

CONVERSATIONS 1: Climate Change

Reflections on International Climate Diplomacy

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The origins of climate diplomacy lie in the alarm bells rung by climate scientists at Villach in 1985. This led to the convening of two influential climate conferences and to the establishment of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change in 1988 and the call for a climate convention (United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change, or UNFCCC). Negotiations for the UNFCCC ran parallel to the preparatory process for the Rio Earth Summit and the Convention was opened for signature at Rio. It was merely a framework that did not impose any binding obligations on emission reductions on the parties, except for the indicative goal of holding emissions at 1990 levels by 2000.

The negotiations were a battle between Europe, which wanted mandatory commitments, and the US—led at that time by a president beholden to oil and coal interests—which resisted this. Within the G-77, interests were widely divided—small islands argued for immediate and strong action; oil producers resisted action, to protect their economic prospects; and large emerging economies, led by India, did not want constraints on their development ambitions. The principle of ‘common but differentiated responsibility’ was enshrined in the UNFCCC, and has now become central to the negotiating stance of China, India, and other developing countries.

When it became clear that the indicative targets would not be met, the pressure for stronger action led finally to the Kyoto Protocol, in which industrial countries accepted binding obligations on emission reductions by 2008–2012. That also brought developing countries indirectly into the mitigation effort through the Clean Development Mechanism (CDM). The Kyoto Protocol was not a mitigation plan worked out on the basis of goals for allowable temperature increase and related emission targets—it was a bazaar bargain, with the distribution of mitigation effort between industrial countries reflecting negotiating skills and nerves rather than objective criteria.

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Published by Indian Society for Ecological Economics (INSEE), c/o Institute of Economic Growth, University Enclave, North Campus, Delhi 110007.

ISSN: 2581-6152 (print); 2581-6101 (web).

Towards the end of the Kyoto period, a fresh round of negotiations was launched at Bali in December 2007. But by this time, the dynamics of climate diplomacy had changed substantially. The focus had shifted to China, where the combination of rapid growth and coal dependence has led to a rapid increase in emissions. The pressure on India is a consequence of this concern over the growth in China's emissions. The basic argument is that any reasonable goal for allowable temperature increase is unattainable unless the large emerging economies join in the mitigation effort. Concerns about global competitiveness reinforced this pressure from the West.

Climate diplomacy is now dominated by what could be called a 40:40:20 power structure, the unit of measure being each country's contribution to GHG emissions. The first 40 per cent includes the two largest emitters, the US and China, who have de facto veto power, because any mitigation agreement would become pointless if both of them stay out. The second 40 per cent consists of the EU, a 10 per cent power; Russia, Japan and India, each of them a 5 per cent power; and a string of 2 per cent powers like Brazil, South Africa, Mexico, Indonesia, South Korea, Saudi Arabia, etc. The last 20 per cent covers the smaller states, whose influence comes from their membership in some larger group, like the Association of Small Island States or the African Group.

Ratifying governments welcomed the Paris Climate Summit of December 2015 as pathbreaking, and the media and lay opinion found it reasonably good, but activists considered it inadequate. Now with Trump in power in Washington, the elation that greeted the agreement is perhaps seen as premature.

An effective agreement on climate change should include a goal for the acceptable limit for the increase in temperature. The Paris Agreement does that, with its 2 °C goal and 1.5 °C aspiration. It should include a greenhouse gas (GHG) budget for the distribution of allowable global emissions between countries and a time profile of GHG emissions consistent with the accepted goal. That the Paris Agreement does not do, as it leaves mitigation effort to the voluntary pledges of each country. As a corollary, the agreement has moved away from the flexibility mechanisms that existed earlier. But it does have some of the other ingredients required, like the treatment of forestry and land use changes, support adaptation actions, and financial and technology transfer commitments.

In terms of outcomes, do the Intended Nationally Determined Contributions (INDC) meet the tests of effectiveness and equity?

The Emissions Gap Report (UNEP 2016) suggests that the INDCs do present a significant reduction compared to a projection of current policies, but the proposed mitigation contributions are far from enough to keep us on the 2 °C pathway. The estimated gap between the unconditional promises and the 2 °C path is 14 gigatons of carbon-dioxide-equivalent (GtCO₂e) in 2030 and 7 GtCO₂e in 2025.

The INDCs are meant to be fair and adequate. There is no agreed metric for INDCs, and evaluation has been left to non-governmental organizations (NGO). According to one such report (Climate Equity Reference Project 2015), the pledges

from poorer countries amount to 10.1 GtCO₂e, well in excess of their estimated fair share of 6.6 GtCO₂e, while rich country pledges amount to only 5.5 GtCO₂e, against their fair share of 24.2 GtCO₂e. This assessment is based on production emissions; the gap would widen if the assessment were based on consumption emissions.

The INDCs that have been submitted are basically energy policy plans. The key to averting the worst consequences of climate change lies in incentivizing a shift to low-carbon strategies for energy use through technology development, pricing reforms that reflect the social cost of carbon reform, and a reconsideration of regulatory policies from a carbon perspective. The future will belong to those who move most rapidly to this reorientation of development.

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