

GLOBAL CLIMATE CHANGE POLITICS: CAN INDIA BECOME A MAJOR PLAYER?

Abstract

The perspective on global climate change politics brings forth the debate on climate change which is inherently a political issue taking into consideration the interrelationship between power-politics and conflict of interests. Since this is a global phenomenon the actions taken by state actors reflect the nature of contested approach regarding some of the difficulties associated with global climate change politics. 'We must acknowledge that the debate over climate change, like almost all environmental issues, is a debate over culture, worldviews, and ideology' (Hoffman, 2012: 32). This chapter focuses on India's transition from a voice of protest on the fringes of global climate policy to one that is pro-actively involved in shaping international efforts to combat climate change. Shifts in India's climate change negotiations have been but a part of its overall foreign policy adjustments in favour of greater responsibility in management of the global commons. The emerging and enhanced soft power diplomacy has given India a better negotiating position as well a challenging role in global climate action agenda. The question therefore arises, in the present scenario is India in a better position to negotiate and carve a place for itself globally in climate policy debates?

Keywords: climate change; climate policy; climate politics; foreign policy; India.

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I. THEORETICAL EXPOSITIONS ON GLOBAL CLIMATE CHANGE POLITICS

The theoretical exposition on climate change politics is a contested one. Various conceptual analysis, theoretical exercise and perceptual explanations have been offered to deal with the issue of climate change. The problem of climate change is that this arrangement is inherently unfair. When it comes to climate change the issue of justice can be viewed from multiple angles: the problem of the distribution of emission reduction, financial burdens to be shared among States, uneven distribution of adverse impacts over countries and people, impacts for future generations and imbalance in power status connected to the negotiation process for the formation of the international climate change regime.

Systematic study on global environment politics started since the late 1970s when G. Hardin's 'The Tragedy of the Commons', established the linkage between the politics and economics of environment thus setting the stage for climate change politics in the late 1980s. The introduction of global environmental politics as a field of enquiry within International Relations is a relatively recent phenomenon in comparison to traditional fundamental issues such as war and peace and the global economic order. In fact the concern for environment and particularly climate change as an academic inquiry, specifically started since the late 1980s. With reference to the theoretical tools available in International Relations theory, global climate politics can be explained as issues of conflict and cooperation. Particularly realism/ neo realism, liberalism/ neo liberalism and constructivism may provide the explanation for climate politics.

Since solving the global climate change problem is essentially a problem of conflict and cooperation these theoretical tools have been applied in order to explain climate politics. This has been helpful to a certain extent to identify the nature and modalities to which cooperation is possible and which type of gains actors are pursuing in global politics. With regard to climate change politics these theories try to identify the extent to which conflict and cooperation is possible and gains arrived at, by the various actors. It also depends on the perspectives that these actors apply in International Relations on the issue of climate change negotiations. The agenda has been set to bring out maximum gains for each actor who have been actively participating on global environmental governance.

Standing at the current juncture the political discourse around climate change is no longer about carbon emissions and differential responsibilities, but about values, culture, worldviews and ideology. Without addressing the question of political and social perspective of each of the participants in global governance there will be greater defiance to bring compliance among all the stakeholders on global warming. Andrew J. Hoffman's critical assessment of the issue has put forward a rather intriguing inquiry regarding "climate science as culture wars" – To quote "without attending to the values that climate change threatens - the greater resistance there will be to a social consensus on global warming".

II. INTERPLAY OF SCIENTIFIC-POLITICAL-SOCIAL DIMENSIONS OF CLIMATE CHANGE

It is quite interesting to understand the interplay between scientific perspective on climate change and its counterpart, the political-social context of global climate change and the association of global environmental governance for the global commons. With each passing day the scientific perceptions on climate change have become more accurate with a

large body of scientific research identifying anthropogenic causes as the engine behind climate change. Hence, even though there is as of yet no definitive scientific proof in the strictest sense of the term, scientific enquiry overwhelmingly indicates both the existence of climate change as well as its nature as a phenomenon caused by human activities. Scholars have questioned the paradox generated by the wealth of scientific knowledge on climate science not leading to power-play among the facilitators of global environmental governance. Is it the knowledge about the “historical burden” that is the central bone of contention between the developed and developing group of nations or is it the social – political perceptions, ethics and value system of the people associated with climate change that is creating setbacks to bring consensus on climate change.

It is an established fact now that, not every government has embraced the Paris Agreement with open arms, some have not even signed it and others are threatening to get out of it. However not all countries have the same weight, or responsibility, in the fight against climate change. With the Paris climate agreement (2015) coming into effect in 2017 as of now 194 countries had signed the Agreement, including European Union and 123 countries have ratified it. Although the provisions of the agreement says that it becomes legally binding for those countries that sign and ratify it, few countries have embarked on plans to assure that temperatures are kept below a 2⁰C warming. The implementation of important provisions of the Paris Agreement has to comply with the equity requirement set by the same provisions. The provisions of equity plays an important role in shaping the treaty obligations. The first one is that climate change represents itself as a problem of justice originated from the uneven distribution of its adverse effects on countries and generations, different contributions to GHG emissions, and uneven capabilities to deal with the consequences. The second one generates from the understanding on climate science and how it’s going to impact generations and societies with inherent value systems.

Since the threat of climate change has been engendered mostly by emissions of early industrializers such as the UK, Germany and the US, these countries should assume the responsibility for remedying the implications of a changing climate and to shoulder most of the burden of mitigating emissions. It is estimated that the richest 20 percent of the world’s population is responsible for up to 80 percent of historical emissions. Historically generated understandings of fairness, justice and responsibility are important when looking at those actors who are often perceived as the creator of this burden, the highly industrialized nations of the world. While on the other hand there are developing countries, emerging economies, the Group of 77 and China whose shared identity have organized themselves to reject the primary responsibility for climate change mitigations. The main contention or possible conflict is between the prospects of development and climate change prevention and mitigation.

There is a growing global consensus that climate change is putting a lot of stress on the growth trajectory of nations worldwide, with evident economic, social and environmental implications. According to the World Economic Forum’s Global Risks Report 2020, the top five risks over the coming decade, in terms of likelihood, are all climate-related including human-made environmental disasters, climate action failure, natural disasters, biodiversity loss, and extreme weather. The mitigation regime is not yet succeeding because of disagreements over cost or the sharing of responsibility among the parties to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC), which stipulates that all UNFCCC parties have to accept mitigation responsibility. Moreover the contested approach

regarding climate fund for mitigation purposes do not cover all possible trajectories in favour of either of the groups whether developed, developing or emerging economies.

III. LOCATING INDIA IN CLIMATE CHANGE POLITICS DEBATE

India has traversed a long way since the 1972 United Nations Conference on the Human Environment in Stockholm, the first world conference to make environment a major issue at the forefront of international concerns. It marked the start of a dialogue between the developed and developing countries on the linkage between economic growth, environmental pollution and the well-being of people around the world. In the last three decades India has emerged as a crucial international actor in climate policy negotiations and climate politics debates. India has played a vital role in international climate change negotiations. India's transition from a voice of protest on the fringes of global climate policy debate to one that is pro-actively involved in shaping international efforts to combat climate change. Overtime there has been a growth in its role which has shifted from a strict hard line of negotiation to a more mature, liberal and accommodative stand on climate agenda. At present India is considered as an emerging economy so it needs to keep a track of carbon emissions though it may be a negligible contributor to past emissions, but could become a significant contributor in future emissions contributing to more carbon footprints.

Shifts in India's climate change negotiations have been but a part of its overall foreign policy adjustments in favour of greater responsibility in management of the global commons. Indian climate policy is situated in its larger foreign policy agenda and objectives. At the international level India has played an agenda-setting role on key concepts and ideas in the early years, and has gradually adopted a more elastic approach to the climate regime. India has gradually incorporated climate considerations in its internal-domestic policies that seek to integrate climate considerations into development which is then reflected in India's global stance on climate change negotiations.

India's negotiating positions on climate change is based on the competing motives of equity and co-benefits, which has been crucial in explaining some of India's actions in global climate governance. The evolution of India's climate policy has to be understood through the perspective of its broader foreign policy strategy. Arguing that India's engagement with international climate politics can be better grasped by locating its climate policy as a subset of its foreign policy agenda. Going forward, tracking Indian foreign policy objectives will yield vital clues towards India's role in global climate action. The principle of "common but differentiated responsibilities" as part of the UNFCCC for negotiation was the formula proposed by India that sought to build common ground to the conflicting positions of countries in the global north and the global south, regarding emissions reduction responsibilities. India has emerged as a significant negotiator in climate change politics bringing diverse groupings of countries together at international forums, particularly the G77 and China on the negotiating table with the developed North. The historical responsibility of the North and per capita carbon emissions with differentiated responsibilities for the South were adopted by India's climate negotiators as the foundational principle of India's position in the first climate change negotiations.

India's stance on climate change was steadily and strongly laid at the 1972 United Nations Conference on the Human Environment, when the then Indian Prime Minister Indira Gandhi initiated an intellectual tradition in Indian climate policy discourse that India was not

ready to trade socio-economic development for environmental protection and accused the developed countries of the North for causing global environmental problems. Indira Gandhi's speech at the conference reflected the ideological and ethical strand of the "Voices from the South" which was ready to take on the West head on and was not in the mood to bear the historical burden of the North. Another influential Report that further cemented India's ideological strand on climate policy was by the Centre for Science and Environment (CSE), called 'Global Warming in an Unequal World', which accused developed countries of "carbon colonialism. The report further argued that developed countries bear the historical burden for carbon emissions and that per capita allocation of emissions should be the metric for dividing responsibility for climate mitigation which was accepted during the RIO Summit and also been accepted and acknowledged in Article 3 (Common But Differentiated Responsibilities) of the Convention of UNFCCC 1992.

The first Conference of Parties COP1, on climate change was held in Berlin in 1995. India successfully managed to break the deadlock over emission reduction targets for the year 2000. India brought G77 countries together to isolate the OPEC countries and secured a target of 20% emission reduction on industrialised countries till 2000 compared to 1990 levels. This is commonly known as the Berlin Mandate. India identified itself with the Group of 77, developing nations who urged developed countries to take action on climate change while arguing that developing nations might only take on voluntary commitments conditional on receipt of finance and technology transfers from industrialised nations. From Rio, onwards India continued to play an active role in global climate negotiations and its efforts were seen as crucial to securing the Berlin mandate in 1995 which would guide two years of negotiating processes for the legal instrument focused on mitigation actions by developed countries.

The negotiations eventually resulted in the Kyoto Protocol in 1997, which required Annex I parties of the UNFCCC, i.e. developed countries, to commit themselves to "quantified emission limitation and reduction objectives" while developing nations were exempted from legally binding commitments (UNFCCC 1997). At the subsequent COPs, wherein emissions trade and carbon markets became prominent issues of debate, India took a more defensive position. It went as far as delaying negotiations necessary so as to bring the Kyoto Protocol on centre stage of negotiations. This was a common but significant position shared by the G77 countries. However, after COP8, in New Delhi in 2002, India changed its position on clean development mechanism (CDM) as enshrined under the Kyoto Protocol, eventually establishing the National CDM Authority in 2003. This was a positive sign when India eventually recognised that it need to integrate climate policy in its domestic agenda.

The Bali Action Plan (COP13), culminated in Copenhagen in 2009 that laid down legally binding agreement after deliberation of two years. The Bali Roadmap outlined the key principle of "nationally appropriate mitigation actions" which also reflected India's evolving position on climate negotiations. While it still emphasised common but differentiated responsibilities, India was willing to adhere to a self-imposed target of not letting its per capita emissions exceed those of the developed countries in the long-run. This was a more accommodative approach to emissions targets, unlike the traditionally defensive position India had taken in past decades. The launch of the National Action Plan on Climate Change in 2008 embodied this new position of nationally determined targets. This process culminated in 2009, with India's pledge at the Copenhagen meeting that the emissions in relation to per unit GDP would decrease from 20% to 25% below 2005 levels by 2020

From 2010 (COP16) to 2015 (COP21) the developed countries focused primarily on drawing a new global climate agreement, led by the USA strongly, the developed countries advocated for replacing the Kyoto Protocol — ‘legally binding’ and strictly ‘differentiated’ — with a ‘more voluntary’, ‘less differentiated’ and ‘bottom-up’, ‘pledge and review’ kind of arrangement. Moreover they wanted the developing countries to come on board to set their voluntary emissions reduction targets. At the COP21 negotiations in Paris, both the North and South divisions showed a willingness to take part in the Paris climate agreement because the agreement provided space and flexibility to determine and decide how much they wish-to and are capable-of contributing to the common agenda of collective climate action.

IV. INDIA’S CONTRIBUTION TO CLIMATE CHANGE

- National Action Plan on Climate Change (NAPCC) launched in June 2008 which outlines existing and future policies and programs addressing climate mitigation and adaptation. The Action Plan identifies eight core “national missions” running through to 2017: Solar Energy; Enhanced Energy Efficiency; Sustainable Habitat; Water; Sustaining the Himalayan Ecosystem; Green India; Sustainable Agriculture; and Strategic Knowledge for Climate Change. Most of these missions have strong adaptation imperatives.
- National Clean Energy Fund: The Government of India created the National Clean Energy Fund (NCEF) in 2010 for financing and promoting clean energy initiatives and funding research in the area of clean energy in the country. The corpus of the fund is built by levying a cess of INR 50 (subsequently increased to INR 100 in 2014) per tonne of coal produced domestically or imported.
- India plans to triple its renewable energy capacity by 2022, and is planning for 40 percent of its power to come from non-fossil sources by 2030, and to reduce its emissions intensity of GDP by 33 percent to 35 percent by 2030 below 2005 levels. But CAT rates India ‘medium’ as well. According to CAT, ‘it is not ambitious enough to limit warming to below 2C... unless other countries make comparably greater effort.’
- Paris Agreement: Under the Paris Agreement, India has made three commitments. India’s greenhouse gas emission intensity of its GDP will be reduced by 33-35% below 2005 levels by 2030. Alongside, 40% of India’s power capacity would be based on non-fossil fuel sources. At the same time, India will create an additional ‘carbon sink’ of 2.5 to 3 billion tonnes of Co2 equivalent through additional forest and tree cover by 2030.
- It is spending nearly Rs 2,000 crore public funds on its ambitious solar energy plan. With this, the government seems to be keeping up with its pledge of generating 40 per cent of power from renewable sources.
- International Solar Alliance: ISA was launched at the United Nations Climate Change Conference in Paris on 30 November 2015 by India and France, in the presence of Mr. Ban Ki Moon, former Secretary-General of the United Nations to produce clean energy.
- Bharat Stage (BS) Emission Norms: Emissions from vehicles are one of the top contributors to air pollution, which led the government at the time to introduce the BS 2000 (Bharat Stage 1) vehicle emission norms from April 2000, followed by BS-II in 2005. BS-III was implemented nationwide in 2010. However, in 2016, the government decided to meet the global best practices and leapfrog to BS-VI norms by skipping BS V altogether.

V. INDIA'S CURRENT STRATEGY ON CLIMATE CHANGE

At present, India has maintained what some observers have called a flexible, cooperative and mixed strategy at international climate negotiations. This is a shift from the earlier stand which was rooted in a more “strictly differentiated responsibilities” and not “sharing the historical burden of global commons”. The current approach is grounded in the country’s traditional support for differentiated responsibilities but outlined by a more flexible outlook of emissions reduction. Throughout the last three decades of climate negotiations, India has emerged as a deal-maker in crucial times. This is an extension of its imperative of balancing economic growth and development goals post COP21 with responsible actions required to accomplish climate change commitment both at the domestic and international level.

Under the leadership of Prime Minister, Narendra Modi India’s INDC were formulated which outlined the post-2020 climate actions includes , (i) reduce the ‘emissions intensity’ of its GDP by 33-35 per cent by 2030, below 2005 levels, (ii) increase the share of non-fossil fuels-based electricity to 40 per cent by 2030 with the help of the transfer of technology and low-cost international finance mechanisms, such as the Green Climate Fund, (iii) create an additional carbon sink of 2.5 to 3 billion tonnes of CO₂ by 2030 and (iv) In November 2021, at the COP26 to the UNFCCC, India has pledged to cut its emissions to “Net Zero” and has set important milestones to prioritize this path.

India’s climate policy is spread across several policy documents, sector-specific strategies and laws with the National Action Plan for Climate Change (NAPCC) serving as the overarching guidance for these efforts. Some recent developments covering the energy sector have put forward significant policy documents and Acts including the National Electricity Plan 2023 (NEP2023), the National Green Hydrogen Mission (2023) and the recently amended Energy Conservation Act (2022). These documents and Acts play a crucial role in shaping the energy sector promoting green energy for sustainable development. While the world is grappling with the challenges posed by climate change, developing economies like India are particularly vulnerable. Thus, climate risk as a material aspect is going to play a critical role in charting out national-level policies, economic policies and reorientation of finance which is an imperative for a growing economy like India. The scope for playing a crucial role in climate politics seems quite interesting in the coming decades for an emerging economy like India.

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