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Green Diplomacy at the Crossroads of International Law and International Relations

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Abstract

This article examines the evolution of green diplomacy as a central instrument at the nexus of international law and international relations, highlighting its transformative role in contemporary global governance. While environmental diplomacy historically revolved around treaty negotiation and compliance, recent developments indicate a shift toward using environmental objectives as mechanisms of geopolitical influence, strategic cooperation, and economic leverage. Drawing on foundational legal instruments, including the UNFCCC, Kyoto Protocol, Paris Agreement, Montreal Protocol, CBD, CITES, UNCLOS, the Stockholm Declaration, and the 2030 Agenda, this study demonstrates how international law establishes the normative and institutional foundations of climate action, while diplomatic processes operationalize these commitments within political practice. Through integrated case studies, the article analyzes the dynamics of EU–China climate collaboration and competition, the United States’ withdrawal and return to the Paris Agreement, climate justice diplomacy led by Small Island Developing States, and the Carbon Border Adjustment Mechanism as a tool of green trade. The research reveals that green diplomacy now extends far beyond environmental protection, shaping global power structures, trade regimes, financial flows, and security agendas. Ultimately, the findings suggest that green diplomacy is emerging as a multidimensional governance framework capable of reconfiguring international relations in an era defined by climate urgency, technological transition, and heightened environmental interdependence.

Keywords: Green Diplomacy, International Law, International Relations, Climate Agreements, Sustainable Development, Global Governance, Environmental Treaties

მირანდა გურგენიძე, პროფესორი, საქართველოს ტექნიკური უნივერსიტეტი
ემილია ალავერდოვი, პროფესორი, საქართველოს ტექნიკური უნივერსიტეტი

მწვანე დიპლომატია საერთაშორისო სამართლისა და საერთაშორისო
ურთიერთობების გზაჯვარედინზე

აბსტრაქტი

წინამდებარე სტატიაში მოცემულია მწვანე (გარემოსდაცვითი) დიპლომატიის ევოლუციის ანალიზი და ხაზს უსვამს მის განსაკუთრებულ როლს თანამედროვე გლობალური მმართველობის სისტემაში. თუ ისტორიულად გარემოსდაცვითი დიპლომატია ძირითადად ხელშეკრულებების მოლაპარაკებასა და მათი შესრულების კონტროლზე იყო ორიენტირებული, თანამედროვე ტენდენციები მიუთითებს იმაზე, რომ გარემოსდაცვითი მიზნები სულ უფრო მეტად გამოიყენება გეოპოლიტიკური გავლენის, სტრატეგიული თანამშრომლობისა და ეკონომიკური ბერკეტების მექანიზმებად.

ფუნდამენტური სამართლებრივი ინსტრუმენტების, მათ შორის გაეროს კლიმატის ცვლილების ჩარჩო კონვენციის (UNFCCC), კიოტოს პროტოკოლის, პარიზის შეთანხმების, მონრეალის პროტოკოლის, ბიოლოგიური მრავალფეროვნების კონვენციის (CBD), გადაშენების პირას მყოფი სახეობების საერთაშორისო ვაჭრობის კონვენციის (CITES), გაეროს საზღვაო სამართლის კონვენციის (UNCLOS), სტოკჰოლმის დეკლარაციისა და 2030 წლის მდგრადი განვითარების დღის წესრიგის საფუძველზე, საერთაშორისო სამართალით ჩამოყალიბებულია აღნიშნული საკითხის ნორმატიულ - ინსტიტუციურ საფუძვლები, ხოლო დიპლომატიური პროცესები ახდენს ამ ვალდებულებებს პოლიტიკური პრაქტიკის დონეზე უზრუნველყოფას.

კვლევის შედეგები ცხადყოფს, რომ თანამედროვე მწვანე დიპლომატია მნიშვნელოვნად სცილდება გარემოს დაცვის ფარგლებს და აქტიურად ახდენს გავლენას გლობალურ ძალაუფლების სტრუქტურებზე, სავაჭრო რეჟიმებზე, ფინანსურ ნაკადებსა და უსაფრთხოების დღის წესრიგებზე და ის ყალიბდება, როგორც მრავალგანზომილებიანი მმართველობის მოდელი, რომელსაც აქვს საერთაშორისო ურთიერთობების გარდაქმნის პოტენციალი კლიმატური კრიზისის, ტექნოლოგიური ტრანსფორმაციისა და მზარდი გარემოსდაცვითი ურთიერთდამოკიდებულების ეპოქაში.

საკვანძო სიტყვები: მწვანე დიპლომატია, საერთაშორისო სამართალი, საერთაშორისო ურთიერთობები, კლიმატის შესახებ შეთანხმებები, მდგრადი განვითარება, გლობალური მმართველობა, გარემოსდაცვითი ხელშეკრულებები

Introduction

Environmental concerns have transitioned from peripheral topics to central determinants in shaping twenty-first-century international policymaking and global diplomacy. Issues such as climate change, biodiversity degradation, ocean acidification, desertification, and increasing resource scarcity have amplified geopolitical tensions and pushed environmental governance to the forefront of international relations [1] [2]. Climate impacts now influence not only ecological outcomes but also migration flows, food and water security, economic stability, and the strategic behavior of states. Environmental degradation increasingly intersects with development trajectories and global inequality, making climate governance a fundamental pillar of modern global affairs rather than a supplementary policy domain.

Against this backdrop, green diplomacy has emerged as a comprehensive response framework, shifting from reactive treaty-based environmental management toward proactive strategies that integrate climate objectives into foreign policy, economic negotiation, and security planning. Beyond serving as a mechanism for environmental cooperation, green diplomacy functions as a platform through which states negotiate access to low-carbon technologies, renewable energy markets, climate finance instruments, and innovation partnerships. It also enables states to communicate normative agendas, shape international expectations, and project soft power by adopting leadership roles in climate governance. As countries increasingly recognize the geopolitical value of climate leadership, environmental diplomacy becomes a tool for exercising political influence, shaping global norms, and reinforcing alliances or strategic dependencies.

Discussion

Environmental treaties such as the UNFCCC (1992), Kyoto Protocol (1997), and Paris Agreement (2015) established the foundational legal architecture for global climate cooperation by defining obligations, institutional frameworks, and mechanisms for mitigation and adaptation. However, law alone has proven insufficient to ensure compliance or accelerate ambition at the pace required to prevent ecological tipping points. Diplomatic negotiation, financial incentives, capacity-building programs, and reputational mechanisms have therefore become indispensable tools for translating legal commitments into concrete action. This interdependence illustrates that environmental law and diplomacy operate symbiotically: legal instruments provide normative authority, while diplomacy mobilizes political will and implementation capacity.

The growing strategic significance of environmental governance is also influenced by global economic transitions. The expansion of renewable energy markets, carbon pricing mechanisms, and green technology patents has introduced new dimensions of competition and cooperation in world politics [3] [4]. Countries with technological advantages in solar power, battery storage, hydrogen fuel, or critical minerals such as lithium and cobalt gain

leverage in negotiating climate partnerships and trade agreements [1]. In parallel, fossil-fuel-dependent economies confront structural vulnerabilities, prompting them to use diplomatic channels to secure investment for diversification or lobby for slower decarbonization pathways. Green diplomacy thus reflects a dual nature: it promotes cooperation to combat global ecological risks while simultaneously functioning as a competitive arena over emerging green economies.

Moreover, environmental diplomacy increasingly intersects with human rights frameworks, climate-induced displacement, and global security discourse. Rising sea levels threaten the territorial integrity of Small Island Developing States, forcing them to advocate for Loss and Damage financing and legal recognition of climate-related mobility. In the Arctic, melting ice is accelerating military and resource competition among great powers. In Europe, the introduction of mechanisms such as the Carbon Border Adjustment Mechanism (CBAM) extends climate policy into international trade law, demonstrating how environmental regulation now shapes market access and global supply chains. These examples reaffirm that contemporary environmental policy is not merely ecological; it is strategic, economic, and deeply geopolitical.

Thus, the evolution of green diplomacy signifies a paradigm shift in global governance. Whereas environmental negotiations were once confined to specialized forums, they now occupy high-level diplomatic summits, security councils, economic partnerships, and bilateral foreign policy agendas. Climate issues are woven into discussions of development finance, digital innovation, labor markets, transportation systems, and global health. For this reason, green diplomacy is best understood not as a narrow policy subset, but as an emerging mode of international relations that integrates environmental imperatives into the architecture of global decision-making.

In this context, international environmental treaties form a legal foundation, yet the effectiveness of the global response depends on diplomatic dialogue, coalitions, technology transfer, and equitable financing. The capacity of states to negotiate ambitious climate commitments, secure investment for energy transition, and harmonize trade and environmental regulation will determine how successfully diplomacy shapes the future world order. As this article demonstrates, green diplomacy is no longer simply about saving the planet; it is about reconfiguring power, redefining sovereignty, and constructing frameworks for cooperation in an era of irreversible environmental change.

Green diplomacy stands at the intersection of international law and international relations, reflecting the convergence of normative legal frameworks with the political dynamics of global negotiation. International environmental law establishes binding obligations, monitoring procedures, enforcement options, and institutional arrangements, while international relations theory explains how power distributions, strategic interests, and

geopolitical incentives shape both compliance and the outcomes of multilateral negotiations. The relationship between these fields demonstrates that legal norms alone are insufficient to resolve complex global environmental challenges such as climate change; rather, diplomacy plays a vital role in translating legal principles into implementable policy through negotiation, allocation of financial resources, technology transfer, and cooperative incentives. It is within this interdependent space that modern environmental governance operates.

The development of international environmental law is historically cumulative. Early agreements were narrowly focused, dealing with specific issues such as maritime pollution or wildlife protection, but over time, the legal system expanded into a dense network of treaties addressing climate change, ozone depletion, biodiversity loss, endangered species, and sustainable development. The transformation from soft, principle-based norms into a robust treaty architecture marked the institutionalization of environmental protection as a global political priority. This treaty regime forms the foundation upon which green diplomacy functions today, providing structure for negotiations, compliance reviews, and long-term goal-setting among states.

Key agreements in this architecture include the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate [5], which established climate change as a “common concern of humankind” and created annual COP meetings as a permanent diplomatic arena. The Kyoto Protocol (1997) introduced legally binding emission-reduction targets for developed nations and institutionalized flexible market mechanisms such as emissions trading and the Clean Development Mechanism. The Paris Agreement (2015) marked a paradigm shift toward nationally determined contributions (NDCs), iterative ambition cycles, and a global stocktake process driven by transparency rather than coercive enforcement [6].

Other pillars of the regime reinforce and broaden climate governance. The Montreal Protocol (1987) is widely regarded as the most successful environmental treaty due to its strong compliance system and financial/technological support through the Multilateral Fund [7]. The Convention on Biological Diversity [8] introduced ecosystem integrity, access to genetic resources, and benefit-sharing principles later expanded under the Nagoya Protocol. The Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species [9] regulates wildlife trade through appendices and compliance committees, demonstrating how trade restrictions can function as conservation tools. Maritime environmental duties derive from the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea [10], which allocates jurisdictional rights and environmental responsibilities now central to debates on deep-sea mining and Arctic governance.

Foundational soft-law instruments such as the Stockholm Declaration (1972) and the Rio Declaration (1992) [11] articulated enduring principles of precaution, polluter-pays, sustainable development, and common but differentiated responsibilities (CBDR) that

continue to structure treaty interpretation and diplomatic negotiations. The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development (2015) further integrated environmental action with development policy, illustrating that climate cooperation cannot be isolated from poverty alleviation, economic reform, food security, or energy systems.

The strength of the international environmental regime lies not merely in treaty ratification but in the institutional mechanisms that enable negotiation, monitoring, and adaptive implementation. Transparency frameworks under the UNFCCC require regular reporting of inventories and progress, enabling diplomatic peer pressure and reputational incentives to encourage compliance [12]. Climate finance and technology-transfer mechanisms, including the Green Climate Fund, Global Environment Facility, and Adaptation Fund, shape developing countries' willingness to adopt ambitious mitigation measures. Market-based instruments such as emissions trading systems and carbon offset mechanisms have expanded state and private-sector involvement, providing cost-effective pathways toward emissions reductions. Compliance systems vary: the Montreal Protocol uses a strong facilitative–sanctions model, while the Paris Agreement adopts a non-punitive, capacity-building approach. Annual COP conferences serve as political and diplomatic arenas where coalitions are formed, technical rules are negotiated, and scientific inputs from the IPCC shape decision-making.

Despite institutional advances, major challenges persist. Many states fall short of their climate pledges due to financial constraints, administrative limitations, domestic politics, or competing development priorities [13]. The absence of coercive enforcement in most treaties means progress relies heavily on transparency, persuasion, and reputational consequences rather than sanctions. Persistent asymmetries between developed and developing countries generate tensions over equity, historical responsibility, and climate justice. Mechanisms such as CBDR, just transition policies, and the Loss and Damage Fund, formally acknowledged at COP27, represent attempts to reconcile diverging expectations and capacities.

The future of green diplomacy will depend on transforming political commitments into measurable action. Strengthening implementation requires deeper integration between climate law and trade, investment, human rights, and technology governance. Expanding predictable climate finance, improving MRV systems, and preventing greenwashing are essential for durable progress. Empowering Global South actors in agenda-setting, improving access to clean technology, and aligning industrial strategies with global climate objectives will shape the next phase of climate cooperation [1]. In this sense, the success of green diplomacy relies not only on legal frameworks but on sustained political will, negotiation capacity, and institutional accountability. Law provides structure and durability; diplomacy animates these structures through negotiation, adaptation, and implementation. Together, they form the dual engine of global climate governance.

Green diplomacy cannot be fully captured by the legal frameworks that govern climate action; it must also be understood through the theoretical and political lenses of international relations, since environmental governance does not occur in a vacuum but within a global system shaped by power, interests, and identity. International agreements, even when legally binding, depend on states' willingness to comply, on their economic priorities, on the balance of power between negotiating coalitions, and on the institutional mechanisms that monitor progress. IR theory, therefore, offers an analytical foundation for explaining why states cooperate, compete, or resist environmental obligations. From this perspective, climate treaties become not merely legal documents, but instruments of foreign policy, bargaining, and strategic influence.

Under realism, states act as rational, power-seeking entities concerned with sovereignty and national interest. Climate commitments are adopted only when they align with strategic advantage or mitigate emerging risks. Environmental diplomacy under this logic becomes a negotiation tool through which major powers shape markets, secure technological dominance, and reinforce geopolitical leverage. The rise in competition over critical minerals for renewable energy development, such as lithium and cobalt, illustrates how green policies intersect with resource geopolitics [1]. Similarly, rapid Arctic melting has intensified territorial claims and naval activity among great powers, demonstrating that ecological change generates new security rivalries rather than resolving them. In this framework, environmentalism becomes embedded within security politics.

Liberal institutionalism interprets climate change as a collective action problem where cooperation yields mutual gains. International institutions such as the UNFCCC and Paris Agreement reduce transaction costs, facilitate information-sharing, stabilize expectations, and create iterative negotiation cycles. COP meetings, MRV systems, and climate finance mechanisms contribute to trust-building by increasing transparency and lowering uncertainty. Even when legal enforcement is weak, reputational pressures and diplomatic signaling encourage participation. Climate cooperation, therefore, emerges not only from altruism but from interdependence: environmental stability is essential for trade, investment, and long-term economic growth.

Constructivist theory adds a normative and identity-based dimension, arguing that state behavior is shaped by shared ideas, evolving norms, and reputational concerns. Climate diplomacy becomes a contest over legitimacy and leadership. The European Union presents itself as a global „green leader,” leveraging *normative power* to shape international standards through renewable energy reforms, emissions trading, and mechanisms such as the Carbon Border Adjustment Mechanism (CBAM). Small Island Developing States (SIDS), meanwhile, employ a moral narrative focused on existential risk and historical responsibility,

transforming vulnerability into diplomatic influence. Through this lens, climate diplomacy functions as narrative power, not just material bargaining.

The workings of green diplomacy become clearer when examined through practice-based examples. EU–China climate relations reveal both cooperation and rivalry. Both actors invest heavily in green technologies, yet their economic competition is evident, for example, in EU tariffs on Chinese solar panels, framed as balancing environmental goals with industrial protection. A second example is the United States’ withdrawal from and re-entry into the Paris Agreement, showing how domestic politics reconfigure global alliances and the momentum of climate negotiations. Treaties lacking coercive enforcement remain highly sensitive to electoral shifts and national political dynamics.

SIDS offer further insight into how diplomacy empowers vulnerable actors. Although their emissions are minimal, their persistent advocacy led to the formal recognition of Loss and Damage responsibilities at COP27, an achievement rooted in moral authority and coalition-building. Another illustration is the Carbon Border Adjustment Mechanism (CBAM), which uses trade policy to externalize environmental standards. Supporters argue it prevents carbon leakage; critics see green protectionism. CBAM demonstrates how environmental regulation doubles as foreign economic policy.

Arctic governance presents a different dynamic. Melting ice creates new shipping routes and access to hydrocarbons, intensifying geopolitical competition under the nominally cooperative framework of the Arctic Council. Green diplomacy in this region involves balancing ecological preservation with economic and military interests.

Climate finance diplomacy, particularly across Africa, has become central to shaping geopolitical alignments. China’s Belt and Road Initiative funds solar capacity, hydropower, and transmission networks, while the EU’s Global Gateway and Africa–Europe Green Energy Initiative emphasize governance reforms and sustainable infrastructure [4]. Financing determines which technological models countries adopt, embedding geopolitical influence within their energy systems.

Looking ahead, the future of global green diplomacy will depend on transforming negotiated commitments into enforceable, equitable systems. Implementation under the Paris Agreement demands stronger MRV frameworks, transparent reporting, and accountability mechanisms [14]. Expanding climate finance, reforming intellectual property frameworks for clean technology transfer, and integrating climate rules into trade, investment, and security law will be essential. Emerging issues, including climate migration, biodiversity credits, digital carbon tracking, and patent-sharing mechanisms, will reshape global governance structures.

Proposals for strengthening the regime include establishing a climate compliance tribunal, operationalizing the Loss and Damage Fund, enhancing South–South cooperation, and formalizing climate-security considerations at the UN Security Council. Ultimately, green diplomacy must evolve from negotiation-based engagement toward systemic transformation of energy, industry, finance, and agriculture. Its success will depend not only on treaties but on political will, institutional capacity, and equitable governance. Diplomatic practice will determine whether environmental law becomes a mechanism of collective survival or another domain of geopolitical fragmentation.

Conclusion

This article has explored the evolution of green diplomacy as a defining feature of contemporary global governance, situated at the intersection of international law and international relations. It has demonstrated that environmental diplomacy has moved far beyond its original function as a technical mechanism for treaty negotiation and environmental protection. Instead, green diplomacy now operates as a multidimensional governance framework that reshapes geopolitical relations, economic competition, normative leadership, and security agendas in an era defined by climate urgency and ecological interdependence. By integrating legal analysis with international relations theory and empirical case studies, the article contributes to a more comprehensive understanding of how environmental imperatives are transforming the architecture of global decision-making.

At the legal level, the analysis has shown that international environmental law provides the normative and institutional foundations upon which green diplomacy operates. Foundational treaties such as the UNFCCC, Kyoto Protocol, and Paris Agreement have established principles, obligations, and procedural mechanisms that structure global climate cooperation. Complementary instruments, including the Montreal Protocol, CBD, CITES, UNCLOS [], and the 2030 Agenda, have expanded environmental governance across biodiversity protection, trade regulation, maritime responsibility, and sustainable development. Together, these instruments reflect the gradual institutionalization of environmental protection as a core concern of international law. However, the article has also underscored that legal frameworks alone are insufficient to ensure effective implementation. The absence of strong coercive enforcement mechanisms in most environmental treaties means that progress depends heavily on diplomatic engagement, political will, and the strategic use of incentives, finance, and reputational pressure [15].

From an international relations perspective, the article has demonstrated that green diplomacy cannot be understood independently of power relations, strategic interests, and normative contestation. Realist dynamics remain visible in competition over green technologies, critical minerals, and emerging markets, as states seek to secure economic advantage and geopolitical leverage through climate leadership. Liberal institutionalist insights help explain why, despite weak enforcement, states continue to engage in

multilateral climate cooperation through institutions that reduce uncertainty, facilitate information exchange, and enable iterative bargaining. Constructivist approaches further illuminate how climate diplomacy has become a site of normative struggle, where leadership, legitimacy, and moral authority shape outcomes as much as material capabilities. The European Union's projection of normative power, the moral diplomacy of Small Island Developing States, and the narrative framing of climate justice exemplify this dimension.

The case studies explored in the article reinforce the argument that green diplomacy functions simultaneously as a cooperative and competitive arena. EU–China climate relations reveal a complex blend of collaboration on emissions reduction and rivalry in green industrial policy. The United States' withdrawal from and return to the Paris Agreement illustrates the vulnerability of multilateral climate regimes to domestic political change, highlighting the limits of treaty-based governance in the absence of sustained political consensus. The successful advocacy of Loss and Damage by Small Island Developing States demonstrates how vulnerable actors can exercise disproportionate influence through coalition-building and normative persuasion. Meanwhile, the Carbon Border Adjustment Mechanism exemplifies how environmental regulation increasingly intersects with trade policy, raising fundamental questions about equity, protectionism, and the externalization of regulatory standards.

Collectively, these developments confirm that green diplomacy is no longer confined to environmental ministries or specialized negotiation forums. Climate and environmental considerations now permeate foreign policy, trade negotiations, development finance, security strategies, and technological governance. This diffusion marks a structural shift in international relations: environmental issues have become integral to how states define national interest, construct alliances, and exercise influence. Green diplomacy, therefore, represents not merely a policy response to ecological degradation but a reconfiguration of global power relations under conditions of environmental constraint.

The article has also highlighted persistent challenges that threaten the effectiveness and legitimacy of green diplomacy. Deep asymmetries between developed and developing states continue to generate tensions over historical responsibility, financing, and access to technology. Climate finance remains insufficient, fragmented, and unpredictable, undermining trust and limiting ambition. Weak monitoring and verification capacities in some regions complicate accountability, while the risk of greenwashing and regulatory fragmentation threatens to dilute policy coherence. Moreover, the growing securitization of climate issues raises concerns that environmental governance may become subordinated to geopolitical rivalry rather than collective problem-solving.

Looking forward, the future trajectory of green diplomacy will depend on its capacity to evolve from a predominantly negotiation-based process into a mechanism for systemic transformation. Strengthening transparency and accountability under the Paris Agreement, operationalizing the Loss and Damage Fund, and expanding equitable access to clean

technologies will be essential steps. Greater integration between environmental law and trade, investment, human rights, and security frameworks will be required to address the cross-sectoral nature of climate risk. Equally important is the inclusion of Global South actors in agenda-setting and decision-making processes, ensuring that green diplomacy does not reinforce existing inequalities under the guise of sustainability.

In sum, this article argues that green diplomacy has emerged as a central organizing principle of contemporary global governance. It embodies the convergence of legal norms, diplomatic practice, economic strategy, and normative contestation in response to planetary environmental limits. Its success will ultimately depend not only on the sophistication of legal instruments or the ambition of diplomatic pledges, but on the ability of states and institutions to translate commitments into equitable, measurable, and durable outcomes. As climate change increasingly shapes the conditions of international order, green diplomacy will play a decisive role in determining whether global governance evolves toward cooperative adaptation or deepened fragmentation.

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