very different ways, to citizens in democracies and to states in the negotiation of international treaties. Both rest on consent, albeit mediated by institutions, in communities in which capabilities are unevenly distributed. In both settings, to attract support for their preferred proposals, leaders need to demonstrate their commitment to a larger purpose rather than exclusively pursue their own purposes. Leadership, like special responsibilities, carries an explicit or implicit responsibility the leadership role will be fulfilled, and the leaders will be answerable to followers in terms that are consistent with the shared purposes they have shaped and defended. To the extent that putative leaders resort to coercion, or threats of coercion, then their political authority to lead is undermined.

Staking out a constructivist account of leadership, grounded in the consent of the relevant constituency, not only provides a basis for conceptually distinguishing substantive leadership from special responsibilities but also clarifies the relationship between diplomatic leadership in multilateral negotiations and national climate leadership. Building on the foregoing discussion, leadership is defined as:

a type of social interaction whereby by one or more parties (the leaders) exercise asymmetric influence in guiding, directing or attracting the support, acquiescence or compliance of, other parties (the followers), either directly or indirectly, in ways that enable collective agency towards the achievement of a collective purpose in a given community, organisation or social group.

The nature of the goals that are pursued, the social structural location of agents and the social and institutional settings shape the relevant agential attributes and capabilities to lead, how
these may be appropriately exercised, and what counts as recognition, support, consent or acquiescence by followers.

**Substantive and positional leadership**

Substantive leadership can be distinguished from the idea of leaders as front-runners or pioneers in a field, which is a positional status relative to other actors in the field. Front-runners in an arms race are positional leaders because they possess the most weapons, and they are inducing other states to acquire weapons, but they are not practicing *leadership* because their purpose is to win at the expense of others rather than pursue a collective purpose.

Conversely, some forms of positional leadership may be associated with the pursuit of collective rather than individual purposes but they may fail to induce followers. For example, developed states that pursue the most ambitious climate policies, or engage in the strongest climate advocacy, may be appropriately described as national climate leaders in a positional sense. But these efforts do not constitute leadership in a substantive sense if other states are not induced to follow their lead or are not persuaded by their advocacy. However, insofar as the governments of these states attract or maintain the support of their voters for their climate policies, then their actions constitute *domestic* climate leadership since there is a domestic followership.

**Leadership and special responsibilities**

The distinction between substantive and positional leadership provides a basis for disentangling the relationship between special responsibilities and leadership. Both special responsibilities and substantive leadership entail a socially sanctioned distribution of asymmetric roles and responsibilities that enhance collective agency to achieve a collective purpose. However, the key difference is that not all special responsibilities necessarily entail guiding, directing or attracting the support of others as the defining agential activity. Moreover, the special responsibilities of developed countries to lead under the climate regime may be understood as *responsibilities to act as positional leaders* (to go first and/or do more) rather than responsibilities to engage in social interaction with a view to building followership.
Nonetheless, developed countries that emerge as national climate leaders are clearly doing a better job in performing their special responsibilities to lead, and this can confer considerable diplomatic credibility and enhance their prospects for diplomatic leadership. Conversely, laggards tend to have less diplomatic credibility. Indeed, a survey of four consecutive COPs (14-17) concluded that ‘the evidence strongly suggests that it is imperative for any actor seeking recognition as a leader to be perceived as being devoted to promoting the common good’ (Parker, Karlsson and Hjerpe 2015, 449; see also Saul and Seidel 2011, 916). Setting a national example is crucial in building credibility and signalling commitment to a common purpose.

Finally, the intense focus and demands on the US and China arising from their positional status as the two biggest emitters in the world provides grounds for arguing that the performance of diplomatic leadership in negotiating and securing an agreement is itself a special responsibility of indispensable states. The E2 are under much greater pressure and subjected to much greater critical scrutiny than other states, and there are strong expectations that they should not just participate in a new treaty but also work to make it happen. However, whether and how they respond to these social expectations is an empirical question.

The US and China: the Road to Paris

Contestation over special responsibilities is most intense when they are under negotiation. The 2009 Copenhagen negotiations were among the most intense in the history of the climate regime, and they provide a useful benchmark for comparing and evaluating the shifting roles of the US and China in the ongoing negotiations. At Copenhagen, both the US and China acted mostly as great bargainers rather than as leaders. Indeed, China was widely blamed as a spoiler due to its refusal to accept a long-term goal and timetable for peaking global emissions (Christoff 2010). The US had also been widely regarded as a spoiler and laggard following its repudiated of the Kyoto Protocol in 2001. The new Obama administration had sent strong signals of a commitment to re-engagement but high expectations were frustrated at Copenhagen. At the time of the Copenhagen meeting, the Waxman–Markey bill cap-and-trade bill had passed the House but not the Senate, and the US’s mitigation pledge (17% below 2005 by 2020) was based on the bill and contingent on its enactment. The US’s
commitment to national action therefore appeared as a promissory note rather than a *fait accompli*. Although the Obama administration had a Plan B (to use its executive powers to step around Congress and to push for hybrid bottom-up strategy in the hope of eventually appeasing Congress) this was not public. The original Copenhagen Accord was forged in a secret meeting between the US and the BASIC group (Brazil, South Africa, India and China), was therefore perceived by many, especially those locked out of the privileged negotiations during the endgame, as a self-serving bargain that departed from due process and the official negotiating text, and suited the major emitters rather than the collective community of negotiators. No consensus could be found to adopt the Accord in the final plenary.

Prior to COP17 in Durban in 2011, where the negotiating road map for what became the Paris agreement was launched, there had been no push from the US or China for a new agreement. Both were comfortable with the voluntary pledge and review model of the nonbinding Copenhagen Accord, which had been formally adopted at COP16 in Cancun in 2010, along with the nonbinding Cancun agreements. However, the Kyoto Protocol’s commitments ran only to 2012, the Copenhagen pledges only ran to 2020, and the parties faced the challenge of deciding how they would manage their post-2020 commitments. For developing countries, the negotiation of a second round of commitments under the Kyoto Protocol was essential to ensure the continuation of developed countries’ special responsibilities to lead. Yet neither the US nor China were parties to the Protocol, and Russia, Japan and Canada had abandoned any future Kyoto commitments. It was the EU’s undertaking to commit to a second commitment period of the Kyoto Protocol that helped to secure the commitment of China and India to ‘launch a process to develop a protocol, another legal instrument or an agreed outcome with legal force under the Convention applicable to all Parties’ (UNFCCC 2011; Eckersley 2017).

However, once the negotiations were underway, the US quickly emerged as the key shaper of the mitigation architecture of the Paris Agreement. Indeed, it is possible to trace a direct line from the mitigation provisions in the treaty text to a set of formal US submissions to the negotiating body in 2013. The US argued that the parties should ‘define their own mitigation contributions, taking into account their national circumstances, capacity, and other factors they consider relevant’ (US 2013a, 1-2). The submission reasoned that ‘…Parties are in a unique position to judge their respective situations, [and] they are much more likely to participate in the agreement if they have designed their own contributions…and such an
approach promotes an agreement that is applicable to all Parties’ (US 2013a, 1-2). The US argued that ambition could be built up over time and that ‘[a]n approach that imposes contributions from without is neither realistic nor likely to result in wide participation/implementation’ (US 2013a, 2). This contrasted with the EU’s more ambitious proposals for a dynamic, step-wise approach that entailed proposed commitments, a rigorous process of scientific and equity review, revision and then inscription as legally binding commitments in a treaty (EU 2013a, 2; 2013b).

In its second submission leading up to COP19 in Warsaw (US 2013b), the US sketched the elements of the new hybrid agreement: it would need to be concise and flexible so that it would not require constant amendment, and it would contain a mix of legally binding and nonbinding provisions. The parties’ specific mitigation commitments would be ‘nationally determined’ and contained outside the formal agreement in a schedule but would form part of the package (with the clear implication that they would not be legally binding) (US 2013b, 2). All these proposals are reflected in the Paris Agreement.

In contrast, China made most of its submissions as a member of the Like-Minded Developing Countries (LMDC), a diverse coalition of 18 developing countries including India, Saudi Arabia, Indonesia, Malaysia, Iraq, and Venezuela. This new bloc emerged in 2012 after Durban as a sign of increasing divergence among the members of the BASIC group, which had acted in concert at Copenhagen but thereafter splintered. Positioning within the LMDC, China and India adopted the traditionally defensive posture of the bloc, and reiterated their longstanding grievances about the failure of developed countries to fulfil their leadership responsibilities given their greater historical responsibility for climate change (e.g. LMDC 2013). China put this bluntly in one of its few individual submissions: ‘The dichotomy between developed and developing countries is the very foundation of the Convention regime, and any attempts to modify the Annexes of the Convention or to re-categorize developed and developing countries would delay progress in the Durban Platform process with nothing to come in the end’ (China 2013, 1).

By the end of the negotiations at COP19 at Warsaw in 2013, the EU’s long-standing efforts to secure ‘internationally legally binding commitments’ in relation to mitigation had failed to attract sufficient support. In contrast, the US’s formula of ‘nationally determined contributions’ (NDCs) had much wider appeal, especially for China and India and was
adopted in the Warsaw decision. Parties were invited to begin preparing their ‘intended nationally determined contributions’ (INDCs), and communicate them in 2015 in the lead up to Paris. Efforts by the EU, the African Group, the Least Developing Countries (LDCs) and the Alliance of Small Island States to ensure a rigorous *ex ante* equity and science review of all NDCs also languished (Ngwadla 2014). The strongest opposition to these proposals came not from the US but rather the LMDC coalition (including China and India), which also insisted on differentiation on transparency and review according to the traditional Annex I/non-Annex I divide (Ngwadla and Rajamani 2014, 4). China has also argued that the special responsibilities of developed countries to provide climate finance ‘shall be of the same legal bindingness as their mitigation commitments’ (China, 2014, 2). The word ‘shall’ found its way into Article 9.1 on finance.

However, it was in the lead-up to COP20 at Lima in 2014 that the negotiations received a considerable boost from the joint US-China announcement of their proposed post-2020 INDCs (The Whitehouse 2014). This announcement signalled the G2’s commitment to the negotiations and suggested a breaking of ranks by China with the LMDC, and it put pressure India to demonstrate commitment to a new treaty. It also signalled a rapprochement between the E2 over differentiation. This was achieved, in part, by the phrase ‘in light of different national circumstances’, which appeared in the joint statement, in the final Lima decision (UNFCCC 2014, paragraph 3, author’s emphasis) as well as the core provisions on NDCs in the Paris Agreement (in Articles 2.2 and 4.3).

To the world, the US-China joint statement of November 2014 looked like ‘shared leadership’ by the E2, and that was certainly the intention. However, the joint statement was a US initiative, announced during President Obama’s visit to Beijing in 2014, and it had taken more than a year of planning and consultation as part of a larger effort in stepping up climate-energy diplomacy with China, India and many other countries.\(^3\) Although the announcement simply publicised each party’s respective INDCs, and declared a joint commitment to a successful treaty, unlike Copenhagen, it did not seek to pre-empt the negotiations.

The joint statement can be understood not simply as joint declaration of commitment by the E2 of their special and general national responsibilities (reflected in their INDCs) but also a

\(^3\) Interview with anonymous official in US State Department, 28 April 2015
commitment to perform their special diplomatic responsibilities to secure an agreement. There is also mounting evidence to show that, by this stage of the negotiations, China had made an implicit public admission that its mitigation responsibilities were not merely general but also special (albeit different from the US’s), that the world had changed since Kyoto, and that China was ready to acknowledge its status not just as a major emitter but also a major economic power, and with a rising middle class. By 2015, China’s aggregate emissions were roughly double those of the US (29% compared to 14%) (Olivier et. al. 2016, 5) and its per capita emissions were higher than many OECD countries. Moreover, it was feeling pressure not just from the US and the EU, but also from the most climate vulnerable least developed countries. These developments had made China look less and less like a developing country, albeit still different from developed countries, and therefore with different special responsibilities. This is reflected in China’s INDC, where it became the first developing country to promise a peaking and then absolute decline in its aggregate emissions before 2030, rather than simply a decline in emissions intensity. This peaking may occur well before 2025 given structural changes in the Chinese economy (Green and Stern 2016).

China was also providing considerable financial and other assistance to Least Developed Countries and SIDS, and the reference to voluntary finance contributions by ‘other countries’ in Article 9.2 of the Paris Agreement acknowledged this practice (Jinnah 2017, 297). In short China was already discharging its own special responsibilities to developing countries. After the joint announcement, China continued to work from inside the LMDC at Lima, and it continued to defend differentiation in relation to the bindingness of obligations, the content of NDCs, and even transparency and reporting (China 2015). So while China’s NDC represented a ‘new normal’ in China’s economic development and its role in the negotiations (cf. Hilton and Kerr 2016), the US’s ‘new normal’ in climate diplomacy reached out to developed and developing countries.

By early 2015, the broad ‘landing zone’ of the Agreement was already clear, and it had been largely shaped by the US, with the support of its key allies within the Umbrella Group (Canada, Australia, Japan, New Zealand). Since 2013, the US and EU also increasingly worked together on many matters relating to mitigation and transparency, and the US had found common cause with China over the framing of NDCs, despite ongoing differences on other matters.
However, there were many fine-grained details to be resolved, including long-term goals and temperature targets and the precise legal form of NDCs. Given that the flexibility of the mitigation provisions appeared to give too much leeway to major emitters it was not surprising that Paris saw strong push back from vulnerable states on core substantive issues such as the strength of collective mitigation ambition and long-term goals and targets. The most significant development was the emergence of a High Ambition Coalition between the 28 members of the EU and 79 African, Caribbean and Pacific states (European Commission 2015) – an idea initiated by Foreign Minister Tony de Brum of the Marshall Islands. The coalition demanded a range of measures consistent with the early EU’s submissions, but its central and most publicized demand was for a more rigorous temperature target of 1.5 rather than 2 degrees Celsius in order drive mitigation ambition faster and higher.

The 1.5 degrees target had not been part of the US’s or China’s (or indeed the EU’s) negotiating strategy but all joined, at different stages, what was widely perceived as a ‘moral coalition’. For the US, the quid pro quo for more ambition was rigorous transparency and reporting, which it argued was essential to ensure that the bottom-up, pledge and review system was credible. By the closing days of the conference, the High Ambition coalition’s membership continued to ‘snowball’; once the US and then Brazil joined, China then India eventually followed (Climate Home News 2015; Mathiesen and Harvey 2015). This important concession to the most vulnerable states was crucial to securing their support to the final package deal.

Aside from the joint US-China statement, it was not until the final days of the Paris negotiations that the Chinese team shifted out of its defensive mode and into a more overtly proactive role in working closely with the US and the COP President to help broker final compromises on cross-cutting issues, a role that was formally acknowledged by the Obama administration after the conclusion of the meeting (The White House 2015).

**Conclusion and Future Prospects**

Sikina Jinnah (2017) has argued that, over the period 2007-2015, both the US and China have been norm makers and norm takers in negotiations over CBDR, in a two-way process of socialisation, and that China, along with other major emerging economies are ‘normative
powers’. However, if we narrow down the focus to the period 2013-2015, and analyse their respective roles through the prism of diplomatic leadership and special responsibilities rather than norm entrepreneurship, then the US has more clearly discharged its special responsibility as an indispensable state to exercise diplomatic leadership to make an agreement happen, even though China has done more to discharge its special responsibilities at the national level. Parker and Karlsson’s survey of negotiators, state delegates and non-government organisations found that the US, followed by China, were recognised as playing a leading role in the Paris negotiations in 2015 (2018, 531), although China’s leadership role was related to developing countries. They concede that they cannot be sure how respondents understood what ‘leading role’ meant but suggest that respondents did not simply use aggregate material power as a proxy for leadership since key diplomatic shifts did not correlate with material power shifts.

Whereas at Copenhagen, President Obama’s stated commitment to national international action lacked substance, in the following years it gained substance. In 2010, he used his executive powers under the Clean Air Act to direct the EPA to promulgate new regulations to reduce emissions from cars and light trucks, and then new power plants and major modifications to existing power plants. By 2013, now in his second term, President Obama ramped up the use of its executive powers to circumvent a hostile Congress and drive progressive national climate policy. The centrepiece of this action was the Clean Power Plan, launched in June 2013, and finalized in August 2015, which extended the EPA’s regulation of CO2 to all existing power plants with the aim of reducing emissions from this sector by 32 percent from 2005 levels by 2030. These enhanced efforts, along with the US’s climate finance pledge of 3 billion USD - the largest single pledge to the Green Climate Fund (2016) - considerably enhanced the diplomatic credibility of the Obama administration. Climate change was legacy issue for President Obama, and he enjoyed very strong commitment and vigorous climate advocacy from his Secretary of State John Kerry. The irony is that President Obama succeeded in diplomatic leadership but could not provide lasting domestic leadership in the face of ongoing opposition from Congress, and his reliance on executive powers made it easier for the new Trump administration to demolish most of his climate related executive decisions.

China too had stepped up its national climate action, including phasing out the dirtiest coal plants, piloting and (and later implementing) emissions trading schemes in the provinces and
overseeing a massive expansion of renewable energy. China had also given increasing to prominence, including in its 13th Five Year Plan, to the idea of building an ‘ecological civilisation’ (Oswald 2014). However, its considerable domestic efforts were not directly allied to ambitious climate diplomacy. This apparent puzzle can be explained by the fact that its emission reduction strategy was driven mainly (though not exclusively) by domestic considerations such as energy security and rising public concern over the dangerous levels of air pollutions in major cities (e.g. Schreurs 2016, 222). China’s vision of an ecological civilisation is a national, not global, vision and it is contradicted by continued investments in fossil fuels, such as carbon emitting coal-to-chemical (including coal-to-gas) plants (Economy 2017). Moreover, the massive infrastructure investments undertaken and planned under President Xi Jinping’s signature Belt and Road Initiative will see the export of coal fired power plants and other energy intensive industries, which could significantly undermine efforts to reach the long-term goals and targets of the Paris Agreement.

The US’s proposals proved more attractive than China’s because they found a way of side-stepping rather than continuing the deep disagreements over CBDR that had plagued the post-Kyoto negotiation. The proposals focussed on achieving breadth of participation in the first instance through a flexible and pragmatic accommodation of national differences (which drew in major emitters), and then building depth of commitment over time via a nationally determined approach (which drew in vulnerable parties). This pragmatism clearly suited the US’s domestic situation, because it enabled the President to sign the Agreement and implement it under its executive powers (Wirth 2016). The US’s strategy therefore improvised around both US domestic deadlock and international deadlock. The most vulnerable parties accepted this once they had achieved commitments on climate finance (which China helped to secure), a stronger temperature target and long-term goals to help drive ambition forward.

The substantive account of leadership developed above directs attention to the key differences in US’s diplomacy (compared to its role at Copenhagen and compared to China’s) that warrant the ascription of diplomatic leadership: the creativity and broad appeal of the US’s proposed hybrid architecture for the Paris Agreement which helped to break long-standing deadlocks; adherence to the recognized practices of multilateral negotiations; taking the initiative on intensified bilateral engagement with China, leading to the joint statement; providing the largest contribution to climate finance; more vigorous international advocacy
by the US executive; and enhanced domestic initiatives on climate and energy policy, all of which provided strong signals of the administration’s credibility and commitment to a collective goal. While the US’s NDC falls well short of a fair share according to the Climate Equity Reference Project’s allocation framework (Hoz, Kartha and Athanasiou 2018), the Obama administration’s efforts represent a significant improvement on the negligible efforts of previous administrations.

China also demonstrated a consistent commitment to the multilateral process since Copenhagen. Its cooperation with US in the joint statement and in the endgame at Paris were crucial to the success of the Agreement and, unlike the US, China’s NDC has been judged to be a fair share by the Climate Equity Project (CSO Equity Review 2015; Hoz, Kartha and Athanasiou 2018). Yet throughout most of the negotiations China played a defensive diplomatic role and was reluctant to break ranks with developing countries. It also defended a strict differentiation of commitments, strongly resisted rigorous *ex ante* review of INDCs and insisted on stricter *ex post* scrutiny of developed countries’ NDCs. It was also one of the last major emitters to join the High Ambition Coalition during the endgame. This diplomatic performance can be linked to its self-ascribed leadership role within the G77 rather than to leadership of the larger negotiating community, and it explains why it did not offer bridge-building proposals that might resolve traditional divisions. In terms of Clark’s schema, China’s diplomacy largely focused on maintaining a singular-exclusive hegemony with the G77 whereas the US gave much more attention to building a collective-inclusive one.

The growing division between major emitters and the most vulnerable countries threatens the unity of the China/G77 alliance. This has led China to concede, implicitly if not explicitly, that it too has special responsibilities to lead in a positional and substantive diplomatic sense, albeit ones that are different to the US’s, and which are attentive to the needs of developing countries. This new axis of differentiation among developing countries has received oblique recognition in Article 9.2 of the Paris Agreement, which acknowledges that ‘other parties’ (code for China) may voluntarily provide financial assistance, and in Article 9.4, which gives priority to the needs of the most vulnerable countries in the allocation of climate finance (Jinnah 2017, 297).

Looking forward, the pressure to ratchet up ambition will intensify over time if the parties are to reach the long-term goals and temperature targets, and China, as the biggest aggregate
emitter, will be under increasing scrutiny. The rules of implementation, transparency and review are yet to be fully worked out, but thus far China has insisted that the \textit{ex post} review process be nonpunitive and facilitative and therefore not involve blaming and shaming.

The US too will be under continual scrutiny. It is no small irony that the US, under the Trump administration, has once again become the spoiler and the national laggard, and much more spectacularly under the Trump administration than the second Bush administration. This has placed China under increasing pressure to assume the special responsibility of diplomatic leadership of behalf of international society to keep the ongoing Paris negotiations and processes on track as well as performing national leadership in ramping up ambition. However, it is unlikely that China will rush to fill the diplomatic ‘leadership vacuum’ for the same reason that China did not rush to exercise diplomatic leadership by building a collective-inclusive hegemony in the Paris negotiations. Zhang et al. (2017, 224) have argued that China should build a Climate Five (C5) partnership with the EU, India, Brazil and South Africa, which will reduce the intense pressure on China, but they concede this will be difficult. China has clearly reaffirmed its commitment to the Paris Agreement and the ongoing multilateral process in the wake of the US’s defection. Yet it does not seem ready and willing to take new diplomatic initiatives to driving ambition faster and further, or drive a rigorous review process. Given the indispensability of the US, we are therefore most likely to see a holding pattern until a new US administration can re-engage and/or Xi Jinping decides that China will pursue a more consistent and concerted vision of ecological civilisation at home \textit{and} abroad.

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