



# Negotiator Briefs on Cognition and Climate Change

## What is Power in the Global Climate Negotiations?

By Manjana Milkoreit

**What does it mean to be powerful in the UNFCCC process and who holds the most power? Different definitions of power can result in very different assessments, leading and possibly misleading the analyst to pay attention to certain actors and developments, while ignoring others. Departing from the usual data-driven approach of the CCC Briefs, Brief No. 5 will offer a short conceptual introduction to power theory in the climate change context at the global scale.**

### Defining Power

CCC Brief No. 4 argued that the conventional definition of power in international relations scholarship relies on material resources – military capabilities, economic weight or access to natural resources – as base for political might. According to this theory, those with the biggest guns and fattest wallets get what they want because they can force their will upon others. Lots of events in international political life can be explained using hard power theory, as for example the conflict in Syria or the growing tensions between China and Japan over territorial control in the South China Sea.

But when it comes to climate change, hard power theory ceases to be helpful. No country can coerce any other country into action on climate change no matter how big their military or how strong their economy. A more useful way of thinking about power in this arena is to ask *Who has the ability to address climate change?* There is a straightforward response to this question, again, based on material factors. Countries, who control significant GHG emission sources and have significant financial resources to fund adaptation measures, can address climate change. That means that the usual suspects – the US, Canada, Australia, the EU – and increasingly the emerging powers in the BASIC group (Brazil, South Africa, India, China) are powerful players in the climate negotiations. Of course, their power is constrained by domestic political dynamics, but in principle they could get stuff done. However, most of these players currently do not seem keen to exercise their power in a manner that would effectively address climate change.

### Key Lessons

- Hard power theory is not helpful in the context of climate change – nobody can be coerced to reduce GHG emissions or to provide climate finance.
- A more useful framework to think about power in climate politics is a capability-based approach: those with the capability to reduce emissions at home, fund adaptation and compensate disadvantaged groups in an economic transition are powerful players in this global policy arena.
- Apart from capability-based power, the motivating power of ideas – coherent narratives of climate change as a governance problem and its solutions – is important in the climate negotiations.
- The power of ideas might offer a significant lever for change, in particular in domestic political contexts, but there is limited systematic knowledge about its nature and how to use it.
- So far, there is no dominant and effective global narrative to motivate climate action.

While that might be the end of the explanatory story of power for most analysts, it makes sense to look a little further. Neither hard power nor the capability theory of power can explain everything that is going on in international politics or climate negotiations. For example, why is the Alliance of Small Island states (AOSIS), a group of vulnerable countries without any significant hard power, perceived to be important in the negotiations, making the EU anxious to maintain an alliance with the small island states? Why have the BASIC countries so far refused to sign up to formal mitigation commitments, but have made tremendous and sometimes costly progress on climate policies at home? Why do they not exercise their power globally to force others into a binding agreement? Regardless of their failure to explain these and other phenomena, hard power and the capability theory of power do not offer a lever for change. And change is needed.

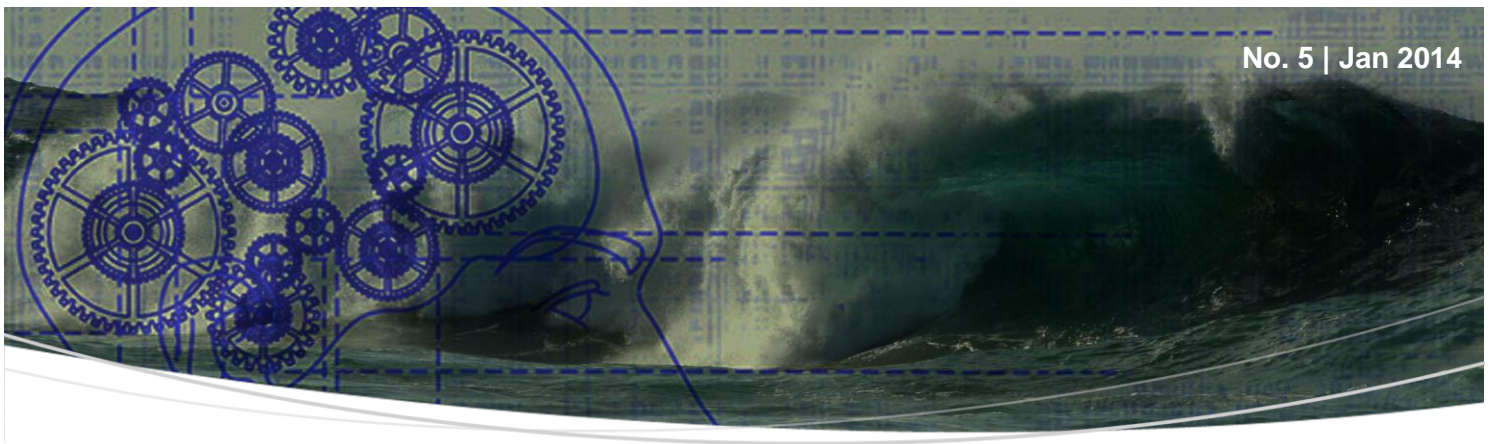
Alternative conceptions of power – focusing on different forms of power – might help. Building on a long intellectual history in sociology and political science, two international relations scholars (Barnett and Duvall 2005) have developed a taxonomy of four different kinds of power. This taxonomy is based on different kinds of social relationships between actors through which power works, rather than the properties of the power holder, such as resource wealth:

3. **Compulsory power** is a form of hard or coercive power, in which actor A can shape and control actor B's actions or circumstances through direct interactions.
4. **Institutional power** concerns the reification and stabilization of hard power relationships through norms, rules and procedures. The relationship between two actors is mediated by these institutions, which confer rights and obligations, advantages and disadvantages upon their members.

1. **Structural power** is about the structures – usually mutually constitutive relationships – that determine what kinds of social beings actors are and what capacities they have. Depending on one's position in the social structure, (e.g., being a teacher or a student) one's power to influence one's own circumstances and those of others differs.
2. **Productive power** is the ability to influence the way people think about reality and what they believe to be important, to convene actors, to set an agenda, or to frame a discussion. In essence, productive power is about the power of ideas. It captures what Joseph Nye calls soft power – the ability to make others want what you want, not because you coerce them, but because you create a desire in them.

Applying this taxonomy to global climate negotiations, three of the four categories appear to be of little use when trying not only to understand, but to shift the power dynamics in the UNFCCC negotiations. As mentioned above, coercive power does not matter because nobody can be forced to reduce GHG emissions or to provide climate finance. Global institutions are still in the making; the UN provides minimal institutional constraint with its rules of procedure, and it is currently being weakened by repetitive rule breaking, such as the neglect of the objections to COP decisions by Bolivia in 2009 or by Russia in 2012. Structural power is important due to the uneven distribution of emission sources, economic wealth, and climate vulnerability among negotiating parties. The relationships between developed and developing countries or the Global North and South are important structuring devices of global climate politics. However, this situation is unlikely to change in the short- and medium-term with the exception of the emerging powers in the BASIC coalition, and therefore does not offer strong levers for change.





That leaves productive or soft power at the center of the power analysis in global climate governance, and raises the questions of when and why ideas can be powerful and how they might be able to create change.

### The Power of Ideas

Whose ideas are influential, regardless of their hard power capacity? And is there a set of ideas that could sway those with hard power resources to change their stance and support speedy and effective multilateral cooperation? If not, can such a set of ideas be created?

This is where scholarship does not offer good answers yet. All we can do at this point is to look back and observe what worked in the past. Moral ideas seem to play a role, as do ideas that turn into social norms more generally. Ideas that make up people's identities matter a lot, including ideas that give meaning to certain places people and their identities are connected with. But why some ideas work to motivate people under certain circumstances but others do not, is still largely a mystery.

What we can do is to assess the power of existing sets of ideas or narratives in the climate change negotiations. Different parties and participants offer a huge variety of stories about the nature of the climate challenge and appropriate avenues for addressing it. Not all stories involve the international community or the UNFCCC. But, unsurprisingly, one of the most popular stories among negotiators defines climate change as a global problem that can only be managed successfully by the international community as a whole. The community of states has to be united in solidarity, so the story goes, and bound by moral responsibility for each country and each human being, especially for its weakest and poorest members. So far, this story has not been able to convince those who hold the keys to action. We need to ask what is wrong with it?

Then there are multiple stories about states being responsible to their citizens, national interests and the inescapable logic of the market. Usually this story makes the case for a market-based approach to climate policy. The only way to reduce CO<sub>2</sub> is to put a price on CO<sub>2</sub>. With a sufficiently long-term perspective, the market logic makes economic sense – resorting to moral arguments is neither necessary nor desirable. This seems to be a fairly effective logic among big emitters. The argument that climate action does not have to be economically painful is popular in a world where neoliberal ideas dominate most national and global policy debates. But it has not (yet) produced the necessary effects on climate change either.

Many more stories could be told, including one about the responsibility of each individual on the planet to take responsibility for climate change, whether as a diplomat, a mayor or a bus driver. There is one about building a better future, with happier and more resilient communities, or one about changing the definition of the good life in the developed world, or one about a world divided between the rich and the poor that defines climate change as the problem through which a new balance between the two groups needs to be established.

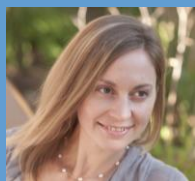
A global story that works for everyone might not be possible, maybe not even desirable. A better place to start thinking about the power of ideas might be at the national level, where powerful domestic narratives are needed that mobilize Americans, Canadians, Australians, Chinese and Indians behind climate as the key human challenge of their lifetime.

### Reference:

Barnett, Michael N., and Raymond Duvall. 2005. *Power in Global Governance*. Cambridge: Cambridge

## About this document

This document is part of the publication series "Negotiator Briefs on Cognition and Climate Change" that builds on research conducted by Manjana Milkoreit since 2011. The series is co-sponsored by the Walton Sustainability Solutions Initiative (WSSI) at Arizona State University's Global Institute of Sustainability (GIOS) and the Waterloo Institute of Complexity and Innovation (WICI) at the University of Waterloo in Canada.



<mailto:manjana.milkoreit@asu.edu>

[Twitter - @ManjanaM](#)

[Bio](#)

## About the Rob and Melani Walton Sustainability Solutions Initiatives

The Rob and Melani Walton Sustainability Solutions Initiatives are the result of a \$27.5 million investment in Arizona State University's Global Institute of Sustainability by the Walton Family Foundation. Within the Walton Sustainability Solutions Initiatives, diverse teams of faculty, students, entrepreneurs, researchers, and innovators collaborate to deliver sustainability solutions, accelerate global impact, and inspire future leaders through eight distinct initiatives.



[sustainablesolutions.asu.edu](http://sustainablesolutions.asu.edu)



[@WSSIatASU](#)



[Rob and Melani Walton Sustainability Solutions Initiatives](#)

## About the Waterloo Institute for Complexity and Innovation

The Waterloo Institute for Complexity and Innovation (WICI) is a research hub that promotes the rigorous transdisciplinary study of innovation within—and the resilient and beneficial transformation of—the complex adaptive systems essential to human wellbeing in the 21st century. WICI aims to pursue leading-edge research that significantly advances complexity science and its practical application to humanity's problems.



[wici.ca](http://wici.ca)



[@WICIWaterloo](#)



[Waterloo Institute for Complexity and Innovation \(WICI\)](#)