

WORKING TOWARDS CLIMATE JUSTICE IN A NON-IDEAL WORLD

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

The [election of Joe Biden as U.S. President](#) has catapulted climate change to the top of the global agenda, allowing him to keep his promise to “lead a major diplomatic push” to increase global climate ambition. This also works well for him in rebuilding the trans-Atlantic alliance apart from keeping at bay the domestic fissures from a tenuous hold of the Democrats in the U.S. Congress while being resolute on climate change. It is also in line with the legacy ambitions of his team, led by former U.S. Secretary of State, John Kerry (and now Special Presidential Envoy for Climate), with many of them being old climate warriors, some even from the days of the U.S. President, Bill Clinton.

Interestingly, the U.S. is not just striding back to the Obama signature achievement of the [Paris Accord](#) with its voluntary commitments but also to the Bush days. This is, perhaps, best evidenced by the presidential call to reconvene the Major Economies Forum (MEF) starting with a Leaders’ Climate Summit in April this year.

The MEF, which was first convened in March 2009, originated in the Bush-era U.S. efforts to rope in major emitters.

It was also to push a way forward on climate change without heed to the principle of differentiated responsibilities and recognition of historical responsibilities, which are rightly hallowed principles of the climate discourse given the decades of staying power of greenhouse gases (GHGs) in the atmosphere. The serious unwillingness of emerging economies to be labelled “major emitters” saw the meeting retitled “Major Economies Meeting” given the clear link between GDP and GHG. While the meeting’s purport was not hidden, the retitling provided a feel-good and one from which retraction was not possible for the emerging economies.

This time the push appears to have come to shove, with all countries being told to commit to net zero (GHG emissions) by 2050 with credible plans to ensure meeting this domestic target. Indeed, the Chinese, who posited themselves as reaching there by 2060, have been sternly told to be there a decade earlier.

Taking a cue from the new U.S. Administration, the UN Secretary-General has even called on countries to declare national climate emergencies apart from building a coalition for a carbon-neutral world by 2050. As of today, countries representing around 65% of global CO₂ emissions have already agreed to this. The UN Secretary-General would like this figure to reach 90% within 2021.

These plans and their implementation will, undoubtedly, be subject to international reviews and verification. Not said as yet, but non-compliance may not be just naming and shaming. Historical responsibilities and differentiation, obviously, have no place in this discourse; but neither does the level of development. India, with its huge population and now one of the world’s largest economies, can easily be in the crosshairs of such a discourse no matter its extraordinarily small carbon footprint in per-capita terms and huge development imperatives.

Adding to the challenges of this proposed global goal is the distinct possibility of the EU imposing carbon border levies on those who do not take on high carbon cut-down targets and do so unilaterally if there is no global agreement. While as of now the U.S. Administration appears

ambivalent on these border levies, the possibility of their coming around cannot be ruled out. In such a scenario, World Trade Organization rules that presently exclude the use of tariffs on environmental grounds will certainly get modified.

The issue of money, especially the lack of it, is a perennial one in the climate discourse. In this context, Raghuram Rajan has recently put forward a proposal for India to consider — it calls on countries to pay into a global fund amounts based on their carbon emissions over and above the global per-capita average of five tons. This obviously disincentives coal in a big way while incentivising renewables. Those above the global average would pay, while those below would receive the monies. While this would suggest a certain equity, it may be unacceptable to the developed countries even though Mr. Rajan has gone along with the drumbeat to forget historical responsibility.

As far as India is concerned, for starters such a proposal may appear attractive as India today has per capita CO₂ emission of only 2 tons and is a global record setter in pushing renewables. But will real politics allow a major economy to benefit from such fund flows or indeed even be the recipient of any form of concessional climate finance? Unlikely.

Moreover, the long-term implications of such a proposal in a setting of a sharply growing economy and reliance on coal-produced electricity for several decades require examination in detail, quite apart from factoring in the twists and turns that negotiations could give to such an idea. And then, of course, there are alternatives such as emission trading.

Furthermore, the proposal focuses on current and future emissions, and in keeping with the contract and converge approach, allows practical considerations to trump fairness by not only giving a short shrift to historical responsibility but also denying priority access to the remaining carbon space for developing countries. In that sense, it double penalises them while giving developed countries a certain free pass. Here it bears noting that more than 75% of the carbon space available to humankind to keep global temperature rises to 1.5° C has already been taken up by the developed world and China.

Climate negotiations are not just about the environment and human well being or even energy, but are also about global governance, and will henceforth be pursued with a vigour which requires India to carefully calibrate its approach including on the economic and political fronts. Climate justice is an imperative for India, which needs to leverage its green and pro-nature commitment to ensure carbon and policy space for its developmental and global aspirations. India's diplomatic and negotiating efforts must be quickly geared to that end.

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