

Institutional Layering without Supranational Authority: Organising Climate Cooperation in South Asia

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Abstract

Climate governance has evolved into a dispersed and multi-level system in which authority extends beyond formal multilateral institutions. Yet existing scholarship continues to associate effective leadership with institutional density and delegated authority, leaving underexplored how cooperation is organised in regions where such conditions are absent. This paper addresses that gap by examining climate governance under conditions of weak regional institutionalisation. It argues that cooperation in such contexts does not consolidate within multilateral frameworks nor fragment into ad hoc arrangements. Instead, it is structured through institutional layering—the allocation of governance functions across multilateral, minilateral, and bilateral modalities, each performing distinct roles under constraint. This configuration enables the expansion of cooperation without corresponding growth in supranational authority. The argument is developed through the case of cross-border renewable electricity integration in South Asia, a region characterised by shallow delegation, political fragmentation, and asymmetrical interdependence. Drawing on evidence of electricity trade, infrastructure development, and institutional arrangements, the analysis shows that cooperation has deepened through infrastructural and contractual embedding, while regional institutional capacity has remained limited. The findings suggest that climate leadership under weak regionalism is modality-dependent: it operates through the organisation of cooperation across institutional forms rather than through institutional consolidation. The paper contributes to climate governance scholarship by reframing the relationship between cooperation and institutional structure, and to the study of rising powers by highlighting adaptation under constraint as a distinct form of strategic statecraft.

Keywords: Climate governance; institutional layering; South Asia; regional cooperation; energy integration

1. Climate Governance under Institutional Constraint

Climate governance has become one of the most institutionally complex and politically contested domains in contemporary international relations. Over the past three decades, it has moved beyond a treaty-centred regime under the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) toward a dispersed architecture of overlapping institutions.

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Authority now operates across global negotiations, development finance institutions, regional organisations, transnational networks, and state-led partnerships. Rather than forming a hierarchical system, climate governance is more accurately understood as a polycentric configuration of partially overlapping jurisdictions, as conceptualised by Elinor Ostrom (2010).

This institutional dispersion expands opportunities for cooperation, but it also complicates how governance is organised and how leadership is exercised. Much of the literature continues to assume—often implicitly—that effective leadership depends on institutional density and delegated authority. Even as governance has become more fragmented, leadership remains closely associated with rule-making and agenda-setting in formal multilateral arenas. What remains insufficiently theorised is how cooperation is structured in contexts where institutional depth is limited and supranational delegation weak.

This gap reflects broader tendencies within the literature. Early regime theory approached climate politics as a collective action problem structured by distributional conflict, with leadership defined in terms of agenda-setting, coalition-building, and rule formation within multilateral negotiations (Keohane, 1984). Subsequent work broadened this understanding by recognising the dispersion of authority across multiple levels and actors. Multilevel governance approaches highlighted the interaction of governance across scales, while polycentric perspectives emphasised the role of multiple centres of authority. Constructivist scholarship further underscored the importance of norms and ideas in shaping expectations and behaviour.

Yet, despite these advances, two limitations persist. First, leadership continues to be analysed primarily within highly institutionalised environments—global negotiations or regions with dense governance structures—where coordination is supported by delegated authority and routinised processes (Oberthür & Groen, 2015). Institutional density thus operates as an implicit background condition. Second, the literature remains largely global in orientation, with rising powers examined predominantly in terms of their behaviour within multilateral arenas rather than within their regional environments (Hurrell & Sengupta, 2012). As a result, the institutional conditions under which cooperation unfolds at the regional level remain underexplored.

These limitations generate a critical blind spot. The prevailing assumption is that institutional strength enables leadership, while institutional weakness constrains it. However, empirical developments suggest a more complex reality: cooperation can persist—and in some cases intensify—even under conditions of shallow delegation. The central issue is therefore not whether leadership exists in weak regional settings, but how governance is organised when institutional consolidation is politically unattainable.

This question is particularly significant because climate governance is inherently implementation-intensive. Decarbonisation depends not only on multilateral commitments but also on the development of infrastructure, cross-border grid interconnection, renewable energy corridors, and sustained regulatory coordination (Keohane & Victor, 2011). Commitments do not translate automatically into outcomes; they must be embedded within institutional pathways capable of supporting implementation. Where regional institutions lack such capacity, the translation of global ambition into practice becomes uncertain.

This challenge can be understood as a problem of translation. Commitments articulated through mechanisms such as Nationally Determined Contributions (NDCs) do not automatically generate regionally embedded infrastructure. Under conditions of weak regionalism, this translation becomes modality-dependent: cooperation must be organised through specific institutional channels rather than assumed to cascade through dense regional architectures.

The problem becomes more acute when leadership is exercised by rising powers within weakly institutionalised regions. In more integrated settings, leadership can be embedded in supranational rule systems and delegated regulatory frameworks. In fragmented environments, however, leadership operates through more contingent modalities—bilateral arrangements, minilateral coalitions, and issue-specific coordination. Institutional context, in this sense, does not merely shape outcomes; it shapes the form that governance itself takes.

This tension points to a broader puzzle. Leadership is often conceptualised as institutional entrepreneurship—the capacity to construct frameworks and embed rules (Young, 1990). Yet institutional innovation does not necessarily produce consolidation. Governance may expand across multiple sites without generating a coherent regional architecture. Under such conditions, leadership becomes adaptive, oriented toward managing constraint rather than overcoming it.

This paper addresses this gap by examining how climate governance is organised under conditions of weak regional institutionalisation. It argues that governance in such settings neither consolidates within multilateral institutions nor fragments into incoherent arrangements. Instead, it differentiates. Governance functions are redistributed across institutional modalities—bilateral, minilateral, and multilateral—each performing distinct roles under constraint.

To capture this pattern, the paper develops the concept of institutional layering. Rather than treating overlapping arrangements as fragmentation alone, institutional layering highlights how governance tasks are systematically allocated across modalities, enabling cooperation to expand without corresponding increases in supranational authority. This argument is illustrated through cross-border renewable electricity integration in South Asia, where cooperation has intensified despite persistently weak regional institutions.

2. Strategic Statecraft in Weakly Institutionalised Regional Orders

The study of rising powers has traditionally been organised around a familiar question: whether emerging states behave as revisionist challengers or as status-quo actors within existing institutional frameworks, as articulated by G. John Ikenberry (Ikenberry, 2008). While analytically influential, this distinction imposes a rigidity that obscures how rising powers actually operate in practice. It treats institutional engagement primarily as a signal of alignment or resistance, rather than as a strategic resource deployed across contexts. In doing so, it underestimates the extent to which institutional participation may vary across domains, sectors, and levels of governance.

Subsequent scholarship has sought to move beyond this binary by foregrounding status-seeking and social recognition. From this perspective, rising powers engage institutions not simply to

comply or contest, but to position themselves within a hierarchy of states (Larson & Shevchenko, 2010). Climate diplomacy, in particular, provides a favourable arena for such positioning, allowing states to project responsibility and capability without directly challenging the underlying architecture of global order. Yet this shift, while important, remains limited in scope. It continues to privilege global arenas—multilateral negotiations, summit diplomacy, and reputational signalling—while paying comparatively little attention to how such engagement is organised within regional contexts.

This limitation becomes more pronounced once institutional context is taken seriously. In many regions, particularly in the Global South, the environments within which rising powers operate differ markedly from the institutionalised settings that dominate the literature. Formal organisations exist, but they lack delegated authority, enforcement capacity, and bureaucratic depth (Börzel & Risse, 2010). Decision-making is often consensus-bound, and political mistrust constrains collective action. Under such conditions, institutional participation cannot be understood solely in terms of positioning or signalling. It must also be understood in terms of how cooperation is organised under constraint.

An instrumental perspective on statecraft helps clarify this shift. Rather than treating institutions as arenas of compliance or recognition, strategic statecraft views them as tools through which states structure their environment (Baldwin, 1985). Institutional choice, in this sense, becomes situational rather than fixed. Multilateralism may be preferred where legitimacy and visibility are required; minilateral arrangements where flexibility and reduced coordination costs are necessary; and bilateral agreements where control, predictability, and implementation capacity are essential. This perspective captures the multiplicity of institutional options available in contemporary climate governance.

However, once institutional environments are recognised as uneven and constrained, the problem shifts from choice to feasibility. In weakly institutionalised regions, institutional selection is shaped not only by strategic preference but by structural limitation. Multilateralism, while symbolically valuable, may be ineffective where unanimity rules and shallow delegation prevail. Bilateralism, while operationally effective, may generate concerns about asymmetry and dominance. Institutional strategy is therefore conditioned by a tension that cannot be resolved within any single modality.

This tension produces a distinct dilemma. Rising powers must pursue cooperation in ways that remain both effective and politically acceptable. Exclusive reliance on multilateralism risks paralysis; exclusive reliance on bilateralism risks legitimacy costs and perceptions of asymmetry. Neither pathway, taken in isolation, provides a stable foundation for sustained cooperation. What emerges instead is a differentiated pattern of engagement across institutional modalities.

In this context, institutional diversity should not be interpreted as inconsistency. Rather, it reflects a structured response to constraint. Multilateral participation is retained to preserve legitimacy and signal commitment; minilateral arrangements reduce coordination burdens and enable cooperation among subsets of actors; and bilateral agreements provide the depth

required for implementation. These modalities do not substitute for one another. They coexist, each addressing limitations inherent in the others.

At the same time, leadership in such environments cannot rely on institutional authority alone. It is exercised through infrastructural provision, market access, and the capacity to organise cooperation across these modalities. Climate governance—particularly in domains such as cross-border electricity integration—provides a setting in which such forms of leadership become visible. Yet the expansion of cooperation in these domains does not necessarily produce institutional consolidation. Instead, it raises a more fundamental question: how are governance functions organised when institutional depth remains limited?

Answering this question requires moving beyond accounts that treat institutional engagement as either alignment or contestation. It requires an account of how cooperation is structured across institutional forms under constraint. The following section develops this argument by conceptualising institutional layering as a patterned redistribution of governance functions across modalities.

3. Institutional Layering as a Mode of Governance under Constraint

The preceding discussion establishes that climate governance in weakly institutionalised regions cannot be understood through the strength or weakness of any single institutional framework. Under such conditions, the central issue is not whether cooperation occurs, but how it is organised when institutional consolidation is politically and structurally constrained. To capture this pattern, this paper conceptualises institutional layering as a mode of governance under constraint.

Institutional layering refers to the structured allocation of governance functions across multiple institutional modalities operating simultaneously within a regional system. Rather than relying on a single institutional pathway, states distribute distinct functions—such as legitimacy, coordination, and implementation—across multilateral, minilateral, and bilateral arrangements. These modalities do not substitute for one another, nor do they operate sequentially. Instead, they coexist as interdependent layers, each performing functions that other institutional forms are less able to sustain under prevailing constraints.

This conceptualisation differs from accounts that interpret institutional plurality as fragmentation. Fragmentation implies the absence of coherence or coordination across governance arrangements. By contrast, institutional layering reflects an organised pattern in which different institutional forms are selectively utilised to address distinct aspects of the cooperation problem. The presence of multiple modalities is not incidental, but structured. Cooperation is not dispersed randomly; it is distributed functionally.

At the same time, institutional layering is analytically distinct from broader notions of polycentric or multilevel governance. While these approaches emphasise the existence of multiple centres of authority, they often treat institutional dispersion as an emergent property of complex governance systems. Institutional layering, by contrast, foregrounds strategic organisation. It directs attention to how states actively allocate governance tasks across

institutional forms in response to constraint, rather than simply operating within a pre-existing multiplicity of actors and levels.

The logic of institutional layering can be understood in terms of functional differentiation across modalities. Multilateral frameworks provide legitimacy and a shared normative platform, even where their capacity for implementation remains limited. They sustain diplomatic engagement and signal collective commitment, but are constrained in their ability to organise complex, implementation-intensive cooperation. Bilateral arrangements, at the other end of the spectrum, enable direct execution. Through infrastructure development, long-term contracts, and regulatory coordination, they embed cooperation within material systems and produce continuous, measurable outcomes. However, their scope remains relational, confined to specific partnerships rather than extended across the region.

Between these poles, minilateral arrangements occupy an intermediate position. By limiting participation to smaller groups of states with convergent interests, they reduce coordination complexity while retaining a degree of regional scope. Their functional orientation allows cooperation to proceed in specific domains without requiring comprehensive political alignment. In doing so, they extend coordination beyond dyadic relationships while avoiding the constraints associated with broader multilateral frameworks.

These modalities form a layered configuration in which governance functions are distributed rather than centralised. The effectiveness of this configuration does not depend on the strength of any single institutional form, but on the interaction between them. Multilateral arrangements sustain legitimacy, minilateral frameworks enable coordination, and bilateral agreements deliver implementation. Climate governance, in this context, is not consolidated within a single institutional architecture but organised across differentiated pathways.

This configuration has important implications for how cooperation is observed and evaluated. Rather than expecting uniform outcomes within a unified regional framework, cooperation is likely to vary in depth, continuity, and scale depending on the modality through which it is produced. Some forms of engagement remain broad but limited in implementation; others become more continuous and technically embedded; still others extend across subsets of states without producing institutional integration. The resulting pattern is one of differentiated governance, where multiple forms of cooperation coexist without converging into a fully integrated regional system.

Institutional layering therefore provides a framework for understanding how cooperation expands under constraint without institutional consolidation. It captures the coexistence of operational depth and institutional thinness, and directs attention to how governance functions are organised across modalities rather than concentrated within a single institutional structure. The empirical analysis that follows examines how this pattern operates in practice through the case of cross-border electricity integration in South Asia.

4. Organising Climate Cooperation through Institutional Layering in South Asia

The conceptual framework developed above generates a clear empirical expectation: where regional institutional density remains low and delegation limited, governance will not

consolidate within multilateral frameworks but will instead be organised across differentiated institutional modalities. The critical question, therefore, is not whether cooperation occurs, but where and how it is structured when multilateral institutions are unable to sustain implementation. South Asia provides a particularly demanding empirical setting in which to examine this claim, combining formal regionalism with persistent institutional weakness and asymmetrical interdependence.

At the multilateral level, the limits of institutional capacity are clearly visible. The South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) provides an institutional platform for dialogue, but lacks the organisational depth required for implementation-intensive coordination (Dash, 2008). Its consensus-based decision-making structure exposes cooperation to political disruption, while the absence of enforcement mechanisms and delegated regulatory authority constrains its ability to sustain long-term coordination. These limitations are especially evident in the energy sector. The 2014 SAARC Framework Agreement for Energy Cooperation (Electricity) formally recognises the potential for cross-border electricity trade, yet does not establish the institutional architecture necessary to operationalise it. There is no regional regulator, no pooled transmission system operator, and no mechanism for harmonising pricing, dispatch, or dispute resolution. More than a decade after its adoption, no regional electricity market has emerged (Bhattacharyya, 2015).

This gap between formal commitment and institutional capacity is not incidental. It reflects a structural condition in which multilateralism generates agreement but cannot sustain execution. The absence of implementation at this level does not, however, indicate the absence of cooperation. Rather, it shifts the locus at which cooperation is organised.

The operational core of regional electricity integration in South Asia has developed through bilateral arrangements, particularly those centred on India. Cross-border electricity trade has expanded through a network of interconnected transmission corridors linking India with Bhutan, Nepal, Bangladesh, and Myanmar. These exchanges are not episodic or experimental; they are embedded within long-term infrastructural systems and contractual arrangements that generate sustained interdependence.

The scale and continuity of this integration are evident in trade data. Between 2019–20 and 2022–23, total cross-border electricity exchange involving India consistently exceeded 15,000 million units annually, peaking at over 18,700 million units (CERC, 2023). Imports from Bhutan remained above 6,000 million units each year, while exports to Bangladesh frequently ranged between 7,000 and 8,600 million units.

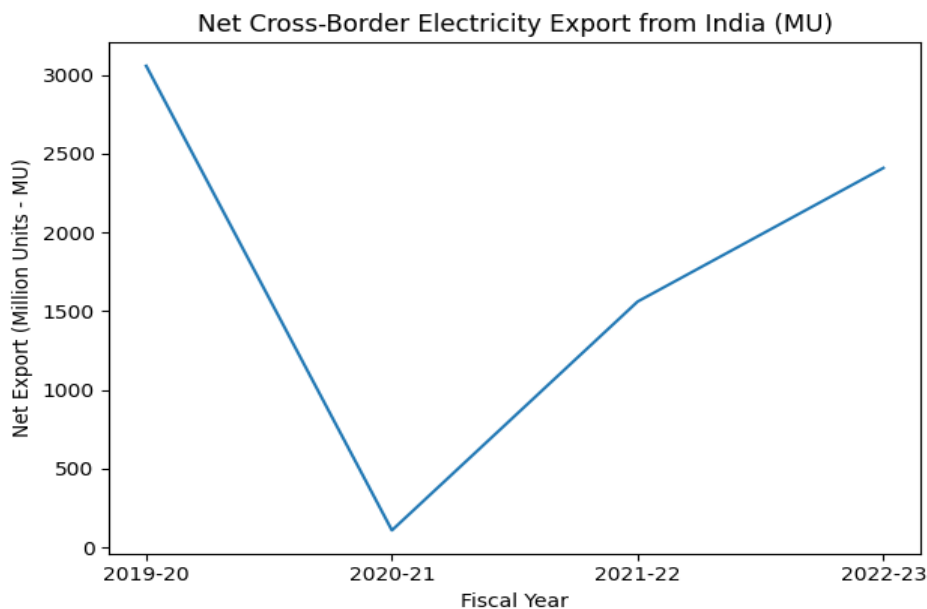
Table 1: Cross-Border Electricity Trade (Million Units), 2019–20 to 2022–23

Fiscal Year	Imports from Bhutan (MU)	Exports to Nepal (MU)	Exports to Bangladesh (MU)	Exports to Myanmar (MU)	Total Exports (MU)	Net Export from India (MU)	Total Trade Volume (MU)
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2019–20	6310.73	2373.06	6987.94	8.61	9369.61	3058.88	15680.34
2020–21	9318.17	1865.05	7551.99	9.24	9426.28	108.11	18744.45
2021–22	7670.34	1921.09	7301.74	8.80	9231.63	1561.29	16901.97
2022–23	6379.95	1508.05	8622.14	9.80	8789.99	2410.04	15169.94

Adapted from Report on short-term power market in India: 2022–23, by the Central Electricity Regulatory Commission, 2023, Government of India

Figure 1: Growth Trajectory of Cross-Border Electricity Trade



Net cross-border electricity export from India (MU), 2019–20 to 2022–23. Adapted from Report on Short-Term Power Market in India: 2022–23 (p. 81), by the Central Electricity Regulatory Commission, 2023, Government of India

These figures do not simply indicate growth; they reveal stabilised and system-level interdependence. The persistence of high-volume trade across multiple years demonstrates that electricity exchange is no longer contingent on short-term agreements but embedded within durable infrastructural and contractual frameworks. This is particularly evident in India–Bhutan hydropower cooperation, where generation, financing, and long-term power purchase agreements are integrated into a single institutional arrangement (IEA, 2023). Similar patterns are visible, though less deeply institutionalised, in India–Nepal and India–Bangladesh electricity trade.

The critical point is that this deepening integration has occurred without any corresponding development of supranational institutional authority. Cross-border electricity trade is governed

through domestic regulatory frameworks, bilateral agreements, and project-specific coordination mechanisms rather than through regional institutions. In other words, implementation has been achieved through infrastructural embedding rather than institutional centralisation. Climate-relevant outcomes—particularly in terms of renewable energy integration and emissions reduction—are therefore realised through bilateral systems of cooperation.

This pattern is analytically significant because it challenges efficiency-based explanations. A transaction-cost perspective would suggest that bilateralism dominates because it reduces bargaining complexity. While this explains initial cooperation, it does not account for the absence of institutional scaling. If efficiency alone were driving integration, sustained bilateral success would be expected to generate pressure for broader coordination mechanisms—such as pooled dispatch systems, harmonised pricing regimes, or integrated electricity markets. The absence of such developments suggests that the constraint lies not in technical feasibility but in limits on delegation and political trust.

A purely geopolitical explanation is also insufficient. While India's centrality in regional electricity trade is evident, cooperation is not organised through unilateral imposition but through negotiated arrangements that generate reciprocal benefits. Bhutan's hydropower exports, Nepal's emerging generation capacity, and Bangladesh's electricity demand create a system of mutual interdependence rather than hierarchical control. At the same time, the continued invocation of regional frameworks indicates that legitimacy considerations remain operative. Bilateralism alone does not define the structure of cooperation; it operates within a broader institutional environment.

This broader structure becomes visible as cooperation extends beyond dyadic arrangements. Sub-regional initiatives, particularly the Bangladesh–Bhutan–India–Nepal (BBIN) framework, demonstrate that coordination widens across multiple states (ADB, 2021). Arrangements enabling the transmission of electricity from Nepal or Bhutan to Bangladesh through Indian infrastructure illustrate how bilateral corridors are embedded within wider cooperative configurations (MEA, 2024). However, this expansion of participation does not produce a corresponding shift in authority. Even within these multi-state arrangements, regulatory control remains nationally anchored. There is no pooled regulatory body, no regional system operator, and no binding dispute resolution mechanism.

What emerges, therefore, is a pattern of extension without delegation. Participation expands horizontally across multiple actors, but authority does not migrate upward into regional institutions. This reflects a form of flexible geometry in which cooperation proceeds among subsets of states without requiring unanimity, yet without generating institutional depth. Importantly, this does not appear to be a transitional phase. More than a decade after formal commitments to regional energy cooperation, there is no observable movement toward supranational consolidation.

The role of multilateral institutions completes this configuration. SAARC continues to articulate commitments to regional cooperation, maintaining a shared normative framework that situates bilateral and sub-regional initiatives within a broader regional discourse. These

declarations perform a legitimising function, signalling collective intent and mitigating perceptions of unilateralism. However, they do not structure implementation. Multilateralism persists, but its role is primarily symbolic rather than operational.

These empirical patterns demonstrate that climate governance in South Asia is neither absent nor consolidated. It is organised across institutional modalities. Bilateral arrangements sustain implementation through infrastructural embedding, minilateral frameworks extend coordination across subsets of states, and multilateral institutions anchor legitimacy. The evidence thus supports the central claim of this paper: cooperation expands through a layered configuration in which governance functions are distributed rather than centralised. The coexistence of operational depth and institutional thinness is not a transitional anomaly—it is the defining feature of climate governance under constraint.

5. Governance without Consolidation: Implications and Limits

The analysis developed in this paper demonstrates that the absence of strong regional institutions does not preclude the expansion of climate-relevant cooperation; it precludes its consolidation. In the South Asian context, governance does not cohere within a multilateral framework, nor does it fragment into incoherent or ad hoc arrangements. Instead, it is reorganised across institutional modalities, producing a differentiated configuration in which implementation, coordination, and legitimacy are distributed rather than centralised. Institutional layering, in this sense, is not a transitional stage on the path to integration, but a stabilising mode of governance under conditions where delegation remains politically constrained.

This finding has important implications for how climate governance is conceptualised. Much of the existing literature continues to treat institutional consolidation—delegated authority, harmonised rules, and centralised coordination—as the primary indicator of governance capacity. The South Asian case complicates this assumption. Cross-border electricity integration demonstrates that implementation-intensive cooperation can scale through infrastructural and contractual mechanisms even in the absence of supranational regulation. Governance, in such contexts, is not absent or deficient; it is reconfigured. Authority is not concentrated but distributed, with different institutional modalities performing distinct functions within a broader system. The analytical task, therefore, shifts from identifying institutional deficits to understanding how governance operates across them.

The findings also refine the understanding of climate leadership. Leadership is often conceptualised as institutional entrepreneurship—the capacity to construct frameworks, embed rules, and mobilise collective action through multilateral processes. Under weak regionalism, however, leadership operates through a different logic. It is exercised through the capacity to organise cooperation across institutional modalities: to anchor legitimacy within multilateral settings, to extend coordination through selective coalitions, and to deliver implementation through bilateral arrangements. Leadership thus becomes modality-dependent rather than institutionally anchored. Its effectiveness lies not in constructing a single governing architecture, but in managing the relationships between multiple institutional forms.

At the same time, the limits of this configuration must be acknowledged. Institutional layering enables cooperation, but it does not transform the underlying structure of regional governance. Multilateral institutions remain thin, delegation limited, and enforcement weak. Operational integration deepens, but it does not produce shared regulatory authority or collective rule-making capacity. The result is a form of integration that is materially dense but institutionally shallow. While this configuration sustains cooperation, it may constrain the development of more comprehensive coordination mechanisms, particularly in areas requiring standardisation, dispute resolution, or collective financing.

This raises a broader question regarding the trajectory of governance under constraint. Institutional layering may stabilise cooperation in the short to medium term, but its longer-term implications remain indeterminate. On the one hand, it may entrench institutional thinness by reducing incentives for delegation, allowing cooperation to proceed without structural reform. On the other, it may generate forms of interdependence—through infrastructure, contracts, and market linkages—that could, under different political conditions, support deeper institutionalisation. Whether layering evolves into consolidation or persists as a durable equilibrium remains an open empirical question.

The relevance of this argument extends beyond the South Asian case. Many regions in the Global South exhibit similar characteristics of weak institutionalisation, political fragmentation, and asymmetrical power relations, particularly in sectors such as energy, infrastructure, and climate adaptation. In such contexts, governance is unlikely to follow the trajectory observed in more institutionalised regions. Rather than converging toward centralised authority, it is more likely to develop through differentiated institutional modalities. Recognising this pattern shifts analytical attention from institutional absence to organisational form.

Ultimately, institutional layering captures a broader transformation in climate governance. As governance becomes increasingly dispersed and implementation-intensive, authority is less likely to be concentrated within singular institutional frameworks. Instead, it is assembled across multiple institutional sites, each performing distinct but interdependent functions. Under conditions of constraint, leadership does not produce institutional consolidation. It produces structured differentiation.

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