



***REORIENTATION OF CLIMATE
ACTION: THE INDO-PACIFIC CANNOT
AFFORD TO WAIT ANY LONGER***

BY TIANSHENG ZHOU

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The world is set to blast past the limit of 1.5°C established by the landmark 2015 Paris Climate Agreement. Yet, the political will for dealing with the climate crisis remains tepid, as seen from the outcomes of the most recent COP29 meeting in Baku, Azerbaijan. The devastating effects of the massive storms affecting millions around the world demonstrate that proactive climate action is more necessary than ever before.

Among the most vulnerable to the climate crisis are people in the Indo-Pacific, home to numerous low-lying island and coastal nations. These regions are obviously extremely vulnerable to rising sea levels, but many are also affected by ever-stronger storms impacting millions further inland. The recent monsoon season in Bangladesh from June to mid-October, for example, brought heavy rains that flooded large swathes of the country. In Bangladesh, which hosts large refugee camps for Rohingyas from neighboring Myanmar, such devastation also has huge humanitarian implications for vulnerable populations.

Without proactive and impactful climate action, the economic costs to these nations will increase. More importantly, countless lives and livelihoods will be lost. Constant rebuilding from climate-induced natural disasters only perpetuates the cycle of underdevelopment and fragility.

First, given the impasse on funding for climate action, new mechanisms and partnerships for the distribution of climate technology and resources must be established. And as climate change does not observe borders, climate action requires integrated global efforts, not least to avoid the free-rider problem. Pending broader international consensus, bilateral or regional agreements may be more effective, as they can build more trust and confidence among participants.

In the Indo-Pacific, China remains a large player in the development of green technology, while Australia also has the potential to benefit as one of the largest exporters of lithium. Such opportunities exist where knowledge, expertise, and resources can be provided to less developed countries in their immediate regions, especially through existing trade networks. In strengthening bilateral and regional cooperative mechanisms, the Indo-Pacific could set the foundations for climate action that can later be applied on the larger international stage. Furthermore, having such access to technology and trade could also provide a hedge against the reduced international funding in the case that some countries renege on their commitments.

Second, multinational enterprises (MNEs), as the largest contributors of greenhouse gas emissions, must be incentivized to reduce their emissions output. As MNEs are not subject to specific constituencies, unlike governments, national leaders must work with business leaders to encourage MNEs to engage robustly with climate action, whether that means larger tax breaks or some sort of subsidy directly tied to climate action. While 1,850 sustainability incentives exist in about 45 countries, they are not ubiquitous across the globe. Thus, there is an opportunity for international consensus building on this front as presently MNEs can “offshore” to countries with less stringent laws and regulations. With developed and developing countries working together, there may also be a solution that helps to curtail emissions from MNEs without the loopholes that they often exploit.

Third, the discussions on how to use climate financing and what should be more pertinent to tackle should be

driven by the countries that are most affected by climate change. Such countries are using their limited resources to uphold their populations' lives and livelihoods, leaving very little to spend on proactive measures to mitigate climate change. Much of the discourse on the threats of climate change often take on a broader scale. There is a good reason this—to engage larger developing nations that may not see the urgency in taking action for climate change. However, it is equally important to understand the localized issue of climate change to highlight the imminent risks that vulnerable nations face. For example, rising sea levels threaten to wipe low-lying Pacific Island nations from the face of the earth, and increasing marine temperatures risk destroying local reef habitats and fisheries, further undermining economies dependent on such resources. Embracing local leadership when it comes to those most severely impacted will allow for a better-adapted and thus effective response to the uncertainties created by climate change.

In the run up to COP30 next year in Belem, Brazil, the international community sits at a crossroads. Leaving this climate crisis for future generations is no longer possible. Continuing to build trust, ensuring the countries remain committed, and addressing the most pressing issues can help move the needle in the right direction. Failure to do so may have dire consequences. With the ongoing gaps in international cooperation and agreement on climate change, efforts need to be made towards greater consensus building. Thus, piecemeal efforts should not be discounted, as it could establish the foundations for future international agreements as countries create new frameworks and processes for climate action. Such regional or bilateral cooperation can also better integrate local voices into account, as it can help divert much needed funds and attention to the imminent threat that vulnerable communities from the jungles of the Amazon to the crowded streets of Dhaka face from the effects of climate change.

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