Executive Summary

Few industries are as global in nature as the maritime shipping industry and few environmental problems are as global in scope as anthropogenic climate change. Given the international nature of the maritime industry, in which goods owned by a company based in one country may be transported between two more countries by a ship flagged to a fourth country, carbon dioxide emissions from shipping have not been easily assigned to individual countries, and have instead been classified as “international emissions” and excluded from any emissions inventories. This problem of attribution has also confounded international environmental institutions’ attempts to develop regulations for reducing emissions from international transport.

This paper adopts an institutionalist analytical framework to examine the problem of greenhouse gas emissions from the international maritime industry and response from the international community to this problem, which has played out over the last two decades. By exploring the responses to this complex problem by both the global climate change regime and the International Maritime Organization, a UN specialized agency based in London which develops guidelines, protocols, and regulations for the maritime industry, as well as the interactions between these institutions, this paper sheds light on the mechanisms that underlie the failure of international agreements to tackle global climate change.

Specifically, the paper asks why it has taken two decades for the International Maritime Organization (IMO), the United Nations agency charged with regulating the
maritime industry, to develop the first regulatory responses to emissions from the industry. By tracing the process by which emissions from the maritime industry have been treated over time, this paper argues that a) there were several identifiable political opportunities available to the IMO during the mid-1990s to act on carbon dioxide emissions, but a combination of the institutional schedule of environmental issues within the IMO, anti-regulatory interests within the shipping industry, and the lack of a political champion of the issue within the IMO torpedoed any chance of action, and b) the UNFCCC has always acted to trigger debate on climate change in the IMO, but has also acted as a force that has changed the institutional behavior and norms of the IMO itself due to competition between conflicting principles between the two institutions. The paper concludes that institutional interaction on this issue has evolved over time, and is continuing to evolve, and that future policies that might successfully address this problem should seek to understand the controls that institutional behavior exert on state action.