

On electric vehicles, India must learn from China

[United Nations Environment Programme chief Erik Solheim](#) on Tuesday said India must move fast to tackle air pollution and to do so, the country must focus on its transport, renewables and agriculture sectors. But how exactly will that happen? Take, for example, the case of electric vehicles (EVs). With the kind of catastrophic pollution levels we have, the State should do its best to push for EVs. But our progress has been uneven.

The hopes for cleaner air were raised when last year the transport minister asked the automobile industry to shift to EVs. Arguing that petrol and diesel vehicles will have to make way for electric power trains and engines running on other fuel variants such as ethanol and biofuels, he warned the vehicle manufacturers: “I am going to do it, whether you like it or not. I will bulldoze. Petrol, diesel banaane walon kaa band-baajaa bajaanaa hai [We will take the makers of petrol/diesel engine vehicles to task]”.

A month later, [the minister promised an EV policy so that India can achieve full electric mobility before 2030](#).

But on February 15, [the Centre did a volte face when the Centre](#) provided a breather to carmakers that are unprepared for a shift to the clean-fuel technology. The transport minister announced that the country does not need a dedicated EV policy; instead it may come out with an action plan.

While India is debating between a policy and an action plan, China, where air pollution is also a huge problem, is trying to become the “Detroit of electric vehicles”.

[A 2017 McKinsey&Company report](#) talks about how and why China has emerged as a leader in both the supply of—and demand for—EVs. On the supply side, China’s government has made it a priority to create favourable conditions for EV stakeholders, including investors.

As for demand, China’s high marks are evidenced not only by the number of vehicles sold, but also by the variety of choices available.

In 2016, 25 new EV models were introduced. “All told, a Chinese consumer can now choose from around 75 EV models—more than in any other country we’ve measured,” the report said.

In several major cities (including Beijing and Shanghai), EVs are exempt from lotteries for number plates (there is a cap on vehicles due to congestion) and significant registration fees that apply for cars with internal-combustion engines. The country also subsidises EVs. For example, a midsize EV owner can get a subsidy of 23% on the price of the car. Electric vehicle sales are low in India because a paucity of choice in terms of models and a lack of charging infrastructure.

In a 2017 report on the future of shared, electric and connected mobility future in India, the NITI Aayog, along with Colorado-based Rocky Mountain Institute, had suggested setting up “a manufacturer consortium for batteries, common components, and platforms to develop battery cell technologies and packs and to procure common components for Indian original equipment manufacturers”. But there has been little progress on any of this.

If the government wants the automobile industry to bring about change in their products and attract investments for greener ones, then it needs to come up with a policy. Knee-jerk interventions and sudden change of plans will affect citizens. EVs are one of the pillars of the plan to combat pollution. Not encouraging them to thrive will deal us a significant blow in the battle to improve the air we breathe.

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