



INDIA AND THE ENVIRONMENT DEBATE

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Many in the international community have long anticipated the BRIC nations to assert their leadership in the global community. Yet it came as a surprise when India, at the UN Climate Conference in Cancun last year, took up the reins in discussing binding cuts to carbon emissions. It was a surprise for two reasons. As a large BRIC nation in the midst of development the country is widely excused for sizeable carbon emissions, the onus for cuts, many claim, should rest on the heads of the west. Furthermore, India has long and staunchly maintained its opposition to such cuts. As the 2011 Climate Conference in South Africa approaches, many are questioning whether this was simply a unique display of leadership or if India will in fact be leading the way towards a much needed climate deal.

The Fallout of Copenhagen

In 2009, at the UN Climate Summit in Copenhagen, Great Britain accused China of hijacking the conference by blocking an agreement that would put legally-binding commitments on all countries. China responded by stating that the accusation was yet another display by the West to dodge responsibility. During this episode India came out as a strong supporter of China. The Indian Minister of State for Environment, Jairam Ramesh, proudly asserted that India saved China from isolation in Copenhagen. According to him, “What has emerged is a ‘Copenhagen spirit’ of friendship between India and China that has high strategic significance far beyond the issue of climate change.”

At Copenhagen, this support was not shared unequivocally among the other developing countries. Island-states, Middle East oil exporters, and Asian Tigers such as India simply were too different to unite behind one single position in Copenhagen. Countries like Brazil, South Africa, India, and China strongly refuted the idea of signing up to a binding agreement, announcing that they would never be part of any binding cuts. Western countries and many developing countries were annoyed when India and others turned out to be unyielding on this issue. For a country such as Bangladesh already suffering from rising water levels, this view was indeed a problem. It became clear that the coalition of developing countries, known as the G-77, was disintegrating. Previously, it had been spearheaded by India in climate negotiations and had spoken with one voice on this issue.

Cancun - Just a Blip?

At the UN Climate Change Conference in Cancun (Nov. 29–Dec. 10, 2010) the discussions continued. There was a widespread feeling of pessimism. In the gloomy mood that clouded the meeting, India seemed to have had second thoughts. Its environment minister, Jairam Ramesh, declared that it was time for India to shift its stance and accept binding cuts. Suddenly, a great deal of optimism was injected into the climate debate. Environmentalists saw this as a potential game changer.

Some argue that environmental concerns were not the real reason for India’s new stance. The primary motive, they claim, was that India wanted to use the climate talks as a springboard that would reshape its international image and reinvent itself as an internationally responsible stakeholder. Ramesh stated that he had the mandate from Prime Minister Manmohan Singh to transition the country from the “the traditional, obstructionist India” to being “part of the solution.” A year earlier, Ramesh had sent a letter to the prime minister expressing views along the same lines. In this confidential letter, which was partially published in October 2009 by the *Times of India*, he suggested that India should delink itself from the G-77 and accept binding cuts on emissions. He went on to write that India should “not stick with the G-77 but be embedded in the G-20. We should be pragmatic and constructive, not argumentative and polemical.” His hope was that India, by shifting gear, might take a major step closer to a permanent seat in the UN Security Council.



However, India's departure from the developing bloc did not go down well with many Indian policymakers and lobbyist organizations. Some of them had previously labelled attempts by the developed world to include India in binding reductions as "carbon colonialism." Their view was that the developed world has not acknowledged its historical responsibility but is trying to stifle India's development. They referred to the fact that India's per capita emissions are only 7% of U.S. emissions and that India's stance must be viewed in the light of this. They argued that it was unreasonable that India should be burdened with such demands, when 27% of the population lives below the poverty line.

Immediately after the *Times of India* revealed the contents of Ramesh's letter a storm of criticism hit the minister. He was accused of giving in to the developed countries and sacrificing the lives of millions of Indians living in poverty. Ramesh was forced to retract his statements at the summit and issued a press release, "India will never accept internationally legally binding emission reduction targets or commitments as part of any agreement or deal or outcome."

India Back in the Same Old Corner

Unfortunately for the environment movement, Ramesh and his "western-oriented" approach are losing the battle. Advocates for the uncompromising refusal to join binding cuts on greenhouse gases seem to have the upper hand. Those who want India to belong to the developing bloc and view the G-77 as a natural group for India to be part of seem to have lost as well. This view is increasingly difficult to subscribe to as the G-77 is breaking apart because the irreconcilable climate agendas of its members.

Instead, Brazil, South Africa, India, and China have emerged as the group in which India will play its climate game in the future. At the end of May this year, these countries met. At the meeting India reiterated its traditional view

that mitigating climate change is the responsibility of rich countries. The four countries announced that the objective for the upcoming climate conference in South Africa should be to extend the Kyoto Protocol, which only stipulates binding reduction commitments for developed countries.

Countries such as the United States, Japan, and Russia have repeatedly said that they will not sign up to any reduction agreement which does not include the developing economies. Therefore, we are likely to see yet another climate summit clouded by unmet expectations and disagreements. It is likely that India will cover in the same corner, refusing to be part of binding commitments.

Not a Zero-Sum Game

Climate change is not a zero-sum game between the world's nations. This goes for India too. Nearly 700 million people in India are directly reliant on natural resources and climate-sensitive sectors for their subsistence. Almost all of India's food production and drinking water are dependent on consistent monsoon and glacial water from the Himalayas. For India, development and mitigating climate change cannot be separated. If the Indian policymakers do not switch gear and show willingness to compromise, they will ultimately hurt their own people. If the stalemate in the climate debate continues everyone will lose. So, just two months out from this year's climate conference in Durban, the question remains, will India be a leader or, to the fullest extent of the word, a "developing" nation?

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