



Least developed countries versus fossil fuel incumbents: strategies, divisions, and barriers at the United Nations climate negotiations

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Abstract

The United Nations climate summits—Conferences of the Parties, or COPs—have emerged as important sites to confront fossil fuel incumbents. While new research indicates that least developed countries (LDCs) are challenging incumbents at COPs by calling upon them to phase out fossil fuel, there is limited research on how the coalition of LDCs is strategizing to confront incumbents and their capacity to do so. I address this gap by drawing on 24 interviews with LDCs’ negotiators and observers. Informed by the strategic power perspective and the neo-Gramscian account of power, it identifies three central dynamics in how LDCs contest fossil fuel incumbents. First, negotiators undertake “soft” strategies at negotiations to call upon incumbents to reduce fossil fuel consumption, while observers pursue “hard” tactics at side events to press incumbents to phase out production. Second, the coalition is divided between those countries focused on reducing fossil fuel consumption versus those emphasizing the need for a production phase-out. This split creates disagreement, contestation, and division in the coalition. Finally, the coalition’s capacity to confront incumbents is restrained by three obstacles: fragile strategies, varied interests and fragmentation in the coalition and the G77+China, and interstate relations between LDCs and incumbents shaped by political economic factors and colonial legacy. The LDCs’ coalition is central to advancing supply-side climate policy in international climate negotiations. Overcoming these divisions and barriers would enhance the coalition’s capacity to exert pressure on incumbents, particularly major fossil fuel-producing states.

Keywords Climate crisis · Fossil fuel incumbents · Fragmentation · Negotiations · Phase-out · Supply-side climate policy

Abbreviations

COP	Conference of the parties
CR	Consumption reduction
IPCC	Intergovernmental panel on climate change

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LDCs	Least developed countries
LDC Group	Least developed countries group
PP	Production phase-out
UNFCCC	United Nations framework convention on climate change

1 Introduction

The burning of fossil fuels is now scientifically recognized as the principal cause of the intensifying climate crisis. The latest Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) report shows that the combustion of fossil fuels has been responsible for about 64% of the total anthropogenic carbon dioxide emissions since 1750 and 86% over the past 10 years (IPCC, 2021). Achieving the Paris Agreement's aspirational 1.5°C goal requires leaving 95% of coal, 62% of oil, and 42% of gas reserves underground, ceasing new fossil fuel developments, and decommissioning a sizable portion of existing infrastructures (Achakulwisut et al., 2023; Trout et al., 2022). The continued development of fossil fuels will substantially exceed the 1.5°C carbon budget. Nevertheless, governments and fossil fuel corporations plan on producing more than double the amount of fossil fuels that were produced in 2020 by 2030 (SEI et al., 2021), and subsidies to fossil fuel production and consumption have increased from US\$697 billion in 2021 (Harring et al., 2023) to US\$1097 billion in 2022 (Ripple et al., 2023).

Acknowledging the relationship between fossil fuels and climate crisis, climate activists are pressuring governments and corporations to cut fossil fuel production, and therefore, they engage in anti-fossil fuel protests and movements, lawsuits against producers, blocking extraction sites, and calling to end fossil fuel subsidies and accelerate divestment (Carter & McKenzie, 2020; LeBillon & Kristoffersen, 2020; Temper et al., 2020). Together these efforts have contributed to the advancement of “supply-side” climate policies. The supply-side approach complements “demand-side” measures (e.g., carbon tax and emissions trading system) to limit fossil fuel consumption that have been prioritized in mitigation-related climate negotiations (Asheim et al., 2019; Green & Denniss, 2018). Supply-side climate policy has also gained traction in the recent rounds of the Conference of the Parties (COP) negotiations [COP26, COP27, and COP28], signaling the potential for making “anti-fossil fuel norms” (Jessop, 2022; van Asselt & Green, 2022) part of international climate policy.

Within the intergovernmental climate negotiations, the coalition of 46 Least Developed Countries (LDCs) is recognized by the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) as the LDC Group. This negotiating group of the UNFCCC¹ occupies a unique and challenging position in the intensifying effort to confront fossil

¹ <https://unfccc.int/process-and-meetings/parties-non-party-stakeholders/parties/party-groupings>.

fuel incumbents² and their norms and practices.³ This coalition is transnational given that it encompasses LDCs' *negotiators* who actively participate in the negotiations and *observers* who participate in "side events" that occur outside the formal negotiations. At COP negotiations, the LDC Group, accounting for 4% of emissions but unevenly bearing the brunt of climate catastrophes, has been pressuring the Group of Twenty countries, responsible for 80% of emissions, to phase out of fossil fuels and subsidies (Saha & Carter, 2022). In doing so, LDCs' negotiators take the lead on confronting incumbents who impede global mitigation policies by blocking fossil fuel-related decisions in negotiations. Likewise, observers engage in other actions (e.g., protests and conferences) at side events to challenge incumbents' norms and practices and press them to shift away from fossil fuels.

While the coalition is a crucial organization for advancing global climate mitigation policy, scholarly research has not uncovered how the coalition is strategizing to confront incumbents and their norms and practices, and to what extent the coalition has the capacity to do so. Drawing on the perspective of "strategic power" (Ciplet et al., 2015), the neo-Gramscian insights on power (Levy & Newell, 2002), and interviews with LDCs' negotiators and observers, I address these gaps. I identify three central dynamics in how the coalition of LDCs contests fossil fuel incumbents. First, while negotiators undertake "soft" strategies in negotiations to call upon incumbents to reduce fossil fuel consumption, observers pursue "hard" tactics at side events to press incumbents to phase out production. Soft strategies are "cooperative" and "friendly" (Bailer, 2012), which seek to maintain positive relations between LDCs and developed countries and major emitters and prevent LDCs' negotiators from urging incumbents of developed countries and major emitters to phase out fossil fuel production. These soft strategies include, for example, highlighting facts from scientific reports and informal corridor meetings. Hard strategies are "aggressive" and "conflictive" (Bailer, 2012) that assist LDCs' observers in arguing that major fossil fuel producers must wind down their production. These hard strategies include, for example, protests and demonstrations. Rietig (2016) asserts that the aims of such protests and mass demonstrations by environmental nongovernmental organizations outside the conference center are to influence the media and the wider public and pressure policymakers and government delegates who join climate negotiations. The soft and hard strategic actions broadly aim to combat climate change by transitioning away from fossil fuels, and the strategies of observers and negotiators can be seen as the discursive framing of climate change as a burning question of ending "the fossil fuel age" (Paterson, 2021). Likewise,

² Johnstone et al. (2017) define incumbents as actors, who are driven by "vested interests" to maintain their "privileged position" instead of enabling energy transition. In this study, the term incumbents indicates those states, who form dominant negotiating groups in COP climate negotiations, benefit from fossil fuel production and use, and prevent decisions in negotiations related to the transition from fossil fuels. These incumbents include the Brazil, South Africa, India, and China group; the group of Arab petrostates (e.g., Algeria, Bahrain, Egypt, Iraq, Kuwait, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates); the Umbrella Group (Australia, Canada, Japan, Russia, and the United States); the group of Like-Minded Developing Countries (e.g., China, India, Iran, Iraq, Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, and Venezuela); the Africa Group (e.g., Angola, Ethiopia, Mozambique, Niger, Senegal, and Tanzania); the Independent Association of Latin America and the Caribbean (e.g., Colombia); and the LDC Group (e.g., Angola, Bangladesh, Ethiopia, Mozambique, and Niger).

³ Norms can be understood through incumbents' inappropriate behavior manifesting in their "addiction" to fossil fuels that undermines climate policies and causes rapid emissions growth (Suranovic, 2013). Practices can be defined as the system of fossil fuel production and consumption.

these strategies reflect a specific pattern of discursive framing, which Blondeel (2019) calls the “moral” framing that criticizes the “immoral behavior” of fossil fuel incumbents due to their lead role in the climate crisis and continued efforts for profits.

Second, the coalition is divided between those countries focused on reducing fossil fuel consumption versus those emphasizing the need for a production phase-out. This split creates disagreement, contestation, and division in the coalition. Finally, the coalition’s capacity to confront incumbents is restrained by three obstacles: fragile strategies, varied interests and fragmentation in the coalition and the G77+ China,⁴ and interstate relations between LDCs and incumbents shaped by political economic factors and colonial legacy. By exploring these issues, I contribute to the burgeoning literature on states’ negotiation strategies and interests as well as fragmentation in the United Nations climate negotiations, shaping mitigation policies and transnational climate governance initiatives. I also contribute to the scholarships on the discursive framing of strategic actions to combat climate change and the rise of anti-fossil fuel norms and supply-side climate politics at COPs.

I first provide a brief overview of challenging fossil fuel incumbents at climate negotiations. I then describe the theoretical perspective and methodology guiding my fieldwork and analysis. Next, I unpack the coalition’s strategies followed by disagreement and fragmentation in the coalition and the G77+ China. This is followed by a discussion of barriers restraining the coalition’s competency to confront incumbents and their norms and practices. In conclusion, I argue that future research is essential to overcome these barriers, which will enable the coalition to press incumbents for winding down fossil fuels and advance supply-side climate policy in multilateral climate negotiations.

2 The rise of confronting fossil fuel incumbents in climate negotiations

Alongside mounting resistance against incumbents by nonstate actors (Hestres & Hopke, 2020; Temper et al., 2020), states are now challenging them at intergovernmental climate negotiations in COPs, implying that COPs have emerged as important sites to confront fossil fuel incumbents. Likewise, COPs have also been sites for fossil fuel industries and their lobbyists to exert extensive influence on state negotiators and climate policymakers, thereby securing industries’ business interests, entrenching the industry’s power in climate negotiations, and shaping policies to reduce greenhouse gas emissions (Newell & Paterson, 1998). Although the UNFCCC recognized fossil fuels as a lead source of emissions (United Nations, 1992), due to the influence of powerful corporations and their lobbyists over climate negotiations (Aronoff, 2018), fossil fuels were not mentioned in the Paris Agreement and guidelines for Nationally Determined Contributions (Rayner, 2021). However, restricting fossil fuel production has gained traction in the recent COPs. Incumbents are increasingly challenged to wind down fossil fuel production.

In the closing statement of COP23, the LDC Group called upon incumbents for a managed phase-out of fossil fuels (Saha & Carter, 2022). Ahead of COP24, the heads of the LDCs delegation reiterated this call for “managing the rapid decline of fossil fuels” to achieve a net zero target by 2050 (LDC Climate Change, 2018). Before the COP26, a group

⁴ The G77+ China is the largest negotiating group formed by developing countries’ groups, which include the Africa Group; the Independent Association of Latin America and the Caribbean; the Bolivarian Alliance for the Peoples of our America; the Alliance of Small Island States; Arab States; the Brazil, South Africa, India, and China group; the LDC Group; Like-Minded Developing Countries; and the Coalition for Rainforest Nations.

of fossil fuel import-dependent LDCs (Comoros, Haiti, Kiribati, Timor Leste, Solomon Islands, Tuvalu, and Sao Tome and Principe), members of the Alliance of Small Island States, called upon incumbents to phase out fossil fuel subsidies.

These calls began to be reflected in the texts of the negotiations at COP26. The first draft of the Glasgow Climate Pact called upon parties “to accelerate the phasing-out of coal and subsidies for fossil fuels” (UNFCCC, 2021, p.4); however, the final version was revised to advocate only for “the phasedown of unabated coal power and phase-out of inefficient fossil fuel subsidies” (UNFCCC, 2022, p. 5). The term “unabated” will allow for the continued use of coal with carbon capture technology, providing an opportunity for the fossil fuel industry to claim that they are contributing to decarbonization (van Asselt & Green, 2022). The weakening of the Glasgow Climate Pact occurred in the context of stringent opposition by China, India, Nigeria, Russia, South Africa, Iran, and Saudi Arabia (Depledge et al., 2022; Saha & Carter, 2022). They opposed it since the Glasgow Climate Pact did not consider equity issues and the national circumstances of developing countries (Depledge et al., 2022). Ahead of the Glasgow Climate Pact’s text change, the USA also joined the discussion between China and India to protect coal interests (Shankleman & Rath, 2021). This text change created frustration in many countries, notably small island states and Switzerland, and reflects a “political drama” that occurred in negotiations at the COP26 (Depledge et al., 2022). However, some opponents (China, India, and Saudi Arabia) of the Glasgow Climate Pact joined Australia and Japan in lobbying with scientists to remove mentioning fossil fuel phase-out from the IPCC 2021 report (Rowlatt & Gerken, 2021).

Then at COP27, incumbents faced substantial challenges to protect their interests related to fossil fuel production. Given the exclusion of references to oil and gas from the Glasgow Climate Pact text, India called for a commitment to phasedown all fossil fuels (Jessop, 2022). India was supported by, for example, the UK, the USA, Norway, France, Denmark, and Ireland (Morton, 2022). The European Union also supported India and advocated for a fossil fuel phase-out (Ainger, 2022), a demand amplified by civil society organizations and environmental nongovernmental organizations. For example, the Climate Action Network awarded the “Fossil of the Day Award” to incumbents, e.g., Japan, Norway, Brazil, Australia, Russia, the USA, and Saudi Arabia.⁵ To reinforce the call by India, national governments pledged to wind down oil and gas production. For instance, Colombia committed to ending oil and gas development (Eco, 2022a). Joined with Vanuatu, Tuvalu invited other states to endorse the “Fossil Fuel Non-Proliferation Treaty”, a new approach to phasing out fossil fuels equitably (Newell & Simms, 2019).

While the above efforts bolstered India’s call, Saudi Arabia, Russia, Canada, China, Brazil, and Gulf Petro-states vehemently opposed the phasedown of all fossil fuels by arguing it is “unacceptable” and a “red line” for energy security (Harvey & Michaelson, 2022; Rabson, 2022; Zee et al., 2022). Furthermore, oil and gas executives and their lobbyists joined state delegations (e.g., Angola, Canada, Namibia, Kuwait, and Russia) and influenced negotiators to block phasedown-related decisions (McGrath, 2022). The COP27 presidency also favored gas interests, as reflected in the Egyptian energy minister’s speech: fossil gas is “the least emissions fuel” (Eco, 2022b). Under these circumstances, in the COP27, no consensus was made to phasedown oil and gas alongside coal.

However, the COP28 reached a consensus on the need to shift away from fossil fuels, not coal alone. Negotiating parties reached this consensus after several time changes in

⁵ See: https://climatenetwork.org/resource_type/fossil-of-the-day/.

the negotiating text and a deep contestation between the advocates for, and opponents of, phasing out of fossil fuels. While the first draft mentioned, “An orderly and just phase out of fossil fuels” (UNFCCC, 2023a), the second draft was revised to advocate for the “Phasing out of fossil fuels in line with best available science, the IPCC’s 1.5 pathways [...]” (UNFCCC, 2023b). While negotiations were going on, the secretary general, Haitham Al Ghais, of the Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries issued an urgent letter to its member states along with the members of the Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries Plus. In this letter, he urged these countries to reject any fossil fuel-related texts in climate negotiations (Saba & Dahan, 2023). Meanwhile, Saudi Arabia also created tremendous pressure on the United Arab Emirates, the presidency of the COP28, to remove mentioning fossil fuels from the negotiation text (Abnett et al., 2023). Against these strong oppositions, the European Union, the USA, small-island states, and all climate-vulnerable countries advocated for phasing out of fossil fuels that were included in the first and second drafts (Abnett et al., 2023). The contestation between the advocates and opponents of phasing out fossil fuels continued. Due to the heated contestation, the term phase-out was finally deleted from the third draft, which was revised to “Reducing both consumption and production of fossil fuels, in a just, orderly and equitable manner [...]” (UNFCCC, 2023c). However, given the obstinate position of opponents, parties further weakened the negotiating text. In the final draft, parties decided to accelerate the “Transitioning away from fossil fuels in energy systems, in a just, orderly and equitable manner, [...]” (UNFCCC, 2023d). Such a fragile decision has sustained the interests of fossil fuel incumbents, thereby entrenching their power in climate negotiations.

Beyond negotiations, various developments also occurred at side events to challenge fossil fuel incumbents. At COP26, Denmark and Costa Rica launched the “Beyond Oil and Gas Alliance” to expand cooperation for an equitable phase-out of oil and gas production. The UK spearheaded the adoption of the Global Coal to Clean Power Transition Statement to forgo unabated coal power production and end new permits for unabated coal-fired power projects (van Asselt & Green, 2022). Although many states, subnational governments, and organizations joined this initiative, Australia, China, India, the USA, and South Africa refused, and Indonesia and the Philippines endorsed with conditions, demanding support for coal phase-out (Saha & Carter, 2022). At COP26, this group (excluding the USA) also did not endorse the Statement on International Public Support for the Clean Energy Transition, underlining the end of new direct state financing to international unabated fossil fuel-driven energy production by 2022. At the COP27, the United Nations’ High-Level Expert Group on the Net Zero Emissions Commitments of Non-State Entities contended that the continued investment in fossil fuels is incompatible with net zero, and therefore, businesses, financial institutions, cities, and regions should accelerate phasing out fossil fuels (High-Level Expert Group, 2022). In short, COPs have emerged as an inter-governmental forum to confront incumbents and their norms and practices.

3 Theoretical perspective

Power is central to international politics and shapes interstate relations. Scholars of international relations argue that “power is the production, in and through social relations, of effects that shape the capacities of actors to determine their circumstances and fate” (Barnett & Duvall, 2005, p.39). In their seminal work, Keohane and Nye (1973) assert that power stems from the “asymmetrical interdependence” between states, which enables the

less dependent states to achieve their goals by manipulating their relations with highly dependent states. The reliance of dependent states, particularly LDCs, derives mainly from their fragile economic conditions and resource scarcity, substantially shaping their negotiation capacities and bargaining positions in international forums, notably the UNFCCC.

To analyze the strategies undertaken by the coalition of LDCs to challenge fossil fuel incumbents and their capacity in this regard, my research employs the perspective of strategic power, which emphasizes evaluating state behavior in international climate politics and negotiations (Ciplet et al., 2015). Before Ciplet et al. (2015), neo-Gramscian scholars developed the strategic dimension of power and contended that intelligent groups with fewer material resources could sometimes circumvent their resourceful rivals (Levy & Newell, 2002). This circumventing relies on “clever strategy”, proper timing, and some good luck for resource-poor groups (Levy & Egan, 2003). Levy and Egan (2003) argue that the strategic conception of power emphasizes “the capacity of agents to comprehend social structures and effect change [...]” (p.813).

In explaining the strategic notion of power, neo-Gramscian scholars have argued that strategies undertaken by actors to outmaneuver their resourceful rivals are shaped by the three forms of power: material, discursive, and organizational (Levy & Newell, 2002). Material power derives from the authority of controlling production and finance, which are utilized by a constellation of actors to secure economic growth and generate conducive environments for capital accumulation (Ford & Newell, 2021). Fossil fuel-producing countries and corporations exercise material power by controlling fossil resource production and fuel prices in international markets. They produce fossil fuels to generate revenue, thereby ensuring economic growth and accumulating capital. Economic strength and other key defining features of material power, as identified above, enable actors to exert structural power over others. This structural power is primarily related to the production, finance, knowledge, and security (Strange, 2015) that play a pivotal role in determining structural positions and the “social capacities” of actors (Barnett & Duvall, 2005). This structural power shapes the destinies and conditions of actors as structures can generate differential capacities, unequal privileges and advantages, and varied positions.

In climate negotiations, structural factors, such as economic situations and vulnerability to climate change, play a vital role in defining the negotiation capacity and bargaining positions of participating states (Bailer & Weiler, 2015). Hanegraaff (2023) argues that as business groups, notably fossil fuel industries, play an important role in the economy, they hold structural power and gain relatively more “privileged access” to climate negotiations than nongovernmental organizations. Due to the structural power of fossil fuel corporations, governments are sympathetic to the interests and concerns of such industries enabling industry managers and lobbyists to shape the outcomes of climate change negotiations (Newell & Paterson, 1998). This sympathy mostly stems from the assumption that the fossil fuel industry is essential for economic growth and capital accumulation by capitalist states (Newell & Paterson, 1998).

The account of structural power emphasizes institutions, norms, rules, and a system of interaction (Kitchen & Cox, 2019) that set the foundation of institutional power, which Levy and Newell (2002) characterize as organizational power. Barnett and Duvall (2005) argue that institutional power functions through rules and procedures that define institutions, and steer and restrict the actions of actors. For example, the UNFCCC’s rules and normative procedures restrict the participation of observers in climate negotiations, who can present their thoughts and perceptions at side events. Such thoughts and perceptions are the defining characteristics of discursive power. Studies define discursive power as the capacity of actors to control the actions of others or shape the topics and frames through

thoughts, perceptions, meaningful models, hegemonic assumptions, and discourses (Jungheer et al., 2019; Reed, 2013). For instance, climate activists argue that natural gas will intensify carbon emissions, whereas fossil fuel incumbents have framed natural gas as a “bridge fuel” that can facilitate global energy transition (Janzwood & Millar, 2022).

The neo-Gramscian insights on the critical power dynamics, as identified above, are useful for analyzing the strategic power approach of Cipler et al. (2015). According to this approach, power manifests through identities, ideas, and institutions that shape global mitigation policymaking in climate negotiations. Furthermore, power in climate negotiations also reveals how interests significantly influence the bargaining positions of states, thereby determining the outcomes of negotiations (Genovese, 2014; Williams, 2005). In addition to climate negotiations, the scholarship on energy transitions also uses ideas, institutions, and interests to analyze challenges faced by governments to govern energy systems sustainably (e.g., Kern, 2011). In this study, I employ identities, ideas, institutions, and interests to examine strategies of the LDC Group to confront incumbents and their capacity in this regard.

Identity implies commonality and solidarity in people, making collective action possible (Brubaker & Cooper, 2000). Identities are shaped by experiences that inform state behavior in climate negotiations. In the case of LDCs as a negotiating group, they share the common traits of having low emissions from fossil fuels while experiencing the worst climate change impacts. Such climate vulnerability coupled with fragile economic conditions as well as aid dependency of LDCs (Abbas et al., 2021) creates an uneven structural position and power inequities between LDCs and incumbents that define the extent to which LDCs have structural power in climate negotiations. As “weak states”, LDCs’ influence on climate negotiations depends on their “moral authority” deriving from experiences of climate catastrophes (Genovese, 2020).

Ideas are defined as causal beliefs, norms, and knowledge (Beland & Cox, 2010) that contribute to policy change and influence interests. The terms ideas and discourses are often used in studies interchangeably (Kern, 2011; Schmidt, 2008). Neo-Gramscian discourse theorists argue that ideas are indispensable parts of interpretation, construction of meaning, and contestation, and therefore ideas are inextricably connected to conflicts and the discursive form of power (Martin, 2002). The dominant ideas that shape negotiations on mitigation policies center on constraining fossil fuel production and consumption that negotiators and observers invoke in COPs. Incumbents also use different ideas or discourses in negotiations to shield their fossil fuel interests. For instance, in COP27, the Egyptian energy minister framed natural gas as the least emissions-intensive fuel (Eco, 2022b). Such discourses aid incumbents in exercising their discursive power in negotiations, which enables incumbents to influence negotiations, weaken the language of phasing out fossil fuels, and include carbon capture, utilization, and storage technology, as reflected in COP28 (UNFCCC, 2023d).

Institutions can be defined in multiple ways. Scholars analyzing institutional power see institutions as a set of rules, norms, and procedures that define, enable, and constrain the behaviors and actions of actors (Barnett & Duvall, 2005; Hodgson, 2006). Discourse analysts highlight the interactions between institutions and discourses that are vital for policymaking (Schmidt, 2008). They argue that institutions often constrain discourses by determining the extent to which discourses are meaningful (Hajer, 1995). In this study, institutions are understood as formally accepted rules that enable and restrain the actions of actors. In the case of UNFCCC, for instance, its rules require decisions in COPs to be based on consensus that any country can break (Falzon, 2023).

Interests are deemed, according to materialists, the behaviors and motivations of actors aiming at maximizing personal utility (Kern, 2011). Williams (2005) argues that the construction of interests is influenced by ideas, norms, and material forces of power. Scholars emphasizing structural power assert that differential privileges and advantages shape the interests of actors (Barnett & Duvall, 2005). As noted by Bailer and Weiler (2015), structural factors such as climate vulnerability and economic conditions shape the fundamental interests of participating states in climate negotiations. In this regard, the LDC Group's interests in climate negotiations are influenced by these structural factors.

Drawing on identities, ideas, and institutions, as well as the work of Antonio Gramsci and other scholars working in this vein, Ciplet et al. argue that strategic power can be understood through *strategic*, *layered*, and *historical* views. The *strategic* viewpoint is concerned with the struggle of transnational coalitions to challenge hegemonic norms and practices. It builds on the Gramscian idea of power as hegemony that is embedded in social and economic structures systematically benefiting particular groups (Ford & Newell, 2021). Neo-Gramscian scholars posit that the hegemony of a dominant group is firmly rooted in its material, organizational, and discursive power (Levy & Newell, 2002). To challenge this hegemonic position, a coalition of actors or social groups, what Gramsci calls a "historic bloc", negotiates conditions to influence hegemonic norms and practices. Gill and Law (1989) argue that a successful historic bloc is organized politically and motivated by a range of hegemonic ideas. Under the banner of a coalition, actors or groups attempt to make realistic solutions to the climate crisis by engaging in strategic actions and establishing alliances with others to influence and defend the material, institutional, structural, and discursive power of hegemonic groups. Gramsci calls this situation the "war of position", which is "a political and ideological struggle, in which the alliance builds influence and consent, developing a counter-hegemony" against dominant groups (Winkler, 2020, p.7).

In climate negotiations, power lies in the struggle of marginalized actors and their coalition (i.e., the coalition of LDCs' negotiators and observers) to challenge the norms and practices of hegemonic incumbents benefitting from fossil fuels. Actors aspire to disrupt the material, discursive, institutional, and structural power of incumbents by, for example, filing lawsuits, as in the case of Vanuatu, a former LDC, that threatened to take legal action against fossil fuel companies for their climate pollution and damage (Wewerinke-Singh & Salili, 2020). In short, the strategic viewpoint sheds light upon transnational coalitions that organize around particular ideas and devise strategies to challenge incumbents' norms and practices.

The *layered* viewpoint focuses on conflicts and fragmentation in global climate governance arrangements restraining coalitions' strategic actions. Outside the UNFCCC, the emergence of diverse initiatives to address the climate crisis creates deep fragmentation in the global climate governance architecture (Biermann et al., 2009). Coalitions engage strategically with this complex architecture to confront hegemonic norms and practices through the international system such as COPs. The proliferation of groups and issues in climate negotiations creates divisions and disagreements preventing consensus among states that are reflected in the fragmented opinions of the Alliance of Small Island States on emissions reduction (Betzold et al., 2012). For this reason, Genovese (2014) argues that the UNFCCC is a site of conflict and political struggle between developed and developing states over climate-related issues. Struggles arise within these groups as well and the LDC Group is not an exception. In short, the layered viewpoint particularly focuses on fragmentation and conflicts in climate governance mechanisms such as COPs.

The *historic* viewpoint explains that the climate governance architecture and coalition's engagement are influenced by historic structures of rapidly changing world order shaped by interstate relations, global political economy, ecological destruction from resources extraction, and transnational civil society. Ciplet et al. contend that while civil society is an influential actor in coalition and climate governance initiatives, their representation in climate negotiations is largely fragmented. This fragmentation has arisen since civil society actors are divided into three groups: academics and professional nongovernmental organizations who collaborate with market players and states to bring realistic change in negotiations; social movement actors and nongovernmental organizations who push radical agendas to address the climate crisis; and actors who mostly involve in grassroots activism to combat climate change. In addition, Ciplet et al. assert that civil society promotes neoliberal agendas. For instance, a coalition of powerful nongovernmental organizations advocated for trading in carbon credits, which has led to the creation and proliferation of carbon markets globally, thereby commodifying the abatement of greenhouse gas emissions. Furthermore, questions arise about whose interest civil society serves and represents in global climate politics (Newell, 2008). This is because civil society lacks accountability resulting from the growing debate that it exclusively relies on the funds of Northern donors, which hamper the missions, priorities, promises, and advocacy roles of civil society (Kaldor, 2003). Despite these limits, civil society is deemed crucial because it not only collaborates with states and business actors to shape climate governance initiatives, but also holds governments, corporations, and financial institutions accountable for their climate footprints (Newell, 2008). At COPs, it plays a vital role, in the form of organizing side events and boosting LDCs' negotiators struggling to challenge incumbents in negotiations. This struggle is embedded in LDCs' unequal structural relations with incumbents owing to LDCs' political-economic entanglement and colonial legacy.

In short, the strategic power perspective is useful for examining the strategies undertaken by the coalition of LDCs to confront incumbents and their capacity in this regard. This is because, as an analytical framework to examine state behaviors in climate negotiations, the three viewpoints of strategic power have been drawn from various theories. These are, for example, Gramscian insights on power, neo-Gramscian views on the strategic notion of power, the Foucauldian perspective on governmentality, the approaches to the earth system governance and fragmented governance, critical theory, and historical materialism. The synthesis of multiple interconnected theories to build an overarching framework makes the strategic power perspective different from the notable approaches, such as the Advocacy Coalition Framework emphasizing the policy process (Weible et al., 2009) and the anti-fossil fuel norms focusing on the rise of anti-fossil fuel activities (van Asselt & Green, 2022). The Advocacy Coalition Framework is relevant to analyzing the coalition of least developed states and their strategies to shape climate mitigation policies via the UNFCCC. Similarly, the approach of anti-fossil fuel norms is useful for explaining incumbents' discursive power, norms, and practices. Despite such significance of the Advocacy Coalition Framework and anti-fossil fuel norms, both approaches are insufficient to address the research questions of this study. This is because these approaches are inappropriate in explaining fragmentation, divisions, and disagreements among negotiating parties and groups in negotiations that hamper reaching a consensus on phasing out fossil fuels. Likewise, these approaches also lack insights into how to examine interstate relations, colonial legacy, and political-economic dynamics arising between LDCs and incumbents, which are the keys to examining the LDC coalition's capacity to confront incumbents. Against this backdrop, the strategic power perspective offers an integrated and comprehensive guideline to analyze the above issues.

4 Methodology

The analysis here was based on a mixed-method approach, which consisted of analyzing policy documents and LDC Group's presentations at the COP26 and conducting qualitative semi-structured interviews. Given the large number of countries in the LDC Group, I focused on one country to allow for a deeper analysis of the LDC-incumbent dynamics. I selected Bangladesh for three reasons. First, the LDC Group's mitigation agenda is coordinated by Bangladesh and the mitigation coordinator co-leads LDCs' mitigation-related negotiators and negotiations with other negotiating blocs. The mitigation coordinator has profound knowledge of the politics of mitigation in COPs. Likewise, negotiators of this country have been involved in negotiations over the last decade. Second, Bangladesh has records of climate leadership chairing the LDC Group and the Climate Vulnerable Forum,⁶ a coalition of 58 least-developed and developing countries that influence negotiations through advocacy and diplomacy. Third, negotiators (N#10) and observers (O#5) of Bangladesh have a significant stake in pushing and materializing climate-related agenda, particularly loss and damage, through negotiations.

Following the process of qualitative interviewing (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009), I developed a semi-structured interview guide. It was based on two themes aligned with research questions and theory. Themes include strategies, disagreement, and fragmentation. The interview guide included 10 open-ended narrative sub-questions that allowed participants to share their experiences on the complex fossil fuel politics at negotiations. Participation in COPs was the only criterion for recruiting interviewees. Participants were divided into negotiators (N) and observers (O). While negotiators are eligible to join negotiations between states, observers are denied. The UNFCCC's rules suggest that observers can only join side events, a forum providing input into negotiations and facilitating the exchange of ideas (Schroeder & Lovell, 2012).

To recruit participants and conduct interviews, I used purposive and snowball samplings. After confirming with the member secretary of the Ministry of Environment, Forest, and Climate Change's subcommittee on preparing Bangladesh's position paper for COP26, I chose 14 current and former negotiators from the subcommittee. Following post-COP26 press conferences and by asking negotiators, I then selected 10 observers based on their experiences in participating in side events. Participants included academics, bureaucrats, civil society organizations, environmental nongovernmental organizations, LDC experts, journalists, parliament members, and researchers (Table 1). To conduct interviews, I used four platforms: Zoom, WhatsApp, mobile, and face-to-face meetings. I conducted interviews (ranging in duration from 30 min to 1.5 h) in English and Bengali. Seventeen interviewees consented to the audio recording. I took detailed notes for the remaining interviews.

I then transcribed and translated the interviews. Following two thematic categories, I organized the transcripts. I assigned a unique reference number to each interview to preserve the participants' anonymity. Following the deductive approach, I scanned the transcripts and performed manual coding along thematic categories, a method used in other research on climate negotiations and fossil fuels (Betzold et al., 2012; Genovese, 2014; Marquardt & Nasiritousi, 2022). This allowed me to screen transcripts to identify key themes and connections between thematic categories.

⁶ See: <https://thecvf.org/>.

Table 1 Participants' affiliation, positional divide, and reference numbers used in the analysis

Group	Reference number	Production phase-out (PP) or consumption reduction (CR)	Affiliation
Governmental	N-1	PP	Chair of the Parliamentary Standing Committee on the Ministry of Environment, Forest, and Climate Change ^a
	N-2	CR	Department of Environment
	N-3	CR	
	N-4	CR	
	O-1	PP	
	N-5	PP	Bureaucrats of the Ministry of Environment, Forest, and Climate Change
	N-6	CR	
	N-7	PP	
	O-2	CR	Environmental non-governmental organization
	N-8	CR	
	N-9	CR	
	N-10	PP	
	N-11	CR	Journalist
	N-12	CR	Academic, civil society organization
N-13	CR	Researcher director	
N-14	PP		
Nongovernmental	O-3	PP	Environmental non-governmental organization
	O-4	PP	Academic, civil society organization
	O-5	PP	
	O-6	PP	
	O-7	PP	
	O-8	PP	Civil society organization
	O-9	PP	Technical Advisory Panel, Green Climate Fund
O-10	CR		

^aStarted from January 11, 2024, N#1 is serving as the Minister of Environment, Forest, and Climate Change of the government of the People's Republic of Bangladesh

5 Analysis: central dynamics of LDCs' confronting fossil fuel incumbents

To challenge incumbents' norms and practices, the LDCs' coalition is guided by two competing ideas that shape the strategic actions of negotiators and observers. While the idea of reducing fossil fuel consumption inspires negotiators to undertake soft negotiation strategies, the idea of phasing out fossil fuel production motivates observers to adopt hard strategies at side events. Both soft and hard strategies are integral parts of the discursive framing of climate change as a pressing question of extracting and burning fossil fuels. The LDC Group's mitigation coordinator (interviewee N#4) argued that negotiators constantly pressure incumbents to

reduce fossil fuel consumption⁷ since burning fossil fuels is responsible for emissions growth. Negotiators' demand for a reduction in consumption intensified after the Paris Agreement established the 1.5 °C target in 2015 (N#12). Against this backdrop, observers deem that production phase-out is a more viable path than reducing consumption given the lack of emissions reduction progress made by the focus to date on demand-side policies (O#1, O#6-9).

Building on the power's strategic viewpoint, below I present how negotiators (Sect. 5.1) and observers (Sect. 5.2) devise strategies to challenge incumbents and their norms and practices. Using the layered approach of strategic power, I then unpack varied interests (Sect. 5.3) that lead to disagreement and fragmentation in and beyond the coalition partly setting the stage for evaluating the coalition's competency in confronting incumbents (Sect. 6).

5.1 Strategies of negotiators

To challenge incumbents, the LDC Group uses inclusive and strategic language guided by science and facts. Drawing from the UNFCCC's institutional principles on emissions reduction and the IPCC's scientific reports, negotiators (for example as confirmed by interviewees N#2-4) asserted that since burning fossil fuel is more responsible for emissions rise than its production, the LDC Group calls on developed countries and major emitters to lower fossil fuel consumption. One negotiator (N#6) noted that alongside developed states, who are the largest historic emitters recognized by the UNFCCC, the LDC Group includes major emitters in their call, who are emerging economies (the Brazil, South Africa, India, and China group) and Arab Group's petrostates. The inclusion of major emitters (incumbents of the G77+China) in the call is due to their increased demand for fossil fuels and emissions growth after the adoption of the UNFCCC (N#8-9).

The inclusion of major emitters is very strategic owing to the politics and divide between northern and southern parties. One negotiator (N#4) argued that if negotiators exclude major emitters, the developed world's groups (particularly the Umbrella Group and the European Union) would regard the LDC Group's call as biased, favoring G77+China's hegemonic incumbents. This is also because Umbrella Group's incumbents (Australia, Canada, Japan, the USA, and Russia) deny fossil fuel-related decisions in negotiations if the Brazil, South Africa, India, and China group and Arab Group's petrostates disagree with such decisions, and vice versa (N#10-13). During the call upon developed countries and major emitters, the LDC Group highlights the environmental and climatic effects of fossil fuel burning to challenge incumbents' norms and practices (N#3). The mitigation coordinator (N#4) noted that the LDC Group highlights facts from the IPCC and the World Meteorological Organization's recent reports to corroborate claims about climate change impacts and refute arguments by incumbents. Alongside underlining their climate vulnerabilities, the LDC Group strategically emphasizes how the survival of small island and African states is threatening, given their exposure to the cascading effects of fossil fuel burning (N#3). As explained by the mitigation coordinator:

The LDC Group has an ethical stand to say we are the most vulnerable. We say to incumbents that by burning fossil fuels, you are increasing our vulnerability. If you

⁷ While literature documents the LDC Group's demand for phasing out fossil fuels, the results of this study suggest that the LDC Group calls upon developed countries and major emitters to reduce fossil fuel consumption, as confirmed by the mitigation coordinator and other negotiators. Though some negotiators argue for production phase-out, this is their individual position, not reflecting the LDC Group's position.

continue to emit from fossil fuels, ice caps will continue to melt, sea levels will continue to rise, and temperatures will continue to increase. Consequently, many small island states will slowly sink into water and disappear from the world map. African states will undergo more desertification, food crises, and famine than the present. (N#4)

Negotiators (N#8–10) noted that by highlighting differential vulnerabilities of the island and African states, they aim to garner the support of the Alliance of Small Island States and the Africa Group during G77+China's meetings and negotiations. This strategy has brought the LDC Group, the Alliance of Small Island States, and the Africa Group closer since they share very common features (low fossil fuel consumption and low per-capita emissions) creating a common identity—"we consume less fossil fuels and emit significantly less than developed countries and major emitters"—and a sense of solidarity among these groups (N#8-15). Moreover, most LDCs are members of the Alliance of Small Island States and Africa Group due to their geographical location and vulnerability. Two negotiators (N#10, N#14) argued that LDCs' overlapping with other negotiating groups and their common identity have facilitated the Alliance of Small Island States and most states of the Africa Group (division is explained in Sect. 5.3) to support the LDC Group's call for reducing consumption. They advocate for the LDC Group's call upon developed countries and major emitters since their demand for scaling down fossil fuel-based emissions aligns with the LDC Group's call (N#7). Apart from formal support, they provide joint statements with the LDC Group underpinning the call to exert pressure over incumbents (N#4). The UK and the Independent Association of Latin America and the Caribbean also buttress the LDC Group's position (N#13). In negotiation, the European Union plays a progressive role in strategically promoting the LDC Group's call. One negotiator reflected:

Though the European Union negotiates as a group of developed states, they take a liberal position regarding our call upon developed countries and major emitters. The European Union holds this liberal position as they are also outspoken in negotiations to reduce fossil fuel extraction and they are also investing to transition away from fossil fuels. Beyond the negotiation room, they encourage us to raise our voices against incumbents. Sometimes they play a mediating role in carrying the negotiation process forward if the LDC Group engages in contestation with incumbents (N#5).

Even so, the European Union's liberal position is also subjected to criticism. In this regard, negotiators asserted that although the European Union has undertaken promising policy initiatives and sharpened its commitments to transition from fossil fuels, simultaneously, they provide indirect support to incumbents by not directly advocating for our call upon developed countries and major emitters during negotiations (N#11, N#14). Moreover, the European Union feels discomfort when the LDC Group argues that developed countries should reduce their emissions from burning fossil fuels, and it has never been a compatible negotiation issue between LDCs and the European Union (N#8-9).

Several negotiators (N#1, N#5-7) emphasized that the support of other like-minded groups during G77+China's meetings is crucial for convincing southern incumbents. Therefore, the LDC Group engages in well-organized "teamwork" to set a "common position" that they discuss in ministerial and preparatory meetings before seeking the support of other groups. Environmental nongovernmental organizations (e.g., Climate Analytics) provide support with drafting the group's position paper and crafting negotiation language

to confront incumbents (N#3, N#10). As a cluster lead, the mitigation coordinator (N#4) requests the LDC Chair to write statements and press releases in collaboration with the Alliance of Small Island States and the Africa Group. At side events, the coordinator discusses the LDC Group's call to motivate observers and attract the attention of incumbents (N#4). To influence incumbents at negotiations, the coordinator places the LDC Group's call on the top of mitigation-related negotiation items, when they submit the LDC Group's position to the UNFCCC before COP meetings.

The coordinator shared that during the call upon developed countries and major emitters, they abstain from mentioning specific names of incumbents to avoid spoiling bilateral relations. Instead, they request other negotiators (either from LDCs or non-LDCs) to name incumbents specifically. This is done with caution in light of the depth of bilateral relations between incumbents and negotiators. One negotiator from Bangladesh gave this example:

In G77+China's meetings, I cannot directly call upon China, India, and Saudi Arabia to curb fossil fuel usage as it will harm Bangladesh's bilateral political economic relations with these incumbents. Given this complexity, I request, for example, Tuvalu to mention these names as Tuvalu has shallow relations with them (N#4).

The mitigation coordinator (N#4) explained that if divergent views arise that prevent a consensus, negotiators bilaterally discuss with incumbents about conflicts of interests and points of disagreement. Bilateral discussion occurs outside negotiation rooms mostly in the form of informal "side meetings" that negotiators characterize as "corridor meetings" (N#6–7). Such meetings take place at the time of tea or coffee break, breakfast, and dinner. In meetings, negotiators share their views and hear counterarguments by incumbents (N#11). One former negotiator (N#5) said that negotiators, in collaboration with like-minded parties of the Alliance of Small Island States and the Africa Group, strive to convince incumbents by saying "We will raise it [the call] for discussion, please don't oppose us at least, if not support." Several negotiators (N#5, N#7, N#4) argued that these bilateral or corridor meetings are very strategic and crucial and they often work better than multilateral negotiations to reach a consensus.

5.2 Strategies of observers

Since observers are restricted from the blue zone (where negotiation occurs), LDCs' observers engage in strategic actions in the green zone (area of side events) and act as a pressure group demanding the phase-out of fossil fuels. One observer (O#8) noted that observers arrange an "alternative COP", known as "people's COP", where civil society organizations and environmental nongovernmental organizations from LDCs and other negotiating groups join. The alternative COP is supported by the host country's civil society organizations, who deliver speeches and assist LDCs' civil society organizations in organizing protests and mobilization for winding down fossil fuels (O#3–4). Academic and civil society observers (O#6–7) noted that through demonstration, LDCs' civil society organizations raise awareness among the public to press their host government to push fossil fuel phase-out into negotiations. Observers added that developed countries and major emitters' civil society organizations also reveal solidarity with these initiatives. In the alternative COP, observers also underline the benefits of advancing renewable energy to influence incumbents. In this regard, a civil society observer stated:

Our message to incumbents is that if you phase out fossil fuel production and invest in renewables, it will be the “best investment approach” because investment for renewable energy expansion means that you are investing to avoid potential harm from fossil fuel extraction. In the people’s COP, we arrange awareness campaigns to create pressure on incumbents to change their addiction to fossil fuels. (O#8)

In addition to the alternative COP, LDCs’ observers arrange the “participant day” at COP to pressure incumbents. On the participant day, civil society organizations and environmental nongovernmental organizations hold processions, chant slogans, wear climate masks, and join other observers and local communities with placards betokening the phase-out demand. In orchestrating these actions, they are backed by key civil society organizers such as the Climate Action Network, 350.org, Extinction Rebellion, and the Jubilee South Asia Pacific Movement that use non-institutional strategies to convey their message. One civil society observer described his role in this way:

As a radical climate activist, I am a member of the Climate Action Network, 350.org, and the Jubilee South Asia Pacific Movement and I join their anti-fossil fuel campaigns and demonstrations at COPs. I have participated in the Climate Action Network’s ‘Fossil of the Day Award’ announcement for lead incumbents. To influence negotiations, I join them to submit online statements to the UNFCCC that include our demand for a rapid phase-out. (O#9)

In addition to the “radical” actions described above, civil society organizations and environmental nongovernmental organizations also devise tactics to build relations with negotiators and influence them to push fossil fuel phase-out into negotiations. Observers (O#4-5) noted that they organize seminars at side events and invite LDCs’ negotiators to deliver keynote speeches. They also present research studies and applied projects in booths and invite negotiators to visit stalls. Beyond the COP venue, they join webinars and engage in climate-related conversations with negotiators (O#10). Thus, these platforms play a crucial role in presenting and conveying their phase-out demand to negotiators. These efforts aim to press negotiators to discuss fossil fuel phase-out in G77+China’s meetings and negotiations. One observer (O#3) argued that such initiatives persuade negotiators to confront incumbents at negotiations. Additionally, civil society organizations highlight their demand in press conferences at side events and send key messages to negotiators by distributing press releases and newsletters, broadcasting news, and posting on social media platforms.

5.3 Interests, disagreement, and fragmentation

Below I present fossil fuel-related discords and divisions unfolding in the coalition and the G77+China that significantly impact consensus-based decision-making and the coalition’s strategic efforts to challenge incumbents’ norms and practices at COPs. Figure 1 demonstrates the absence of consensus between negotiators and observers regarding whether fossil fuels should be phased out or their usage should be reduced. This division also exists within negotiators and observers. While 46 percent [38% (N) and 8% (O)] interviewees argued for its reduction in usage, 54 percent [33% (O) and 21% (N)] supported production phase-out.

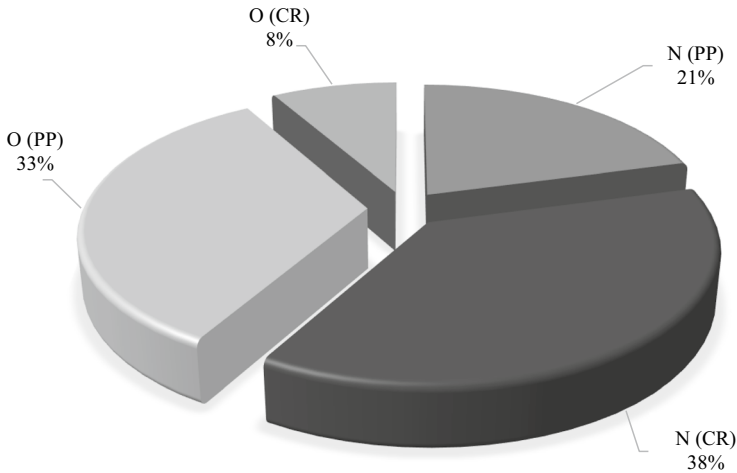


Fig. 1 Fragmentation between and within negotiators (N) and observers (O) regarding fossil fuel production phase-out (PP) and consumption reduction (CR)

Of the negotiators, who opposed production phase-out, they did so on the grounds that “if you phase out fossil fuels, how the world will operate activities because the term implies “fully out” from natural gas, oil, and coal on which the world system depends” (N#8). One argued that the idea of phase-out is “abnormal thinking” (N#8). Another negotiator (N#3) involved in the mitigation agenda opined that the LDC Group will never accept fossil fuel phase-out due to their lowest production in comparison with developed countries and major emitters, and noted that, instead, “LDCs will continue their production as we don’t have adequate capacity to develop an alternative of fossil fuels” (N#12). These positions align with those of some observers (O#2, O#10), who argue against production phase-out and advocate negotiators’ call for a reduction in fossil fuel consumption. Negotiators from academia and civil society organizations (N#12-13) take the anti-phase-out position because they are driven by “material interests and therefore they do not speak collectively. Given the influence of government, they are not vocal, cannot play active roles, and cannot speak impartially” (O#7).

Negotiators supporting production phase-out (Table 1) are divided into two groups. While some argued that fossil fuel phase-out should be begun by developed countries and major emitters considering their production (N#5, N#7), others supported a global phase-out while emphasizing support for those who have inadequate capacity for the transition from fossil fuels to low-carbon developments (N#1, N#10, N#14). However, such division is not evident in observers calling for a global phase-out of fossil fuels.

In addition to these divides, national interests, and regional integration are vital issues during group meetings and negotiations affecting the LDC Group’s consensus-making process. Negotiators (N#4, N#10-11) asserted that because of high dependency on fossil fuel extraction and its revenue, Africa Group’s LDCs (Angola, Ethiopia, Niger, Mozambique, Senegal, and Tanzania) challenge the phase-out proposal by the Alliance of Small Island States’ LDCs (Tuvalu, Kiribati, Solomon Islands, Haiti, Timor-Leste, and Comoros), who rely upon fossil fuel imports. Other African LDCs (e.g., Madagascar, Senegal, and Sierra Leone) that rely less on fossil fuels cannot take positions

to support production phase-out. This is because there is a perceived risk of harming regional cooperation and bilateral relations with Africa Group's non-LDCs (e.g., Egypt and Algeria) extracting fossil fuels to earn revenue (N#4, N#10-11). They are, however, supportive of reducing fossil fuel usage (N#14). Ethiopia is also receptive to consumption reduction instead of production phase-out.

Similarly, Asian LDCs (e.g., Cambodia and Myanmar) prefer consumption reduction and avoid supporting phase-out as they pursue fossil fuel production. One negotiator (N#14) argued that "if Bangladesh advocates phase-out, we have also to get out from gas production contributing over two-thirds of total energy, and therefore, we disagree with phase-out". Despite less dependency on fossil fuels, Nepal and Bhutan also ignore phase-out due to the likelihood of adverse implications on regional cooperation and bilateral ties with neighbors such as India and China (N#7, N#10). Negotiators are concerned about such divisions and diverse interests within the LDC Group preventing consensus on production phase-out and weakening language in the group position paper that calls on developed countries and major emitters to scale down fossil fuel usage (N#5, N#14).

Furthermore, varied interests and divergence in the G77+China affect the LDC Group's consensus. In the G77+China, Arab petrostates, the Brazil, South Africa, India, and China group, and the Like-Minded Developing Countries' group are the primary states that obstruct a fossil fuel production phase-out as they collaborate with each other to impair the LDC Group's call backed by the Alliance of Small Island States (N#10). Key incumbents in the Africa Group and the Independent Association of Latin America and the Caribbean are also aligned with this group. In negotiations, incumbents of the G77+China and the Umbrella Group sit together to counter anti-fossil fuel parties (N#7). Despite the historic geopolitical conflict and divide, India and Pakistan support each other to sustain fossil fuel interests (N#5). While Arab petrostates assert that the transition away from fossil fuels will cause their oil business contraction and revenue loss, incumbents of the Africa Group, the Brazil, South Africa, India, and China group, and the Like-Minded Developing Countries group argue for a right to produce fossil fuels:

We did not pollute in the past. We have the right to pollute, the right to emissions, and the right to eradicate poverty. Allow us to be developed first and then tell us to wind down fossil fuels. (N#5)

One negotiator (N#9) highlighted that concerns about eroding bilateral ties and losing development support and investment prevent LDCs from contesting with G77+China's incumbents. Moreover, this negotiator added that contestation with incumbents can hamper the flow of adaptation monies for which the LDC Group, together with the Alliance of Small Island States and others, bargains. Additionally, Arab petrostates are the key destinations of labor supply and source of remittance for many LDCs (e.g., Bangladesh) supporting to maintain economic stability (N#3, N#12, O#10). Religion also appears as another hidden obstacle for some LDCs. For instance, one negotiator (N#2) indicated that no Muslim LDCs will directly call on Saudi Arabia to phase out oil or lower its usage owing to religious brotherhood. In sum, diverse interests and divisions in the LDC Group and the G77+China as well as LDCs' reliance on and ties with incumbents prevent negotiators' consensus on the fossil fuel phase-out and undermine their call for abating fossil fuel usage.

6 Discussion

Drawing on the three viewpoints of strategic power coupled with the neo-Gramscian insights on power dynamics, below I evaluate the coalition's capacity to confront fossil fuel incumbents, as well as their norms and practices. Three underlying barriers restrict the coalition. These include the fragility of negotiators' strategies, conflict of interests and fragmentation in the coalition and the G77+China, and the deep interstate relations between LDCs and incumbents that are shaped by political economic factors and colonial legacy.

The first barrier is related to the strategic viewpoint of power, which helps in understanding the effectiveness of negotiators' strategies. While the "soft" nature of strategies undertaken by negotiators seeks to maintain diplomatic relations between LDCs and incumbents, this approach falls short on several grounds. To reduce consumption, while the LDC Group's call upon developed countries and major emitters includes the Brazil, South Africa, India, and China group, this call does not specify developed states and Arab Group's petrostates. This non-specification is crucial because not all developed states consume fossil fuels equally. Moreover, production is more important than consumption for Arab petrostates as they dominate global oil and gas production (Tagliapietra, 2019). While the use of soft strategies in global climate negotiations increases the prospect of bargaining success (Weiler, 2012), it appears to be less efficacious for the LDC Group because it means LDCs' negotiators abstain from directly mentioning incumbent's names while negotiations occur. Instead, they proceed more cautiously and indirectly, requesting negotiators of another negotiating group (e.g., the Alliance of Small Island States) to name incumbents and reminding them of their responsibility to cut consumption (N#2). This request results from LDCs' negotiators' concerns about eroding interstate and bilateral relations with incumbents. Such concerns are related to LDCs' trade ties with, and aid reliance on, incumbents that generate an uneven structural position and power inequities between LDCs and incumbents, thereby constraining the policy space and freedom of LDCs to effectively negotiate with incumbents. Furthermore, though the neo-Gramscian outlook on the strategic notion of power suggests that effective strategies need "a careful analysis" of the strengths and weaknesses of rivals and allies (Levy & Egan, 2003), such an analysis is quite absent among LDCs' negotiators. Moreover, the undertaking of effective strategies and tactics allows a group of actors or individuals to exercise power over the target population and transform power relations, according to the Foucauldian governmentality perspective (Foucault, 1991). However, since the LDC Group's strategies are less effective, as identified above, the fundamental transformation in power relations between LDCs and incumbents is difficult. In short, weaknesses in negotiators' strategies limit the coalition's ability to confront specific incumbents and target their fossil fuel production commitments directly.

The second barrier relates to the layered viewpoint of strategic power guiding the analysis of diverse interests, disagreement, and fragmentation in the coalition and the G77+China. In the coalition, due to the co-existence of dual ideas—production phase-out and consumption reduction—disagreement and division emerge between and within negotiators and observers. As found in the analysis here, nearly two-thirds of negotiators advocate for reducing consumption while over two-thirds of observers support phasing out production. Observers and negotiators, who advocate for phasing out production, tend to believe that the phase-out of fossil fuels will accelerate climate mitigation actions worldwide, which will reduce climate pollution, thereby creating a better and safer climate. Such a safe climate is urgent for LDCs given they confront the worst consequences of climate

change. On the contrary, observers and negotiators, who oppose phasing out fossil fuel production, maintain that the production cut by high reserve countries and major producers (e.g., Arab petrostates) will increase the market prices of fossil fuels. Such an increase in prices will worsen terms-of-trade for LDCs' nonproducers and fossil fuel import-reliant countries such as Bangladesh, which imports oil from Arab petrostates.

Though fossil fuel phase-out is crucial for advancing supply-side climate policies under the UNFCCC (Piggot et al., 2018), national interests, regional priorities, and divisions unfolding in LDCs obscure this prospect. Nevertheless, the development and implementation of supply-side policies are necessary for strengthening global actions to mitigate climate change's negative impacts that would benefit climate-vulnerable LDCs such as Bangladesh, which is exposed to sea-level rise and unpredictable weather-related calamities. Moreover, the adoption of supply-side constraint measures results in increasing prices of fossil fuels that would facilitate fossil fuel import-dependent LDCs to abandon fossil fuels and pursue paths of green energy development, which relies on human capital development and adequate investments and financial aid from developed states. Despite such potential benefits of supply-side initiatives, divisions, and disagreements still prevail among LDCs' negotiators and observers, which prevent the LDC Group from reaching a consensus on phasing out fossil fuels. Without such a consensus, phase-out-related decisions are not possible in negotiations since the UNFCCC's rules require that decisions should be based on consensus and any LDC can break this consensus by disapproving of the negotiation text (Falzon, 2023).

In addition to barriers to reaching a consensus by negotiators, civil society organizations, environmental nongovernmental organizations, and academics are also bifurcated. When they join as negotiators, they pursue soft strategies and demand for reducing consumption. When they participate as observers, they undertake hard strategies and pressure to phase out production (Table 1). The results of this study align with Ciplet et al. (2015) and Newell (2008), who discuss fragmentation in civil society and question whose interests civil society serves, respectively. When they join negotiations, their freedom to speak on fossil fuels is very limited (O#7) as governments characterize civil society organizations and environmental nongovernmental organizations as "foreign agents" receiving foreign funds and promoting donor agendas to spoil national interests (O#4). These findings are consistent with Matejova et al. (2018), who assert that civil society organizations and environmental nongovernmental organizations opposing fossil fuel extraction are suppressed by states. Given the national priority on adaptation, civil society organizations are discouraged by peers and governments to speak out against incumbents (O#8). Their non-institutional and "radical" actions are also confined to side events for their inaccessibility to negotiations (O#9) diminishing civil society's potential to hold governments and the UNFCCC accountable (Bäckstrand et al., 2017). Their denied access to negotiations is due to the UNFCCC's stern rules through which this intergovernmental agency regulates strategic actions of civil society observers in COPs, exercises institutional power, and restricts the discursive idea of observers to phase out fossil fuels. Thus, the UNFCCC limits the capacity—a defining feature of discursive power—of observers to shape the phase-out debate and challenge hegemonic norms and practices of incumbents in climate negotiations. Moreover, the financial resources of civil society observers and environmental nongovernmental organizations are overwhelmingly limited in comparison to businesses and industries (e.g., fossil fuel) that join climate negotiations (Dryzek, 2017; Lund, 2013). The greater access to resources enables businesses and industries to exert a "structural influence" on climate negotiations, thereby shaping negotiation outcomes (Lund, 2013).

Alongside the obstacles in the coalition, as identified above, underlying barriers for the LDC Group include demand for rights, varied interests, and a profound “rift” in G77+China’s subgroups (Parker et al., 2012). As a large group of developing countries, the G77+China has been playing the role of the main actor in climate negotiations and holding a common negotiating position (Sforna, 2019). While the broader interests (e.g., strengthening the adaptive capacity of vulnerable communities) of the G77+China have remained relatively unchanged over the last decade, the specific interests (e.g., curtailing fossil fuel production) differ by its subgroups, particular states, and regions (Najam et al., 2003). Chasek and Rajamani (2003) assert that completely different national interests and priorities have created a deep fracture in the G77+China. In the broader landscape of this fracture, countries with low-lying coastal areas and the Alliance of Small Island States are on one side, whereas the Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries is on the other side.

In climate negotiations, small island states and low-lying coastal countries hold a common position by arguing that they are particularly vulnerable to sea-level rise that could destroy their territories (Chasek & Rajamani, 2003). Therefore, Vanuatu, a small island state, called for taking legal action against fossil fuel corporations and governments profiting from fossil fuels and argued that they must compensate for climate damages (Wewerinke-Singh & Salili, 2020). While the Alliance of Small Island States has a common position on their climate change-induced vulnerability, fragmentation and varied interests in curtailing emissions among the members of this Alliance have become discernible (Betzold et al., 2012). This Alliance nonetheless wields influence on climate negotiations and considerably shapes its outcomes through deriving power from external sources, particularly nongovernmental organizations (Betzold, 2010). Such an influence makes this Alliance of Small Island States an emerging player in climate negotiations alongside the Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries, a highly powerful group of the G77+China (Yamin & Depledge, 2004).

Within the larger G77+China group, the Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries plays the key “obstructive role” in climate negotiations and blocks the progress in the climate regime by exercising their de facto veto power in negotiations (Barnett, 2008). The petroleum exporting states’ power derives from the UNFCCC’s Article 4.8, which focuses on particular considerations for states vulnerable to climate mitigation “response measures” (Kasa et al., 2008) that are related to fossil fuels. Furthermore, their power also originates from the control of a large amount of global oil production and supply, and the influence on determining oil prices in international markets (Fattouh & Mahadeva, 2013; Lin et al., 2015). Such an influence on oil production and markets generates a structurally advantageous position for the petroleum exporting states, thereby enabling them to exercise material and structural power in climate negotiations. In climate negotiations, the Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries also garners support from other members of the G77+China (Kasa et al., 2008) and contends that the implementation of climate mitigation policies targeting oil production and use will lead to a substantial reduction in their revenues from oil exports (Barnett, 2008). Therefore, they demand “compensation” from developed states for their expected loss in oil revenues (Barnett et al., 2004). In the Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries, the oil-rich Middle Eastern members are highly powerful in applying the veto power (Barnett, 2008) and dominate the group of Arab petrostates, which also argues that measures related to fossil fuel production curtailment will cause a decline in their oil revenues as reflected in my findings.

Additionally, division and diverse interests have become increasingly evident within the two Latin American groups of the G77+ China. While the Bolivarian Alternative for the Americas focuses on regional solidarity reflecting a Bolivarian vision and denies neoliberalism led by the USA, the Independent Association of Latin America and the Caribbean takes a “conciliatory” approach that underscores an “outward-looking” vision and focuses on building relations with developed countries (Watts & Depledge, 2018). In terms of their underlying visions, these two groups hold opposite positions in climate negotiations. Such division prevents the LDC Group from garnering the support of the Independent Association of Latin America and the Caribbean countries to argue against incumbents of the Umbrella Group’s members, who are developed states such as the USA.

While the LDC Group, together with the Alliance of Small Island States, confronts incumbents, the Brazil, South Africa, India, and China group emerges as an obstructor. Both the LDC Group and the Alliance of Small Island States have collectively been confronting such obstructors since COP15 to control global warming (Parker et al., 2012). However, fossil fuel-dependent African LDCs collaborate with the Brazil, South Africa, India, and China group and the group of Arab petrostates to sustain fossil fuel producers’ interests (N#14). Without recognizing the Brazil, South Africa, India, and China group, little will be achieved in climate negotiations since this group seeks to create a balance of power in climate negotiations (Dubash & Rajamani, 2010). As the emerging powers in global politics, Brazil, South Africa, India, and China are “the clear villains” and play an “obstructionist” role in COP climate negotiations (Hurrell & Sengupta, 2012).

Likewise, in the group of Arab petrostates, Saudi Arabia blocks negotiation progress and collaborates with other key “laggards” (Castro et al., 2014), notably the Brazil, South Africa, India, and China group and the Umbrella Group, to hinder decisions that would cut fossil fuel production. Saudi Arabia’s position in climate negotiations is deeply shaped by the fear of the potential negative impacts of mitigation policies on its oil production and revenues, and therefore, Saudi negotiators have long played the role of an “obstructionist” in the United Nations climate change regime (Depledge, 2008). In the Umbrella Group, Russia holds an unpredictable position in negotiations due to its primary focus on accelerating unrestrained economic growth (Andonova & Alexieva, 2012). Russia’s mitigation-related decisions in climate negotiations rely on the positions of China and the members of the Umbrella Group, particularly the USA (Andonova & Alexieva, 2012).

Both Arab petrostates and laggards hold a belief that the adoption of supply-side policies will reinforce the existing climate mitigation actions, and consequently, they must decline their fossil fuel production. Therefore, Arab petrostates and laggards oppose the fossil fuel phase-out and the introduction of supply-side constraint initiatives. However, they do not fully understand this premise: as the enactment of supply-side policies leads to an increase in the market prices of fossil fuels, it will consequently improve their terms-of-trade as fossil fuel exporting states, while assuming that they produce the most economically efficient fossil fuels. This opposition coupled with the fragmentation in the coalition and the G77+ China has far-reaching implications as it creates a challenging environment for the LDC Group to confront incumbents and obscures the prospect of an international agreement to leave fossil fuels underground (van Asselt & Newell, 2022). Such fragmentation, which stems from conflict of interests and discords among negotiating parties, arguably reflects the conflictive and fragmented natures of the global climate governance architecture, as argued by scholars of the earth system governance and fragmented governance perspectives (Biermann, 2014; Biermann et al., 2009; Van Asselt & Zelli, 2014; Zelli, 2011).

The third barrier is tied to the historical viewpoint of strategic power, which sheds light on LDCs' interstate relations with developed countries and major emitters impairing negotiators' ability to confront incumbents. LDCs tend to retain interstate and bilateral ties because of political economic reasons and colonial legacy. LDCs' relations with Arab petrostates are crucial for earning remittance from migrant laborers working in, for example, Saudi Arabia, Qatar, and the United Arab Emirates (Ulrichsen, 2016). Since remittance substantially contributes to LDCs' foreign reserves and economic development, LDCs' negotiators are tied to an "obligation" to Arab petrostates (N#12). The dependence on remittance generates a structurally disadvantaged position for LDCs' negotiators that prevents them from directly calling upon Arab petrostates to cut fossil fuel use. However, LDCs' remittance dependence creates an advantageous position for Arab petrostates to exercise the structural power of remittance during negotiations as Strange (2015) contends that the financial ability enables actors to practice structural power. To portray the structural power of Arab petrostates, one negotiator (N#3) exemplified that Saudi Arabia, Qatar, and the United Arab Emirates use migrant workforce as a weapon (and threaten to "send back your workers") to garner support from LDCs during G77+China's meetings and negotiations that limits LDCs' bargain power and negotiation freedom.

In addition to Arab petrostates, relations with the Brazil, South Africa, India, and China group and developed countries are also important for LDCs to secure official development assistance bilaterally. For instance, one negotiator (N#12) illustrated that the depth of interstate relations determines LDCs' negotiators' bargaining success during bilateral negotiations for official development assistance grants that include a substantial portion of adaptation funds. China and developed states use official development assistance to influence LDCs' democratic institutions, political regimes, and governments, and obtain access to natural resources, e.g., fossil fuels (Blair et al., 2022; Hess & Aidoo, 2019). This influence implies that donor countries exert their structural power over aid-dependent LDCs. Furthermore, the development assistance not only enables aid providers to control and manipulate their relationships with LDCs but also creates a structurally convenient position for aid providers that prevents LDCs' negotiators from pressurizing developed states and major emitters to reduce fossil fuel consumption. Likewise, LDCs also have deep trade relations with these aid providers that obstruct LDCs' negotiators from boldly challenging incumbents. Additionally, developed countries and major emitters' energy corporations use investment as a tool to control, explore, and extract LDCs' fossil fuels. This investment creates a structurally favorable condition for fossil fuel corporations that enables corporate executives to build relations with LDCs' governments aiming to join LDCs' delegations (McGrath, 2022) and influence negotiators to block fossil fuel-related decisions (O#4, O#8-9). Governments also promote fossil fuel industries' interests due to their structural power to influence employment and businesses (Hanegraaff, 2023; Newell & Paterson, 1998).

Moreover, LDCs' preference to maintain positive interstate relations relates to their colonial legacy and political ties with neighboring incumbents. To maintain colonial ties, African LDCs are split into anglophone and francophone countries and respective colonizers have notable contributions to conflict resolution, peacekeeping, post-conflict reconstruction, and state-building in their former colonies (Adebajo, 2012). One negotiator (N#9) underlined that "colonial masters still provide financial, security, and technical support to their former colonies, thereby maintaining post-colonial relations with LDCs." The results of this study imply that Asian LDCs tend to preserve relations with competing regional hegemony (China and India), who are economically and geopolitically vital for LDCs (N#2, O#8). To ensure political security across borders, Myanmar, Nepal, and

Bangladesh are required to retain bilateral relations with India. However, interstate relations coupled with political-economic dynamics and colonial legacy define why the LDC Group is a “weak power” in multilateral climate negotiations, why the negotiation power of the LDC Group is fragile (N#13), why weaker states, LDCs, undertake soft strategies in negotiations (Bailer, 2012), and why LDCs cannot engage in climate negotiations effectively (Falzon, 2023). Furthermore, economic dependence on, and colonial legacy and political ties with, incumbents limit the LDCs’ scope of “emancipation”, which is central to the critical theory (Farrands & Worth, 2005), from the dominance and structural influence of incumbents on LDCs during negotiations, including LDCs’ domestic issues, as identified above. Such dominance and influence enable hegemonic incumbents to defy the negotiators’ idea of reducing fossil fuel consumption and reinforce material conditions such as socioeconomic realities and circumstances that may arise from phasing out fossil fuels (see the quotes of N#8 and N#12 in Sect. 5.3). Through buttressing material conditions, incumbents reproduce material, structural, and discursive power to sustain their hegemony and fossil fuel interests in negotiations. Scholars of Gramscian historical materialism argue that ideas and material conditions are deeply tied together, mutually influence one another, and assist hegemonic groups in sustaining their dominance over subordinate groups (Gill, 1993; Mann, 2009). However, the limited scope for emancipation would further undermine the greater freedom, autonomy, and power of the LDC Group to shape decisions in climate negotiations.

In addition to the above factors, within the G77+China, LDCs are powerless due to their poverty, economic fragility, and governance problems that create an “unequal negotiating capacity” between the LDC Group and the powerful members of the G77+China, notably the Brazil, South Africa, India, and China group and the group of Arab petrostates (Chan, 2021; Kasa et al., 2008). Such uneven negotiating capacity results in a structurally disadvantaged position for the LDC Group, thereby undermining outcomes of climate negotiations on winding down fossil fuels. In brief, fragile strategies, discord, and fragmentation in the coalition and the G77+China, and LDCs’ interstate relations together with political economic entanglement and colonial legacy explain why the coalition is still ill-suited to challenge incumbents and their norms and practices. Although Newell (2008) argued that civil society can hold governments and corporations accountable for their climate pollution, rupture in and barriers of LDCs’ civil society have blurred their prospect of disrupting fossil fuel incumbents’ norms and practices and creating a renewable energy order that they invoke at side events.

7 Conclusion

Based on common identities, LDCs formed a transnational coalition encompassing negotiators and observers, who have devised strategies to confront fossil fuel incumbents and their norms and practices in COPs. While confronting incumbents is indeed a promising initiative to transition the global community from fossil fuels and accelerate international efforts for a fossil-free future (Marquardt & Nasiritousi, 2022), the co-existence of dual ideas creates divisions between and within negotiators and observers. Although civil society is cast as an emerging force to accelerate the transition away from fossil fuels (McKenzie & Carter, 2021; Piggot et al., 2018), it is also fragmented due to the presence of dual ideas. Furthermore, civil society actors are denied access to negotiations and can participate as observers only, according to the institutional rules of

the UNFCCC. Such barriers are also evident in environmental nongovernmental organizations and academics that in turn undermine their hard strategies and radical actions invigorating negotiators' anti-fossil fuel stance and creating pressure on incumbents to forego fossil fuel production.

In addition to observers, LDCs' negotiators are also subjected to constraints while negotiating with G77+China's incumbents, who focus on their interests, pursue efforts to continue fossil fuel production, challenge the LDC Group's call for reducing fossil fuel consumption, and closely collaborate with Umbrella Group's incumbents. Tensions erupting between negotiators and incumbents further intensify fragmentation, thereby undermining negotiators' ability to defy incumbents' norms and practices through soft strategies. The division into negotiators blocks the LDC Group's consensus on phasing out fossil fuels. The G77+China's rift obstructs the LDC Group to garner support from the G77+China's subgroups to bolster the call. Moreover, due to fragile structural conditions, LDCs are enmeshed in complex interstate relations with incumbents shaped by political-economic dynamics and colonial legacy, which in turn force LDCs to be reliant upon incumbents and restrain negotiators' capacity to challenge incumbents.

In these circumstances, the coalition of LDCs' actors—a historic bloc from a Gramscian perspective—appears to be unable to confront incumbents as well as their hegemonic norms and practices. Nevertheless, their initiatives are crucial in accelerating global climate mitigation efforts and achieving the 1.5 °C target since the global community has failed to control the rise of carbon dioxide emissions despite three decades of mitigation measures (Stoddard et al., 2021). For this reason, overcoming the barriers and divisions identified here is urgent to advancing supply-side climate policies. Therefore, future research should explore how observers' integration and accommodation to climate negotiations can be pursued, how and to what extent LDCs can overcome political-economic entanglement and colonial legacy, and how greater consolidation in and beyond the coalition can be achieved. Understanding these dynamics is vital to ensuring the LDC coalition can act to curtail fossil fuel production through multilateral climate negotiations.

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Declarations

Conflict of interest I certify that I have no affiliations with or involvement in any organization or entity with any financial interest or non-financial interest in the subject matter or materials discussed in this manuscript.

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