Review – Global Warming Gridlock

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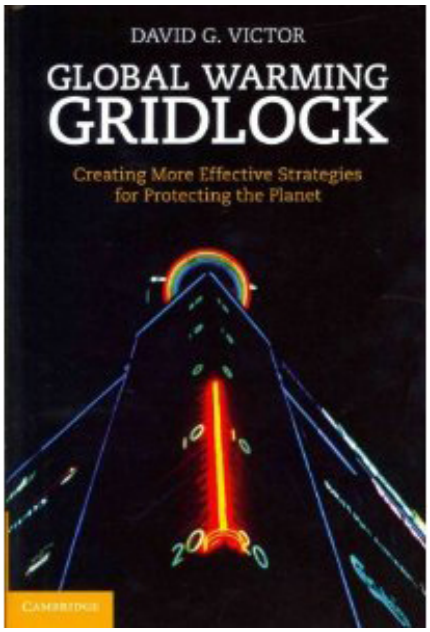
NICK CHAN, JUN 25 2012



Global Warming Gridlock: Creating More Effective Strategies for Protecting the Planet
by David G. Victor
Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011

Since the tumultuous 2009 Copenhagen climate conference the basic institutions and principles that constitute the international climate change regime have been fiercely contested. At times, it has seemed like everything is up in the air: A top-down or bottom-up architecture? What kind of legal structure? What future for 'common but differentiated responsibilities'? Or indeed, for the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change, soon to mark its 20th anniversary,? Meanwhile, the world continues to emit greenhouse gases on a pathway likely to take us to a world of 2C warming – and well beyond.

Discussions at the international negotiations have been preoccupied with cajoling emission-reduction commitments from countries that will bend the global emissions pathway downwards, making a 2C world – or even less – more likely. But the larger problem, and the central premise of David Victor's new book, *Global Warming Gridlock*, is the disconnnect between these commitments and the ability of governments to meet them: in other words, that commitments on reducing emissions are largely not credible absent an understanding of the policies underpinning them – and therefore that the task of international discussions instead needs to be on coordinating policies, not targets. *Gridlock* brings together several strands of analysis that Victor has done over the years with various collaborators, and is presented as a sequel to his 2001 book,*The Collapse of the Kyoto Protocol and the Struggle to Slow Global Warming* (Princeton University Press). Now, as then, his starting point lies in examining the economic structure of the problem and how this shapes the realm of the politically possible, with his conclusions amounting to a "withering attack" (p.xxxiii) on the past two decades of international efforts at forging cooperation on climate change.

Victor begins by unpicking the "myths" (Chapter 2) that have guided these efforts thus far: that of the scientist (that policy follows a scientific consensus), of the environmentalist (that the best solution to environmental problems is a universal one), and of the engineer (that technological innovation leads easily to implementation). With strong echoes of Mike Hulme's *Why We Disagree About Global Warming* (2009, CUP), this provocative challenge to the underlying assumptions of climate policymaking sets the stage for what follows and Victor's correctives to these myths: the *real* way in which policy is made, the advantages of club, not universal, cooperation, and the influence of the regulatory environment in mediating technological invention and implementation.

Each of the main sections (Chapters 3-6) contains a useful step of theoretical generalisation that academic readers may find especially useful in building a more general understanding of economic and political change. In Chapter 3, Victor points out that the economic characteristics of the problem favour the use of certain approaches over others – more specifically, that the uncertain cost of regulating emissions favour the use of policies focused on the price of emissions, rather than the quantity of emissions. And yet, the reverse has taken place, with international efforts largely focusing on quantity instruments (cap-and-trade) over price instruments (taxes). Victor provides a persuasive account of the political economy of regulation and how the organisation of interest groups within a society upends the economics of regulation, favouring cap-and-trade instead. The creation of emission trading systems create new assets and a new pie to be distributed – a politically different ballgame to the alternative of taxation.

If Chapter 3 presents a sobering history of how environmentally ineffective policy in the industrialised countries has been, then Chapter 4 provides warnings about how to avoid similar problems from emerging among the large developing countries as their mitigation efforts intensify. The myriad problems with the CDM and doubts over how much of the investment generated is genuinely 'additional' need to be addressed through building the administrative capacity in developing countries to preserve the quality of offsets. A key strand of the climate governance literature worries about regime 'fragmentation', but for Victor, a multiplicity of schemes – in this case, carbon markets – is the better way to turn international offsets away from a CDM monopoly and into a competition for quality that better ensures the robustness of the international carbon market. The larger problem, however, lies in addressing the perverse incentives that international offsets generate, but also in recognising the big dents in emissions will not come on a project-by-project basis. Instead, international assistance will have the most leverage in triggering larger policy reforms in developing countries and that much-touted 'co-benefits' still require substantial changes in public administration, technology, and political commitment to be turned into reality.

Adaptation is dealt with briefly in Chapter 6, where Victor argues that the "moral thinking on adaptation" is wrong (p.182) and what is needed is a focus on the "full ledger" of costs and benefits, including second-order knock-on effects of regulating emissions. But in this respect the international negotiating process recognises this under the 'response measures' discussions, although concrete policy schemes are largely absent from the discussion. The relative neglect of adaptation policy is unfortunate, particularly given the controversial nature of Victor's conclusion that while adaptation is essential, there is little the international community can do to help countries adapt. The questions recurring during the international discussions on adaptation are not unlike those covered by analysis elsewhere in the book – regarding the kind of institutions to be established, managing interaction with other areas of policy, ensuring the credibility and transparency of financial flows – all ones that are at least as deserving of Victor's scholarly clarity as the rest of the book's overarching focus on the mitigation effort.

Chapters 7 and 8 conclude the book by returning to the international political process and summarise Victor's prescriptions for what can be plausibly done. Chapter 7 reviews the history of climate diplomacy, and in a neat mirror to Chapter 2's polemic against the assumptions that underpin contemporary climate policymaking, draws out further 'myths' that constitute the diplomatic consensus over what an international regime should look like. In four areas, Victor argues that the 'wrong lessons' were drawn from previous experience of environmental diplomacy – the principle of universal participation, an architecture based on targets and timetables, a desire for greater legal bindingness, and a neglect in building an enforcement system. In all of these, Victor's criticisms are trenchant, and he usefully identifies 'better' lessons from trade and other environmental regimes. But what is left only partially answered is an account of why diplomats did indeed draw the lessons that they did: why were particular lessons, and not others, seized upon as the models for the climate regime to mimic? For example, Victor suggests that a targets and timetables architecture was based on a "herd mentality" in past efforts at designing air pollution treaties, a compelling

example of cognitive inertia and path dependence in regime design. But if argument by analogy (x current situation is like the past y situation, so conclusions from y are applicable to x) is commonplace in political life, is there anything that can be done about it? The shortcoming of this sobering chapter is that Victor leaves little guide about how to choose between contested lessons of history, and how to avoid such calamitous mistakes in the future.

Chapter 8 then presents an integrated strategy for moving forward, based upon small-group, major-emitter club cooperation, an effort rooted in policies rather than targets and timetables, and providing incentives to reluctant countries that can reorient dynamics away from the lowest-common-denominator politics that have plagued international negotiations. Drawing clear parallels with the WTO accession process, the 'climate accession deals' proposal charts a path towards both increasing global ambition and the institutions and processes needed to support it. But while Victor notes that since Copenhagen that the "ground is ripening for new ideas" (p.276), the UN-sponsored process is still the main game in town. Claims of legitimacy in the universal-member process still resonate powerfully – not least among the small island states and least developed countries, who would find it difficult to accept club-like climate cooperation that sees them only as observers – and will be difficult to shift. The challenge and gap in Victor's proposals still lie in finding a way to bring the best ideas on how to make commitments credible within the forum of the UNFCCC without being diluted to the point of meaninglessness. To his credit, Victor is not calling for the end of the UNFCCC process, recognising the value of some of the processes that have developed around it. But there is little nostalgia for the principles that the UNFCCC represents, and even if these are being contested now more than ever before, may still be a cognitive and political step too far for most diplomats and policymakers.

Global Warming Gridlock brings together a wealth of comprehensive analysis, which has in its crosshairs the conventional wisdom that has straitjacketed both national and international efforts at dealing with climate change. Given this chequered history, Victor's work may be summed up as a 'let a thousand flowers bloom' philosophy: we know what doesn't work, and the experiments in climate governance have to intensify. In a landscape littered with a multitude of commentary on what has gone wrong after two decades of international efforts to address climate change, and no shortage of proposals on how to rectify this, Victor's work is a standout contribution: melding the economics and politics, moving between the domestic and international, and robustly challenging assumptions about how we might move towards a low-carbon future.

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Nick Chan *is a DPhil candidate at St Antony's College, Oxford University, where his research focuses on the the evolution of the Third World coalition in the climate negotiations. You can read Nick's blog here*

About the author:

Nicholas Chan recently completed his D.Phil in International Relations at St. Antony's College, Oxford University, on developing country coalitions in the UN climate change negotiations. He holds an M.Phil in International Relations from University College, Oxford University, and a B.Sc in International Politics from Aberystwyth University. He has been a delegate at UNFCCC since 2011, and his research interests are on global environmental politics, constructivist IR, and the global South in world politics. He tweets at @nickdotchan.