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Opinion – Strategic Voids in Global Environmental Governance

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Global environmental challenges like climate change and pollution demand international cooperation. Yet in many cases there are surprising gaps or "voids" in international rules and commitments. These voids are not just random oversights, they often benefit powerful countries and leave vulnerable communities unprotected. For example, the Paris climate agreement of 2015 set goals but allowed each country to set their own targets, so major emitters could avoid tough limits. This created a strategic void in global governance: a policy arena left intentionally loose or undefined, which strong actors can exploit. This article, building on prior work, explores how such voids work as a subtle tool of influence, why they worsen environmental injustice, and what we might do to fill them.

A strategic void is essentially a gap or empty space in international agreements or norms where action or rules are missing by design. One way to understand this is via Robert Dahl's classic definition of power: "A has power over B to the extent that A can get B to do something that B would not otherwise do". In our context, powerful states create or maintain voids so that other actors behave as the powerful wish, often without noticing the influence. These voids can be tangible (missing treaties, unused funding mechanisms, or unenforced rules) or abstract (missing norms, weak framing of issues, or lack of expertise). For example, there is still no universal tax on carbon emissions and no fully binding global enforcement for cutting greenhouse gases. These are tangible voids: they leave clear problem areas ungoverned. Similarly, there is no widely accepted international concept of "climate refugees" – an abstract void in how we even think about environmental displacement. In each case, the absence of a rule or norm creates a void that powerful actors can occupy and shape on their own terms.

Imagine global climate policy as a chessboard. In chess, grandmasters know that it's not just the pieces you move but also the open squares you control that matter. As Garry Kasparov noted: "In chess we have the obligation to move; there is no option to skip a turn if you can't identify a direction that suits you". Strategic voids work the same way in world politics. Instead of moving a piece (like signing a strict treaty), a powerful actor can control an empty space (leaving the treaty weak) so that others have to respond to how they fill it. For example, the Paris Agreement requires every country to make a pledge, but it does not set hard binding limits on carbon cuts. This lack of firm rules is a strategic void. It lets top polluters claim they are leaders in climate talks while actually keeping their commitments as weak as possible. In effect, the most powerful countries have used this intentional void to stay competitive economically without taking on big costs.

These voids tie into the idea of soft power. Unlike military or economic force, soft power is about shaping what others want and believe. Joseph Nye introduced this term to describe how countries can influence others through attraction and persuasion instead of coercion. Strategic voids are prime territory for soft power: by keeping rules vague, powerful states can steer global norms and debates behind the scenes. They might fund friendly NGOs, frame the media narrative, or quietly make climate aid conditional on following their rules. In effect, they get to "set the agenda" without openly forcing anyone's hand. This is like controlling the center of a chessboard by pressure rather than direct occupation: other players unconsciously adjust to the advantage of the strongest.

When major powers control voids this way, decisions end up reflecting their interests. For example, one study finds that even though Paris talks pledged to "assist developing countries" with money and technology, in practice there is

a big gap. Rich countries promised $100 billion per year by 2020 to help poor nations adapt and cut emissions, but they fell short. An OECD report estimated only about $79.6 billion was mobilized in 2019. The shortfall undermines trust in the whole process.

This imbalance is a direct consequence of a strategic void. With no strict enforcement of the $100 billion promise, some wealthy donors give only a fraction of what is needed. The United States, Australia, and others provided far less than their fair share, while a few smaller rich countries contributed more. Because there was no hard binding rule forcing richer nations to pay up, those nations could maintain economic leadership without paying for climate damage. In short, the gap in enforceable funding rules became a tool for them to avoid costs and control the climate agenda indirectly.

These voids do more than weaken agreements, they shape who wins and who loses in the climate era. Environmental justice is about fairness: ensuring that all people, especially poor and marginalized communities, share in both the burdens and benefits of environmental policies. Strategic voids often work against justice. For example, when rich countries avoid paying for adaptation or disaster relief, the hardest hit are vulnerable communities who did little to cause the problem. As scholar Joan Martínez-Alier notes, the most vulnerable communities, particularly in the Global South, disproportionately bear the impacts of environmental degradation due to the absence of effective governance mechanisms. In plain terms, the poorest people suffer most from pollution and climate change while having the least voice in making the rules.

Consider flood disasters in countries like Bangladesh or island nations. In theory, international funds are supposed to help them prepare and rebuild. In reality, the rules around “loss and damage” -– finance to cover climate disasters – were left unsettled for decades. This void meant that when a country floods, there was no ready global fund to compensate victims; wealthy polluters were not held to account. The result is what we call “void perpetuation”: the cycle continues where affected communities remain excluded from decision-making and relief. The uneven power means that decisions (or indecisions) on climate financing, technology transfer, and emission cuts often favor richer nations, reinforcing global inequalities.

In that sense, strategic voids theory frames strategic absences in international governance as intentional and instrumentally valuable spaces rather than mere oversights. Under this umbrella, a void is an institutional, normative, or cognitive gap – an arena of weak or ambiguous rules- whose indeterminacy can be exploited. This theory delivers concepts that are useful to deepen the understanding of international relations. Void colonization, for example, describes how powerful actors convert those gaps into spheres of influence via informal norms, technical standards or expert networks; void cooperation refers to the tacit, decentralized forms of coordination that emerge inside voids (information-sharing, soft-law practices, conditional financing) instead of formal treaties; and void action denotes deliberate non-action or selective engagement used to preserve strategic advantage. Together these mechanisms show how omission can be a mode of governance as potent as formal rule-making.

Complementary concepts specify the dynamics and consequences of those gaps. In that sense, a “void impasse” signals when competing interests freeze a policy field, producing chronic inaction;“void resistance” captures how marginalized actors contest, reframe or partially fill voids through advocacy, coalition-building and transnational litigation; “void double discourse” names the rhetorical split in which actors publicly praise cooperation while materially preserving ambiguity or loopholes; and the “void trap” describes the self-reinforcing cycle by which unaddressed gaps reproduce unequal capacities and interests, making future closure politically costly. These analytical categories link the mechanics of power (agenda-setting, framing, selective transparency) to concrete distributive outcomes -especially in environmental justice- by showing how governance by omission shapes who bears environmental burdens.

This theory draws on a wide intellectual lineage that mixes classical philosophy with modern theories of power and political economy. From Hegel it borrows a dialectical sensibility – voids are not mere absences but dynamic sites where thesis and antithesis interact to produce new political forms-, while Feuerbach’s notion of projection and Nietzsche’s will to power help explain the subjective and agnostic drives that animate actors who exploit those spaces. In international-relations thought, Robert Dahl’s behavioural account of power (who gets others to do what

they otherwise would not) and Steven Lukes's multi-dimensional view (including non-decision and preference-shaping) provide the analytic tools to see omission as a form of influence; Joseph Nye's concept of soft power clarifies how attraction and agenda-shaping operate within voids. Marxist and critical traditions –Gramsci's passive revolution-, Wallerstein's world-systems theory supply the structural and distributive lenses that link voids to inequality.

Building on this theoretical foundation, it becomes essential to translate these insights into practical strategies for more equitable governance. Strengthening inclusive multilevel governance is a key starting point. Global climate goals must connect with local realities. This means giving voice and resources directly to the communities most affected by climate change. For example, local and regional governments, indigenous groups, and community organizations should have a seat at international forums or linked processes. Better yet, climate agreements could require national governments to incorporate input from vulnerable populations when making pledges. By lowering the "yellow line" between grassroots and global policy, we close voids that let elites decide alone. In practice, this could look like regional climate councils that include civil society, or funding models that allocate some aid directly to local projects. These steps help ensure that cooperation is not just top-down but engages those on the front lines of environmental change.

Traditional approaches to global environmental policy often rely on punitive measures such as fines for missing targets or demands for compensation. While accountability remains essential, these mechanisms can be complemented by positive incentives. Wealthier countries and international bodies could, for instance, provide financial rewards for renewable energy projects, forest preservation, or strict pollution controls, especially for developing nations that exceed expectations. Highlighting and celebrating such achievements through publicity, awards, or development programs can help shift global norms. In practical terms, this could take the form of an international prize or fund for countries that surpass their goals, or low-interest green bonds for the poorest nations. In this way, cooperation becomes a collaborative game rather than a blame-driven one.

Beyond rewarding good performance, filling strategic voids also requires stronger cooperation at the regional level. Global frameworks like the Paris Agreement remain important, yet they often overlook local contexts -creating new voids where powerful actors define rules that fail to fit regional realities. Regional agreements can bridge this gap. African Union climate initiatives, cross-border river basin treaties, or South American rainforest partnerships offer models for addressing specific challenges such as desertification, flooding, or biodiversity loss in targeted ways. These transnational pacts empower neighboring countries to establish standards that suit their needs while diluting the dominance of any single major power. In short, promoting networks of cooperative agreements among nearby nations -such as an African Renewable Energy Alliance or an ASEAN climate pact- helps address the strategic voids left by one-size-fits-all global deals.

Many voids persist precisely because of weak accountability and limited oversight. To counter this, the international community must adopt more robust and transparent systems for tracking compliance and sharing information. An independent monitoring body -possibly under the United Nations or a newly created global institution- could verify climate actions using data from satellites, climate sensors, and open financial records. Public transparency platforms, such as databases of emissions, aid flows, or permit allocations, would enable civil society and smaller nations to hold leaders accountable. When gaps exist, they should be visible to all. For example, if a country claims to have met its renewable energy target, independent data on energy use or pollution levels should confirm it. Over time, regular peer review and public disclosure can transform strategic voids from spaces of ambiguity into spaces of scrutiny and shared responsibility.

Finally, strategic voids in environmental governance are deliberate gaps that powerful actors use to their advantage. They represent spaces of inaction or lack of regulation that can quietly shape outcomes. In the field of climate and environment, this has meant that wealthier states often set the terms of cooperation without fully binding themselves, while poorer nations and vulnerable communities are left paying the price. That is, institutional and normative voids allow the most powerful states to indirectly define the agenda and rules of the game without fully subjecting themselves to the same. In plain terms, powerful countries can quietly steer international efforts by controlling the gaps.

This outcome undermines both environmental protection and justice. When decisions are made through power rather than openness, solutions tend to favor those who already have influence. To change this, the global community must treat voids not as inevitable blanks but as calls to action. That means building governance in those spaces: filling them with inclusive rules, incentives for good behavior, regional initiatives, and transparent oversight. Crucially, it means centering equity. A just solution demands the voices of developing countries and the most affected communities to play a central role. In other words, those most harmed by climate change must have real power in the process.

Concretely, nations and organizations could agree to new fairness measures (such as financing for loss and damage, or a scaled carbon-pricing fund for poorer regions), and pledge that no agreement will leave any party behind. They might also create mechanisms for civil society to propose and review policies. By treating past voids as opportunities for innovation, the world can move toward truly cooperative models. In the end, strategic voids need not remain traps; with transparency and commitment, they can become points of collaboration. This shift toward a more horizontal, inclusive system is essential if we want global cooperation to deliver on both climate goals and environmental justice.

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