

THE LOWDOWN ON INDIA'S GLASGOW ANNOUNCEMENT

Relevant for: Environment | Topic: Environmental Degradation - GHGs, Ozone Depletion and Climate Change

Prime Minister Narendra Modi's surprise declaration on November 2, 2021 at the [COP26 Climate Summit in Glasgow](#), Scotland, of striking enhancements in India's emissions reduction targets did not, for several reasons, get the rave reviews the Government may have expected. Except for a few specialists, international commentators expressed disappointment that India was promising net zero emissions only by 2070 instead of 2050. In India, several analysts praised the new targets as indicating a new climate-oriented development policy.

The Government's raised ambition represents a welcome continuity of the cross-partisan consensus prevailing since the 2015 Paris Agreement. The new policy paradigm, initiated at the Copenhagen Summit in 2009, had departed from the earlier long-held stance that India, as a developing country, was not obliged to cut emissions, and asserted that although India was not a part of the problem, it was now willing and able to contribute to reduction efforts in global emissions. India's pledge at Glasgow, not yet formally submitted as an updated Nationally Determined Contributions (NDC) as required, adheres to the Paris Agreement decision to increase emission cuts to tackle the rapidly escalating climate crisis.

India's newly unveiled commitments deserve close examination, since they came amidst sharply contradictory signals from the Government over several months. Many interactions took place with high-ranking emissaries visiting India and at the G20 meeting before COP26, with India giving no indication of revising its current NDC. Right up to the Prime Minister's speech, senior Indian officials were loudly proclaiming the unacceptability of net-zero and the unlikelihood of higher targets by India. People in India are familiar with the penchant for dramatic announcements by this Government, but the value of such secrecy in the climate negotiations is questionable. India insufficiently communicated the significance of its enhanced commitments, especially in contrast to the weak pledges of developed countries, and little effort was made to leverage India's updated pledge to extract deeper emission cuts from them.

At the time of writing, India has further muddied the waters and taken some sheen off its Glasgow announcement, with senior officials stating that the new pledges are contingent upon substantial financial assistance from developed countries, with figures such as \$1 trillion being mentioned in press interviews. Ramifications of such post-facto conditions would unfold gradually, and further speculation here is pointless.

India's new targets, details perhaps varying in an updated NDC, comprise five elements: reducing Emissions Intensity (EI), or emissions per unit of GDP, by 45% in 2030 relative to 2005 levels; cutting absolute emissions by one billion tonnes, presumably from projected business-as-usual (BAU) 2030 levels; 500 GW (1 Giga watt = 1,000 Megawatts) of non-fossil fuel installed power generation capacity by 2030; 50% electricity generation from renewable sources by 2030; and net-zero emissions by 2070.

India's existing NDC and subsequent submissions to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) confirm a steady decline in EI of over 2% p.a. from 2005 onwards. Both the 33%-35% decline promised at Paris, and the updated 45% reduction by 2030, are quite achievable and par for an emerging economy.

Emissions reduction by one billion tonnes by 2030, the first time India has put an absolute

number to this, can be read in different ways. India's current annual emissions are around 2.8 billion tonnes and projected to reach about 4.5 billion tonnes in 2030 on a BAU basis, so the pledged reduction would be a substantial 20%, comparing favourably with several developed country targets. However, the Prime Minister's speech in Glasgow mentioned the Railways' net-zero 2030 target cutting 60 million tonnes annually, and LED bulbs cutting another 40 million tonnes a year, yielding one billion tonnes over 10 years from just these two measures, making the pledged reduction seem easy, which it probably is not.

On installed power generation capacity, India's extant NDC had incorporated the Government's declared goal of 175 GW from renewable energy (RE) sources by 2022, even though the NDC stretched to 2030, raising an anomaly. Even so, India has reached only around 101 GW of solar and wind due to numerous constraints. If one adds large hydro and nuclear, both now considered renewable, current RE installed capacity is about 150 GW or just under 40% of total, almost achieving the NDC target for 2030 showing under-projection. The Central Electricity Authority (CEA) in its 2020 Report on Energy Mix for 2029-30 has projected around 525 GW or 64.3% non-fossil fuel installed capacity including 280 GW Solar and 140 GW wind. Only 267 GW is projected to come from coal and lignite, compared to 203 GW in 2019, so almost all of India's future growth of capacity is to come from RE. Without actually saying so, India at Glasgow therefore seems to have pledged virtually no additional coal-based power! Even accounting for some confusion about whether the Prime Minister meant installed capacity or electricity produced, India's Glasgow pledge of 50% electricity from RE by 2030 is just a tad more than the CEA projection of 44.7%. These commitments may prove difficult as currently witnessed, combined with the need for storage and grid stability.

The Glasgow pledges come from a few sectors mostly related to electricity generation. However, a truly transformational low-carbon future must embrace many more aspects, as indeed emphasised at Glasgow by the Prime Minister as "Lifestyle for Environment (LIFE)". It is also time that India, hitherto vociferous about equity between nations, now seriously addresses the deep inequity in access to energy and other essentials within India. Climate change is multi-dimensional, not confined to mitigation alone and, as all studies tell us, should be tackled cross-sectorally.

Accelerated deployment of electric or fuel-cell vehicles must go alongside a rapid reduction in personal vehicle use and a major push for mass transportation. Carbon lock-ins and energy use need to be minimised through mandatory "green" construction codes for the huge housing and other buildings stock, highways and infrastructure yet to be built. A leap in employment-intensive recycling of waste goods and materials, including in solid and liquid waste management linked to methane recovery, would deliver substantial co-benefits across sectors.

Two big disappointments with India's stance at Glasgow deserve mention. First, India refused to join over 110 countries in a declaration to end deforestation by 2030. India's pledges also do not mention the NDC target for forests and tree cover, in which India is known to be slipping, with deleterious impacts on both the environment and livelihoods of tribals and other forest dwellers. Read together, these may confirm the worst fears of many regarding efforts to dilute environmental regulations in favour of corporate interests. Second, India also did not join the Global Methane Pledge by over 100 nations to reduce emissions of the short-lived but potent greenhouse gas by 30% by 2030 from 2020 levels, when methane is among the fastest growing emissions in India.

On the other hand, Glasgow saw India launch another international climate initiative called Infrastructure for Resilient Island States (IRIS), aimed at providing technical, knowledge and financial assistance to small island nations with the help of developed countries. One wishes such an initiative was undertaken in India too, where coastal erosion, sea-level rise, and urban

flooding due to extreme rainfall exacerbated by haphazard urbanisation are acquiring threatening dimensions.

It would be ideal too if the on-going updating of the NDC was done through a cross-partisan multi-stakeholder consultative process that would make it truly “nationally determined” and implemented.

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