

## Multiple pressures on India on climate change

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At a press conference just prior to the UN Summit on Climate Change in New York on 23 September 2009, Jairam Ramesh, India's Minister for Environment and Forests denied that India wants to be a 'deal-breaker' at the negotiations culminating in Copenhagen in December 2009 (ref. 1).

Now, ministers do not deny anything unless there is sufficient 'buzz' going around that needs a denial. There is a widespread view circulating in western industrialized countries that India will be the bottleneck at these negotiations. This plays on our still strong need to be thought well of by the West and is a part of a campaign to get India to change its position on climate change.

To those of us who remember the history of climate negotiations over the last two decades, it is preposterous to see how the tables are being turned. Those who have failed to honour their previously agreed to commitments and who therefore have not been negotiating in good faith, accuse us of being recalcitrant, for having an orientation towards the past.

Let us recapitulate the Indian position. As enshrined in the Climate Change Convention, we subscribe to the principle of common but differentiated responsibility based on respective capability of countries to address climate change. Also negotiated in the convention was the principle that developed countries would take the lead in combating climate change. In the convention, the developed countries, including the US, had agreed to cap their emissions at the 2000 levels, and in the Kyoto Protocol, they agreed to reduce their emissions by a few per cent. Neither of the goals will be achieved<sup>2,3</sup>. Our Prime Minister has announced that our per capita emissions would never exceed the per capita emissions of developed countries and has assured the world that – 'the more ambitious they are, the lower the limit India would be prepared to accept'<sup>4</sup>.

As a part of the campaign, many analysts, both western and of Indian origin, reject the Indian position. One says, although India's position is 'defensible, it is neither sagacious nor imaginative'<sup>3</sup>. Another says it is 'honest and well-

intentioned but vacuous'<sup>5</sup>. A third dismisses it as 'rhetorically useful but practically meaningless'<sup>6</sup>. A fourth paper acknowledges that it is 'essentially valid, but increasingly unsustainable in international politics of climate change, and will lead to a growing rift between India and the West'<sup>7</sup>. Yet another agrees that 'targets based on per capita emissions would best secure India's development, but the political and intellectual ground is shifting beneath India's feet'<sup>8</sup>.

The West masterfully uses several instruments in its armamentarium to achieve its goal. Many western political operatives, whether currently in power or retired, come to Delhi wanting to talk to the Prime Minister on climate change. There is no real difference in the message between those from North America or the European Union. And similarly there is no real difference between messages brought by those from conservative or liberal governments. At least for 12 years now, American politicians have consistently demanded reductions in total country emissions comparable to those undertaken by them and in the same time frame<sup>9</sup>. What is being demanded of India are reductions in emissions for which India will not be compensated<sup>3</sup>. This is accompanied by a dogged refusal to agree to any reasonable formula for assessing responsibility, or capability, or equitable burden-sharing.

Almost all multilateral institutions, whether the World Bank or the United Nations specialized agencies have recently brought out special annual reports on climate change. The message is the same, only emphases are different. The message is not directed exclusively to India but to all developing countries.

Several international consulting firms and business organizations such as the World Energy Council and World Business Council on Sustainable Development too have brought out reports all pointing out the need for developing countries to join in the emission limitation efforts. The previously vocal and contrarian oil and coal industry types have now become quiet.

Even the international NGOs have been mobilized to campaign for responses by developing countries. Their reports argue

that the poor in developing countries will be most adversely affected by climate change; therefore it should be in the self-interest of developing countries to mitigate climate change. Several international NGOs have recently established offices in India to try to increase pressure from grassroots.

Again the National Academies of Science and the consortia of academies have all sponsored their reports on climate change. The science establishments have generously funded researchers in developing countries so that a local scientific constituency is created for advocating action on climate change. There has been an opportunity cost to this as late Amulya Reddy used to point out. It is now difficult to find researchers to engage in normal energy research. Even in the Inter-governmental Panel on Climate Change, the outgoing message about what or how much to do was carefully controlled within Working Group III, where most analysts from developing countries were content with playing secondary roles.

With appeals to greater global good, the West has also used the Indian diaspora to make and support the arguments it has been making. The idea is get India to accept any sort of 'binding' commitments, initially those that are supposedly in our national interest<sup>7</sup>, which then can be tightened in future periods.

It is again understandable that the western media would propagate the simplistic message that the only thing preventing western countries from assuming emission reduction targets is the intransigence of developing countries to do the same. Lately, Indian newspapers have started giving increased coverage to climate change issues. For example, to create a groundswell of public opinion in favour of action, last year alone the *Indian Express* published over a 1000 articles on climate change<sup>3</sup>, an average of three a day – completely out of proportion to the public interest in the subject.

Even though one is at the receiving end of such efforts, one cannot but marvel at the sophistication that is brought to bear on this issue. All the more because the crescendo is reached without an obvious conductor but the players know the

piece they have to play. As in all countries, a small elite circle sits on the boards of most institutions and commissions and approves their reports. The institutional ability to stay uniformly on the message that is desired by the West is a source of wonder. Compare this with our inability to agree in any field on what constitutes the national interest<sup>10</sup>.

Flattering it would be for us to think that we are being singled out for special treatment. Reasons are not far to seek: our felicity with the English language, our outspokenness, our advocacy of positions on behalf of all developing countries, the tendency of the West to treat China with kid gloves, *ad nauseum*. This is erroneous for undoubtedly the West has different strategies for each major country.

Sometimes, we have lost similar arguments in the past as on the Trade-Related Aspects of Intellectual Property Rights (TRIPs) agreement on intellectual property rights in the Uruguay round<sup>11</sup>. Some-

times our position as on the multi-fibre arrangement<sup>12</sup> ends up benefiting other countries more than us. Sometimes we have refused to budge, as in our stance that the Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) is discriminatory. In climate negotiations as well, India should continue to argue for a just outcome as a matter of creed and not merely as an expedient policy<sup>13</sup>.

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