

A CLARION CALL TO COMBAT CLIMATE CHANGE

Relevant for: Environment | Topic: Environmental Conservation, Sustainable Development, and EIA

When almost all news about climate change concerns catastrophic events, there are a few shining lights in the U.S. and Europe. One is Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, 29, the newly elected member of the U.S. House of Representatives. The other is Greta Thunberg, a 16-year-old Swede whose school strike outside the Swedish Parliament, in a clear-minded effort to force politicians to act on climate change, has inspired students in many countries to walk out of their classrooms and make similar demands. If Ms. Thunberg's voice is inspiring for the way it has roused the youth, Ms. Ocasio-Cortez is daring in her imagination and policies.

The Green New Deal "is a four-part programme for moving America quickly out of crisis into a secure, sustainable future". It takes its name from U.S. President Franklin Roosevelt's famous New Deal, a series of economic and social measures launched in the 1930s to end the Great Depression. The Green New Deal audaciously aspires to make sweeping changes to the environment and economy and meet all of the U.S.'s power demand from clean, renewable and zero emission energy sources by 2030, while at the same time addressing racial and economic justice. Thus, in many ways, it is more than just a climate change plan. Ms. Ocasio-Cortez along with Massachusetts Senator Edward Markey introduced the resolution in the House and Senate on February 7.

The resolution acknowledges the 1.5° report of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change and the U.S. Fourth National Climate Assessment. It identifies the worldwide effects from warming, the disproportionate responsibility borne by the U.S. as a result of its historical emissions, and calls for the country to step up as a global leader. It speaks about the fall in life expectancy, economic stagnation, erosion of workers' rights, and rising inequality in the U.S. Climate change that will asymmetrically affect the most vulnerable sections of U.S. society and ought to be considered a direct threat to national security.

The resolution goes on to recognise the momentous opportunity available to take action. It states that it is the responsibility of the federal government to create a Green New Deal, which would meet its power demand through renewable sources in 10 years. It calls for a 10-year national mobilisation that would build infrastructure, eliminate pollution and greenhouse gas emissions, as much as is technologically feasible, and reduce risks posed by the impacts of climate change.

These goals entail dramatic changes in manufacturing, electricity generation, education, livelihoods, sustainable farming, food systems, an overhaul of transportation, waste management, health care, and strong pollution-control measures. The resolution also calls for international action by the U.S. on climate change. It recognises that public funds would be needed for these changes and need to be leveraged. It states that the federal government needs to take the full social and environmental costs of climate change into consideration through new laws, policies and programmes. Importantly, the Green New Deal calls for a federal jobs guarantee for all.

How far this resolution will go and whether and how it will be diluted in the U.S. Congress is unclear. Many details of the proposal still need to be worked out. It has been called "ridiculous" by some Republicans and has made some Democratic leaders uneasy as well.

But various progressive elected officials, groups, and some activists have lent their support. Almost all Democrats who have announced their candidacy for the 2020 election have backed

the resolution. A poll conducted by Yale and George Mason Universities showed that there was support for the deal among most Democratic voters and a majority of the Republicans. One does not know if this appetite for the deal will be sustained, but if extreme events related to climate change continue, people are likely to view radical change as essential. If we look at the political situation when Roosevelt passed the New Deal, both Houses of Congress were under the Democrats. On the other hand, the Clean Air Act and the Clean Water Act were passed by President Richard Nixon and were regarded as being radical in their time.

If any country has the “capability” to increase its commitment in renewables, it is the U.S. This clarion call by Ms. Ocasio-Cortez and Mr. Markey is therefore a welcome surprise. The share of fossil fuels in total electricity generation in the U.S. in 2017 was 63%, the share of renewables was 17%, and the share of nuclear was 20%.

It should be noted that until now no U.S. agency or civil society group has publicly acknowledged the responsibility of the country for its historical emissions. The Green New Deal is the sort of resolution the U.S. should have passed after the Kyoto Protocol in 1997. Instead, the U.S. Senate unanimously passed the Byrd-Hagel Resolution, according to which the U.S. ought not to be a signatory to any protocol or agreement regarding the United Nations Climate Convention that would reduce greenhouse gas emissions for Annex-1 Parties, the wealthy countries, unless developing countries were also similarly required to limit their emissions.

Meanwhile, Ms. Thunberg’s school boycott movement has inspired protests in the Netherlands, Belgium, Germany, Sweden, Australia and elsewhere. If this spreads to many more countries, it can help apply pressure on governments and the fossil fuel industry and create a bottom-up movement led by the youth for major changes in dealing with climate change.

The Green New Deal is an acknowledgement by politicians that economic growth, the environment and social well-being go together. While these bold moves by two young women have opened windows to winds of change, how far these can progress and whether they will bring the scale of change needed as rapidly as it is required to deal with the world’s dire challenge remains to be seen.

Sujatha Byravan is a scientist who studies science, technology and development policy

Pakistan’s identity crisis, going back to the debates since its creation, remains unresolved

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