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When climate policy meets foreign policy: Pioneering and national interest in Norway's mitigation strategy



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ABSTRACT

This paper compares Norway's strategies to promote carbon sequestration based climate change mitigation measures Carbon Capture and Storage (CCS) and Reduced Emissions from Deforestation and forest Degradation (REDD+). It aims to explain what makes Norway such a strong promoter of the two by focusing on the conceptual characteristics of CCS and REDD+. Treating Norway mitigation action portfolio as foreign policy, a two-level analytical framework is presented to this end. The analysis shows how initially unlikely ideas may be turned into lasting climate strategies when they contribute to bridge a state's national energy interests and international climate obligations. The paper adds to the empirical study of states' climate political behavior within the boundaries of a prevailing energy political paradigm. This topic is particularly timely in a post-Paris setting where states are to provide new mitigation strategies that are compatible with other national interests.

1. Introduction

A key question in the study of global climate politics is what determines states' preferences for different methods of reducing emissions. In international climate regime parlance, such mitigation measures are the “technologies, processes or practices that contribute to (...) reduce the sources or enhance the sinks of greenhouse gases” [1]. Mitigation measures based on carbon sequestration refer to “capturing and securely storing CO₂ that would otherwise be emitted to or remain in the atmosphere” [2]. Different approaches to sequestering carbon are expected to have a massive mitigation potential and most of the scenarios that reach the so-called 2 °C target assume widespread use of such options [3]. The international climate regime currently features a couple methods of carbon sequestration, notably based on Carbon Capture and Storage (CCS) and on protecting or enhancing terrestrial sinks [4–6]. CCS signifies technological value chains where carbon is captured at a source, typically from fossil fuels or biomass combustion, and permanently stored in geological reservoirs [7]. In addition to rules for accounting for national land and land-use change, the international climate regime includes a separate mechanism for protecting forests in the global south, called REDD+ (from Reducing Emissions from Deforestation and forest degradation in Developing countries). It is an arrangement where industrialized states offer economic incentives for protecting forests as giant biological sinks [8].

Yet, despite a supposedly global demand and formal arrangements, states have generally been unenthusiastic about carbon sequestration as

part of their mitigation policy portfolios [9,10]. There are, however, country case examples where carbon sequestration is at the heart of national strategy. To find out what explains a state's rare enthusiasm for such options, this paper presents a two-case comparison of Norway's twin policies for promoting carbon sequestration in the shape of CCS and REDD+. Despite variations in both national and international level politics, CCS and REDD+ have remained key to Norway's climate strategy since the 2000s. As an affluent small state seeking to harmonize petroleum exports with ambitious normative commitments, Norway makes a valuable setting for learning how certain types of mitigation measures may help bridge a state's otherwise conflicting energy interests and climate obligations.

Section 2 presents materials and methods. As a theoretical starting point, I suggest viewing Norway's strategy in a Foreign Policy Analysis (FPA) perspective. It allows for considering a state's political behavior as the balancing of national preferences and international obligations [11]. Norway basically aims to pursue its interests *and* uphold its international commitments on terms that are mutually acceptable within the international climate regime *and* among national actors with diverging agendas at home [12]. The two-level games metaphor is helpful for examining a state's preference for certain mitigation measures as a political product and, thus, that promoting CCS and REDD+ contributes to squaring Norway's climate and energy political two-level concerns. The next question is if this is because CCS and REDD+ are compelling *concepts* that on their *ideational* basis enable *political solutions* or because CCS and REDD+ are effective mitigation measures that

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successfully deliver material output in line with overall climate policy goals? By contrasting two alternative explanations, the paper first attempts a line of reasoning that sees mitigation measures as socially constructed *ideas* as drivers of a political dynamic [13,14]. This is followed by a traditional rational choice perspective emphasizing material cost-benefit considerations [15]. The applied FPA framework is elaborated in Section 3. Norway's CCS and REDD+ policies are traced using the method of focused, structured comparison in Section 4 [16].

The analysis in Section 5 disentangles exactly how Norway's promotion of carbon sequestration contribute to balancing Norway's interests and obligations. I suggest that certain persuasive characteristics of CCS and REDD+ as concepts, not material results from implementation, have driven Norway's wholehearted commitment to these options at multiple crossroads. The Norwegian experience shows how novel and unproven mitigation measures may be *ideas* that fulfill a crucial political function for a small state that is otherwise stuck between domestic demands and international obligations. Section 6 concludes that Norway's enthusiasm for CCS and REDD+ show how initially far-fetched ideas may be turned into lasting strategy when satisfying this intricate but essential political reality. Considering the prospects for comparable states to promote different methods of carbon sequestration, the analysis highlights how specific national needs, notably including the combination of irrefutable petroleum interests and normative ambitions, seem to be a prerequisite for such a strategy.

2. Materials and methods

2.1. A contribution to the empirical analysis of climate and energy policy

This work complements two intriguing strings of research in this journal. First, it adds to the previous contributions that suggest we should take political and social context seriously in energy policy analysis [17,18]. Methodically assessing political systems and their (veto) players offers much needed leverage when addressing “how” and “why” questions in policy analysis, as opposed to the “what” clues offered when primarily focusing on technical feasibility. This empirical turn invites us to examine the interests and ideas that “actually” influence decision making and implementation [19,20]. Second, as introduced above, by aiming to demonstrate the usefulness of FPA for the climate and energy nexus, this article also adds an analytical argument to the journal's recent attention given to linking foreign policy and energy policy perspectives [21,22].

So far, Norway's CCS and REDD+ efforts have been labelled as carbon sequestration based *technological* and *biological siblings*, but they have not previously been studied in comparison [23]. Considered separately, CCS in Norway was first studied as a reconciliatory means for resolving the conflict over the eventual construction of natural gas-fired power plants [24]. Others have treated Norway's CCS policy as a technology research and development (R&D) strategy [25] and as an externally oriented foreign policy initiative [26]. In other industrialized countries, the politics of CCS have been studied on a case by case basis [9] or comparatively [27,28]. The overall picture is that CCS has materialized to a lesser extent than what its proponents hoped for [29,30]. Turning to REDD+, Norway's engagement was initially studied as a case of Official Development Assistance (ODA) or as a strategy in the international climate negotiations [10,31]. Accounts of the domestic politics behind its inception point to the crucial agency of Environmental Non-Governmental Organizations (ENGOS) in this process [32]. Previous analyses of overall Norwegian climate politics emphasize the influence of a globally oriented discourse and of entrepreneurial actors operating as carriers of ideas in individual decision-making processes [33,34].

2.2. Research design and methods

Given Norway's strong support for CCS and REDD+, as we shall see,

the two cases constitute what arguably are *crucial* cases of carbon sequestration promotion. Crucial cases are helpful for assessing the analytical value of theoretical claims, which implies that studying Norway is valuable for explaining variation among industrialized countries' support for such measures [35,36]. Beyond carbon sequestration, CCS and REDD+ are dissimilar constructs along almost every conceptual axis (e.g., hi-tech vs. low-tech, fossil carbon vs. biological carbon, combustion off-streams vs. land-use change, potential for emissions reductions within Norway vs. forested developing country potential). Thus, the two may also be *least similar* cases that despite such differences share a strong footing in the same polity. I argue that a structured and focused comparison based on process-tracing and congruence offers as an effective design for this within-country setting [16,37].

Moreover, assessing an idea's causal effect on policy is a methodological challenge (as well as an epistemological and theoretical one, to be elaborated in Section 3.2. below). At the very least, it requires identifying whether decision-makers possessed an idea before making decisions, if the idea shaped choices, and to rule out if the idea may be reduced to material factors of the circumstances of choice [38]. Doing so mandates process-tracing with an “expansive empirical scope” across a wide temporal range, and multiple levels of analysis, such as in the FPA framework presented below. Within-case comparisons, for example before and after change of government at the national level, help ruling out multicollinearity where possible. Looking for such variance along the temporal scale helps account for changes in both ideational and material factors in a qualitative case study. In addition to document studies, data is gathered from 17 semi-structured interviews with previous and current Norwegian ministers, state secretaries, members of parliament, senior bureaucrats, industry and NGO representatives, as well as from attending multiple CCS and REDD+ stakeholder conferences in Norway 2011–2015 [39,40].¹

3. Theory

3.1. Climate change mitigation and foreign policy analysis

Building on the two-level games metaphor, FPA aims to explain public policy that takes place in relation to entities outside the state [11,12]. First, an explanatory focus on the domestic level proposes that Norway's behavior follows from a national dynamic where policy accommodates the agendas of winning coalitions of domestic actors – this is the aggregate national interest [41]. In Norway, industry and the major left and right leaning political parties aim to uphold the prominent role of the petroleum sector. ENGOS and the smaller political parties pursue the climate action agenda. Domestic politics is characterized by a parliamentary system with a preference for settling such issues in broad compromises. This requires finding mutually acceptable solutions to a win-set that is otherwise a zero-sum game among pro-petroleum and pro-climate actors.

Second, FPA also stresses the importance of external influences on state behavior. This systemic perspective focuses on the state's fundamental situation in the international system and the international climate regime's normative influence on state behavior [42,43]. In this view, the climate regime prescribes what are acceptable means for states to fulfill their mitigation commitments [44,45]. As a small state, Norway cannot move the international regime process unilaterally or resist external demands for appropriate behavior. We will consider two possible explanations as to why CCS and REDD+ fit Norway's needs in this two-level space, starting by theorizing how ideas shape policy processes.

¹ The author also owes to inform that he was a member of Norway's REDD+ project team in the Ministry of Environment from 2011 to 2013. While this background gives thorough understanding of the cases at hand, it may also cause additional biases. Measures, such as interviews with diverse parties and thorough process-tracing, were taken to compensate for such potentially adverse effects.

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