

Climate Diplomacy: Positioning Tajikistan as a Vulnerable but Proactive Actor in Global Environmental Governance

Author: Behruzsho Nuriddinov

Research Scholar, Department of Political Science and Public Administration, College of Arts & Commerce, Andhra University, Visakhapatnam, Andhra Pradesh, India

behruzsho.nuriddinov@gmail.com

Abstract

This article is an attempt to explore Tajikistan's climate diplomacy to address environmental vulnerabilities while building its international status. Despite the fact that it is a small, landlocked state in Central Asia, Tajikistan has been able to represent itself as a proactive player in global climate governance through innovative diplomatic initiatives. The research explores how Tajikistan uses its environmental vulnerabilities, mainly the impact of climate change as diplomatic opportunity to enhance its international recognition and influence.

This study demonstrates how small states can effectively employ niche diplomacy to transcend traditional power limitations. The result of the study suggest that Tajikistan's climate diplomacy initiatives have successfully enhanced its international profile, facilitated regional cooperation, and represented the country as a credible voice in global environmental governance. This research contributes to literature on small state diplomacy and environmental governance. At the same time it provides practical insights for small states seeking to enhance their international influence through climate leadership and diplomacy.

Keywords: *Climate diplomacy, small state theory, environmental governance, Tajikistan, niche diplomacy, Central Asia*

1. Introduction

Increasing number of small states is engaged in climate diplomacy positioning them in the frontline of the climate diplomacy. Republic of Tajikistan a small landlocked country in Central Asia is an example of this practice through its active engagement in international climate diplomacy in spite of its comparatively limited political and economic resources.

The strategies and initiatives of small countries like Tajikistan to climate change and environmental governance raises question about the role of small states in evolving international environmental governance. How a country with limited economic and political capacities can address global challenges posed by climate change? The way small states manage effectively influence international climate policy with traditional power limitation? Therefore this study is an attempt to explore how Tajikistan has strategically used environmental challenges as an opportunity to position itself as an active player in international environment governance.

By analyzing Tajikistan climate diplomacy initiatives within the broader context of small state theory and environmental governance this research answers to the above mentioned questions. The study argues that Tajikistan successfully used vulnerability diplomacy in its response to the challenges imposed by climate change. This strategy allowed Tajikistan to use climate vulnerability as a diplomatic capital to enhance its international profile. Through initiatives like International Decade for Action "Water for Sustainable Development" (2018-2028) and active participation in international conferences on climate change, Tajikistan has enhanced its position in international environmental governance.

The contribution of this research extends beyond the Tajikistan case study. Starting from the end of the last century, the role of climate change and environmental governance in international relations has significantly increased. Therefore, exploration and understanding the role of small states and their contribution to environmental governance became crucial for academics and policymakers. This study contributes to the existing literature on climate diplomacy and provides a roadmap for other small states seeking to address environmental challenges and enhance their international influence through climate diplomacy. Tajikistan is an example of a small state for other international actors with limited material resource and traditional power.

Methodology

This study employs a qualitative research approach to examine how Tajikistan has strategically used environmental challenges as an opportunity to position itself as an active player in international environment governance. The analysis is grounded in a comprehensive review of academic journals, books, policy papers, analytical reports, and other scholarly literature relevant to the topic. In addition to academic sources, the research closely examines official documents, including multilateral and bilateral agreements, policy statements, and government reports. Relevant public speeches and statements by political leaders are also analyzed to capture current strategic perspectives and diplomatic positions. By integrating these sources and data, the study offers a nuanced and contextualized understanding of the role and contribution of small states to environmental governance.

2. Literature Review and theoretical framework

2.1 Climate Diplomacy and Environmental Governance

Diplomacy as a field of international relations evolved as a bilateral relations and conflict resolution method to solve complex bilateral challenges (Spies, 2019). The modern diplomacy evolved on the basis of traditional or bilateral diplomacy. Diplomacy is a dynamic and contested concept the definition of which varies depending on historical period, context, school of thought and actors of the diplomatic practice. Because of that there is no single recognized definition of diplomacy. The Britannica encyclopedia provides classical definition of diplomacy which is following: “*Diplomacy, the established method of influencing the decisions and behavior of foreign governments and peoples through dialogue, negotiation, and other measures short of war or violence*” (Encyclopaedia Britannica, 2024). This definition is foundational and requires taking into consideration the realities of contemporary diplomacy, including evolving of climate diplomacy as subset of diplomacy.

Climate diplomacy is a subset of diplomacy which evolved recently but became one of the important tools in international relations. In compare to the traditional diplomacy which mostly results in zero sum game, climate diplomacy require combined strategy and unified way beyond the nation state borders. Climate diplomacy is one domain of environmental diplomacy but due to increasing warning of international community about the challenges of climate change it sometimes overshadows other environmental issues. Climate diplomacy emerged as a subset of diplomacy

recently. It is mainly distinct from traditional diplomacy for its multilateral nature. Despite the growing geopolitical tension among superpowers threat of climate challenges necessitates multilateral cooperation through climate diplomacy to address these challenges (Gasimova, 2024).

The evolution of international climate governance and climate diplomacy links to 1992 United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) and 2015 Paris Agreement (Alam, Muhib, Khan, & Khalil, 2024). These two documents emphasized the growing importance of climate issue in international relations. Other researcher argue that the evolution of climate diplomacy began with the UNFCCC in 1990, advanced with the adoption of the Kyoto Protocol, and culminating in negotiation of the Paris Agreement in 2015 (Naser & Pearce, 2022). Indeed these are the principal international documents which enable all countries of the world to respond strategically to the environmental issues through multilateral cooperation.

According to the principle of "common but differentiated responsibilities" (CBDR) all countries of the world have shared responsibility to address environmental problems (United Nations, 1992). This principle is the cornerstone of climate diplomacy which recognizes different capacities and different duties based on their historical contribution (Honkonen, 2009).

2.2 Theory of Small State Diplomacy

Despite the bulk of research on the topic of small states there is no consensus among scholars regarding key characteristics of small state. Review of literature reveals that lack of power and vulnerability are among the key variables of small states mentioned in academic studies (Maass, 2009).

There is ongoing debate among scholar about the role of small states in international relations. From the perspective of realism school of thought small states are often described as passive actor in international relations and less attention is paid to their position and status in international politics (Simpson, 2018). In compare to them great powers are active member of international relations. However there are scholar who challenge this point of view, demonstrating how small states with limited resources can influence international relations through strategic positioning, diplomacy and soft power (Long, 2017). Small state diplomacy is the act of strategically employing regional and global institutions. Small states focus on narrow diplomatic agenda using strategies like enhancing international status and initiating new institution and norms in international relations. Despite

limited traditional power in compare to big actors the act of initiating new institution and norms allows small states to impact on international relations (Wivel, 2023).

Theory of small states diplomacy provides conceptual framework for exploring the role of countries with limited material resources in international relations. Despite having limited political and economic power small states use specific strategies to achieve their goal. One of the primary strategy of small states in international relations is norm entrepreneurship or institutional entrepreneurship. Small states flexibility in international relations allows them to initiate new international institution and norms or promote processes (Wivel, 2023).

For achieving their goal and enhancing their status in global arena small states build strategic alliance and coalitions, in particular with other states facing similar challenges. The example of Small Island Developing States (SIDS) leveraging their vulnerabilities to influence in climate negotiations, through Alliance of Small Island States (AOSIS) can be practical example of this strategy (Ourbak & Magnan, 2018).

In addition, small states utilize strategies of adherence to the principle of international law, promotion of innovative international initiative and provision of expertise to demonstrate their positive image. It enables small states to establish them as reliable and responsible actor in international relations (Krasnyak, 2023).

2.3 Vulnerability as Diplomatic Asset

Literature on small states theory mentions various key mechanisms through which small states enhance their influence in international relations. Among them are moral authority, institutional entrepreneurship, coalition building, and traditional diplomacy (Wohlforth et al., 2018; Corbett et al., 2019; Deitelhoff & Wallbott, 2012). In compare to the big states small state possess greater flexibility, which enables them to adapt easily to the changing international circumstances. However the role of small states in the process of multilateral negotiations has been neglected in academic literature (Deitelhoff & Wallbott, 2012). Small states have the above mentioned mechanism on their disposal which enables them to be active partner in international processes. Vulnerability is one of the strategic sources of small state diplomacy. Small states use their vulnerability status and demonstration of environmental responsibility to act as a leader in environmental governance. Their environmental action and moral standing guarantees them international recognition and reputation (Benwell, 2011).

As small states seek to compensate their weaknesses through leveraging their victim status to enhance security and influence the concept of vulnerability diplomacy emerges (Wivel, 2023). Vulnerability diplomacy is a strategic approach by small states which allow them to use their environmental challenges as diplomatic opportunity. The literature on small states and vulnerability diplomacy explores how states with limited traditional power resource can employ vulnerability to address environmental challenges. The most prominent example of successfully employment of vulnerability as diplomatic asset is the case of Small island Development States. Vulnerability diplomacy enabled small states to raise their concern and build moral authority in Environmental governance (Oculi & Stephenson, 2018). (if there is a new source can be used)

The concept of vulnerability diplomacy can be applied beyond the case of Island states. This concept is applicable to other small countries facing environmental challenges like extreme weather, water scarcity, excessive melt of glaciers, and desertification. In case of Tajikistan vulnerability diplomacy can be employed in addressing the problems like glacier treat, water management, and other ecological problem caused by climate change.

3. Tajikistan's Climate Diplomacy: A Case Study Analysis

3.1 Geographic and Environmental Context

Tajikistan's approach to climate diplomacy shaped by its geographical location. Tajikistan is a landlocked mountainous Central Asian republic which control significant water resource of the region. Approximately 60% of Central Asias water resource with over 13,00 glaciers is contained in the territory of Tajikistan which are crucial for the agriculture and energy sector of the region. From one side it makes Tajikistan as critical actor in the regional water management of the region. However from the other side these conditions make the country vulnerable to the climate change impacts, mainly glacier retreat and changing climate patterns. The regional agriculture productivity and hydropower generation of the republic and the entire region is highly dependent on climate change patterns of the region. As headwater state this vulnerability creates both challenge and opportunity for the climate leadership of Tajikistan.

Climate diplomacy of Tajikistan takes its origin from addressing post-soviet climate challenges in the region including the crisis of the Aral Sea. The republic is among the most vulnerable state to the effect of climate change in the region. Limited institutional capacity, decades of underinvestment in water and sanitation infrastructure, and the legacy of Soviet central planning of natural resource

management are the main factors of its vulnerability (Climate-Diplomacy, 2015). Taking into consideration this disposition since the first day of its independence Tajikistan choose multifaceted approach to the regional environmental leadership. Tajikistan's geographical position and significant water resources facilitated its leadership in international water cooperation and enabled it to engage in international dialogues (Church, 2017).

3.2 Diplomatic Initiatives of Tajikistan and its regional and international environmental cooperation

Within the context of Central Asia, Tajikistan established itself as one of the initiator of regional water cooperation. Tajikistan is active participant of different regional initiatives, including interstate water cooperation in Central Asia and Central Asian Regional Economic Cooperation program. As headwater country Tajikistan is one of the main partner in managing the shared trans boundary rivers through institutions like Commission for Water Coordination. At the same time Tajikistan is one of the founding state and proactive initiator of International Fund for Saving the Aral Sea (Agency of IFAS).

Despite the huge effort of Central Asian states there are challenges in regional water diplomacy due to some historical tensions among headwater and downstream countries. Upstream countries of the region Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan prioritize hydropower generation. Particularly, Tajikistan is the biggest producer of hydropower electricity in the region. However, downstream countries Kazakhstan Uzbekistan focus more on irrigation and agriculture. One of the main task of the water management in the region is to use carefully navigate the use of water between upstream and downstream countries.

Among other global leader in climate diplomacy Tajikistan was a pioneer and frontline fighter in mitigating the effect of climate change. Since its independence official Dushanbe demonstrated its consistency and visibility through its engagement in international climate institutions. Tajikistan is active participant of UN Climate Change Conference, where it promotes international cooperation for mountainous ecosystem and water security. Taking into consideration international efforts of Tajikistan, António Guterres, UN Secretary-General stated that *“The Republic of Tajikistan is a world leader in water resources management and glacier protection. Tajikistan has great influence and plays a prominent role in the work of the United Nations and the global community as a whole”*(MFA of Tajikistan, 2024).

Tajikistan engaged in environmental activities since its first days of independence. The first step of Tajikistan was joining United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change in 1993. On 23 December 2003 In the UN General Assembly taking into consideration suggestion of Tajikistan declared the period from 2005-2015 “ the international Decade for Action Water for Life (United Nations General Assembly, 2016, A/RES/71/222). On 21 December 2016 the UN General Assembly adopted resolution entitled "International Decade for Action "Water for Sustainable Development", 2018-2028", which was initiated by the president of Tajikistan (MFA of Tajikistan, 2016).

International Decade for Action "Water for Sustainable Development" (2018-2028) is one of the significant achievements of Tajikistan water diplomacy which has been advocated at UN level. The initiative was co-sponsored and supported by Netherlands. It demonstrated international image of Tajikistan and its ability to take initiative in international environmental governance despite its small size and limited resources. This initiative is a huge success in the history of climate diplomacy of the country. Strategic partnership with the Netherlands equipped the experts of Tajikistan with technical expertise from one side and diplomatic support from the other side.

Within the framework of the International Decade for Action "Water for Life" three interactive dialogues were convened in 2010, 2013 and 2015 with the resolutions of the UN General Assembly. In addition, in cooperation with the United Nations Republic of Tajikistan prepared and organized in Dushanbe the following important events:

- The Mid-term Comprehensive Review of the implementation of the International Decade for Action "Water for Life", June 2010;
- High-level International Conference on Water Cooperation, August 2013;
- High-level International Conference on the implementation of the International Decade for Action "Water for Life", June 2015.

Thus, Tajikistan became one of the main leaders in the sphere of water management and climate diplomacy regionally and internationally by mobilizing its diplomatic asserts. Tajikistan could effectively employ its geographic location and climate vulnerability to position itself as a proactive player in environmental governance.

4. Analysis and Discussion

Through its climate diplomacy Tajikistan achieved significant results in establishing its international status and leadership in international environmental governance. Advocacy for the protection of mountains ecosystem, water security at UN level and initiating systematic program such as Water for Sustainable Development Decade demonstrates republic's ability to exercise international environmental leadership. Senior UN officials, head of the states and international partners acknowledge leadership of Tajikistan in water and climate initiatives.

Indeed Tajikistan along other international partners made huge effort to mobilize international finance for mitigating the challenges of climate change regionally and globally. Despite some limitations and challenges in regional water management, Tajikistan could effectively navigate the existing issues through climate diplomacy. Domestic implementation of international initiatives at the grassroots level, tensions among Central Asian water management and other problems indicate that Tajikistan and other countries of the region should consistently mobilize their diplomatic efforts to address existing issues.

The experience of Tajikistan's climate diplomacy is an example of strategy of a small state employment of climate vulnerability as a diplomatic assert. Tajikistan's focus on mountains ecosystem and water resources enabled it to identify it as active partner in international environmental governance. The country's cooperation with international partners like Netherlands allowed it to achieve its goals through strategic alliance. As a result, Tajikistan's consistency in climate diplomacy enabled it to establish itself as a credible and reliable partner in international environmental governance.

5. Conclusion

The analysis of regional and global initiatives of Tajikistan in addressing the challenges of climate change reveals that it has been successful in its employment of climate diplomacy to enhance its international profile and influence despite limited traditional power and small size. Key strategic initiatives like Water forums and programs established the image of the country as an active and reliable partner in international environmental governance.

Tajikistans strategy reveals distinct points of successful small state diplomacy: transformation of environmental risk to diplomatic opportunity, strategic coalition building and norm entrepreneurship. With the increasing challenges of climate change the role of multilateral efforts and role of small states like Tajikistan will become essential in environmental governance. For

building successful environmental governance it is crucial to support the efforts states which are vulnerable to the climate change. It is evident from the case of Tajikistan that material resource and size are not the main factor of international leadership and influence. Small countries like Tajikistan can make their contribution to the global problems along big powers through their effective strategy and diplomacy. Furthermore, Involvement in international initiatives allows small states to enhance their international influence. Despite international recognition and image building challenges in transforming international achievements into local and regional climate action remains.

6. Policy Recommendations

Based on analysis of Tajikistan approach to climate diplomacy here are some policy recommendations for enhancing Tajikistan climate diplomacy:

Develop new strategies to raise international public awareness about Tajikistan initiatives in the sphere of international environmental leadership. For example, employing digital diplomacy tools to increase awareness about climate diplomacy initiatives. In the regional level of climate diplomacy Tajikistan should focus more on trust building measures in trans boundary water management. This can enhance effectiveness of water diplomacy in the region.

Furthermore, Tajikistan can introduce new perspective employing youth in the climate diplomacy initiative at the grassroots level to enhance the effectiveness of the implementation of international initiatives locally.

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