

Just compare for a moment the high expectations around Copenhagen in 2009 and the obscurity of Doha today, and you can quickly get a sense of the basic contemporary irrelevance of UN bodies in the creation of climate policy. (At the New York Times website as of this writing, Doha doesn't even merit a *mention* in the "World" section; on the site's general front page, however, there is [a link](#) to news from the Los Angeles Auto Show.).

Importantly, though, this means little in terms of actual progress on emissions and climate policy. The United States actually figures to make its 2020 Kyoto targets, which is basically an artifact of fracking. More directly, California has started its cap-and-trade system; as I noted a couple of weeks ago, China is set to do the same; India is pursuing a wide variety of clean energy initiatives. The Regional Greenhouse Gas Initiative continues on its way, together with the European trading market, and talks are underway to link the markets together.

It wasn't hard for me to predict this a couple of years ago — you would have had to have been blind, or an academic with a vested interest in pushing international treaty architectures, not to see the pattern. But I think it also tells us something about international institutions more generally.

Three decades ago, Robert Keohane [published a seminal article](#) entitled "The Demand for International Regimes." If international institutions cannot coercively enforce their mandates, Keohane asked, what good are they? His answer was shrewd and insightful, deriving from transactions costs economics. Multilateral agreements are hard, he noted: you have to get everyone in the room, focus their political leaders appropriately, and have them negotiating from a relatively common factual basis — all species of transactions costs problems. International institutions can help solve these problems because they can generate high-quality information, make the act of negotiating easier, and provide individual nations with a bureaucratic base (viz. the negotiators and staffs who represent a nation at the institution) from which to broker agreements.

The irrelevance of Doha helps flesh out Keohane's theory, ironically providing the basis for the demand of the **absence** of international regimes. The very thing that makes an international institution such as the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change *useful* also makes it susceptible to domestic political sabotage. The reduction of negotiation transactions costs makes it easier for opponents to block it; its centralized production of information makes it easier for opponents to discredit proponents' factual conclusions. One would expect on this theory to find that when international agreements face substantial domestic opposition, they will avoid international institutions. For example, because US domestic opposition to arms control treaties in the early 1970's was so fierce,

Henry Kissinger pursued backchannel negotiations with the Soviet Union.

This framework, then, might suggest that different national climate regulatory mechanisms will tacitly begin to align without any central coordinating mechanism, and instead, a series of inefficient but roughly workable bilateral arrangements will emerge. European carbon markets will arrive at a way to credit offsets from RGGI, for example. China and California might figure out a way to demand credits from and give credits to the other. These administrative mechanisms will be less open and transparent, but less politically vulnerable, than a public international regime, with all the advantages and disadvantages that attend such arrangements.