

## India must lead the transition to green energy

India has always been torn between an urge to sit at the high table of global negotiations and being seen by the rest of the world as a deal breaker on issues such as global trade and climate change.

The International Solar Alliance (ISA), which began its meeting in New Delhi on Sunday, is thus a breakthrough in our global positioning. Prime Minister Narendra Modi has been a driving force ever since he first announced the idea at the India-Africa Summit in New Delhi in October 2015 and followed this up with more concrete moves during the United Nations climate change talks in Paris in November 2015, with France being an important partner at a time when the US decided to renege on its climate change mitigation commitments. India has suddenly become a catalyst in the global attempts at capping climate change. This is important in a geopolitical sense when China is clearly expanding its global footprint.

There are now 121 countries which have signed up for the global solar alliance. Central to this new role in global affairs is the domestic commitment to generate 100 gigawatts (GW) of solar energy by 2022, part of the broader 175GW target for renewable energy. The strategic thought behind this is clear: India has to push towards mass prosperity at a time when climate change is a huge concern. The context of what India will have to do in the next three decades is quite different from what developed countries or Asian success stories such as China faced.

However, just unilateralism will not do. Fighting climate change cannot come at the cost of halting the urgent fight against poverty. Global initiatives should always be seen through the lens of national interest. That is why an international alliance based on credible commitments is important. The key issues that India raised at the Copenhagen climate change talks is still important. The rich countries that are responsible for most of the stock of excess carbon in the atmosphere as well as the high current levels of per capita carbon emissions (as against national aggregates) still need to be pushed to provide asymmetrical funding for climate change mitigation and technology transfers, especially given the recent drop in the prices of photovoltaic batteries. That will continue to be an important challenge for the global solar alliance.

The shift to solar energy should not be seen only as a defence mechanism. It can also be an opportunity. Here is why we say so. Economic historians have identified five long waves of technology since the Industrial Revolution. The chronological order of these technology waves is as follows—the steam engine and cotton ginning; steel and railways; electrical and chemical engineering; automobiles and plastics; and information technology. These waves of innovation have broadly moved in sync with long economic cycles.

The interesting thing is that the same set of countries need not dominate each wave. There are huge opportunities for upstarts to get into the game. This is generally recognized to be true in the corporate sector, where established companies get replaced by innovators. Countries do not crash and burn like companies do. But a similar process works for countries during periods of discontinuous technological change. Think of how Japan gatecrashed into the big league in the age of automobiles and plastics, or how India managed to make a global mark in the age of information technology.

The fight against climate change—and the broader move to low-carbon economies—is likely to create the next big technological wave. Almost all countries are at the starting block right now. A few have a historical head start over India, though China is using its state power to get ahead early in the race. India needs to grab this opportunity as well. The shift to a new economy with a low carbon footprint need not mean reversion to poverty. New technology will be the critical factor

in the transition to a green economy which also grows rapidly, and India should take a shot at global leadership. Coal will continue to be a key part of the Indian energy mix in the immediate future. But the push for solar energy is welcome if a longer view is taken. ISA thus offers many opportunities —from geopolitical advantages to economic benefits in the next wave of global innovation.

*Can India keep pace with China in the green energy race? Tell us at [views@livemint.com](mailto:views@livemint.com)*

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