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India: Worst polluter?

India is the laggard on climate change challenges." So said a senior European personality at a high-powered meeting I attended in Berlin a few weeks ago. Many luminaries attended this meeting, including Ban Ki Moon, Javier Solana and Mohamed El-Baradei. For such a serious criticism of India to be made at a serious meeting attended by serious people showed that India may soon have a serious problem on its hands: to be perceived as the prime obstacle in responding to climate change.

This may well happen even though criticism of India is manifestly unfair here. The real "laggards" on climate change are America and Europe, not China or India. The reason why this is the case is astonishingly simple but if you read the Western media, you will never find this simple argument ever expressed. The failure of the Western media to report this simple argument demonstrates clearly that even though the Western media often pretend to defend global interests, in reality, their actual role is to defend Western national interests.

So what is this simple argument? Global warming is not happening today because of the new 'flows' of greenhouse gas emissions in recent decades. It is happening because of the 'stock' of greenhouse gas emissions that the Western industrialised countries have deposited in the atmosphere since their industrial revolution, which was also brought about by burning a lot of dirty coal.

The global analysts are absolutely right in saying that the only way to prevent global warming — which would be disastrous for all of humanity — would be to reduce the 'flows' of greenhouse gas emissions. We cannot reduce the 'stock'. This is true. It is also true that the only way to reduce the 'flows' of greenhouse gas emissions is to put an economic price on the new 'flows' of greenhouse gas emissions.

Both of these propositions are true. However, there is a third proposition which is equally true but that is never mentioned in any Western analysis: if India and China are to pay an economic price for the new 'flows' of greenhouse gas emissions, shouldn't the Western industrialised countries also be made to pay an economic price for the 'stock' of greenhouse gas emissions that they have released into the atmosphere? There is a fundamental principle of justice involved here. Why punish only the latest marginal contributors to a global problem and forgive the main historical contributors to the same global problem?

This problem of injustice is further aggravated by the fact that the Western industrialised countries are still much richer than China and India. According to the latest World Bank figures, GNI per capita figures are: US\$46,040 in USA, US\$38,860 in Germany, US\$38,500 in France, US\$42,740 in UK, US\$2,360 China and US\$900 in India. Yet, despite such economic disparities, the pressure is growing on China and India to make equal contributions.

President George W Bush has been a good friend of India in many ways. The Indo-US nuclear accord was a clear win for India. He has also pushed for closer relations with India in other ways. But in at least one area, he has damaged India's real national interests. President Bush fiercely opposed the Kyoto Protocol and may finally succeed in killing it. His primary reason for opposing the Kyoto Protocol was that it imposed no burden on China and India to reduce their greenhouse gas emissions. But the compromise reached in Kyoto Protocol was a result of an implicit acknowledgement that those responsible for the 'stock' of greenhouse gas emissions should assume primary responsibility. President Bush has killed that sense of responsibility.

The Kyoto Protocol is virtually dead. Let me make one confident prediction: if Barack Obama is elected president of the USA, he will make global warming a major priority. During his meeting with President Sarkozy on 25 July, 2008, Obama indicated that as president he would work toward an energy policy to curb the use of fossil fuels and work to lower emissions and reduce global warming. He also stated his commitment to participate in international conventions on global warming. Hence, when Obama takes office, we can expect a new frenzy of moralising by both America and the EU on the global warming challenge.

The frenzy of moralising may actually be good for the world. With each passing year, we are beginning to be aware that global warming will lead to many disastrous consequences. The melting of the Gangotri Glacier, a key source of water supply to the Ganges River, could lead to serious problems for India. There would also be threats to food supply. In addition, there will be an obscene scramble for the resources under the Arctic ice cap as they cap continue to melt. In short, global warming is a serious issue. We cannot afford to ignore it.

However, it is also true that no solution to global warming is possible without sacrifice. All of us, those living in rich and poor societies, will have to sacrifice some aspects of our lifestyle. The real debate on the global warming issue should be how to apportion the sacrifices. Since the Western industrialised countries are responsible for the huge 'stock' of greenhouse gas emissions and since they remain the richest societies of the world, any natural principle of justice would dictate that they have to bear the heaviest burden of any 'sacrifice'.

What is truly shocking here is that not a single Western politician dares to use the word 'sacrifice' when discussing global warming. Only a retired politician like Al Gore can do so. Al Gore has proposed a one-dollar solution for America. He has correctly calculated that a dollar a gallon tax at the petrol pump would significantly reduce gas consumption and reduce greenhouse gas emissions. This solution is simple and easy to implement. Yet no American politician dares to suggest this.

Instead, the latest statement by the G8 leaders at their recent meeting shows how outrageous the Western leaders have become on the global warming issue. In an effort to look virtuous, they agreed to reduce greenhouse gas emissions by 50 percent by 2050. But they specified no base year. Even worse, they suggested that the eight fastest growing countries, including China and India, should adopt a 'shared vision' of tackling global warming.

Such moralising by the West on global warming is going to hit a new fever pitch if Obama takes over. Both China and India, and other developing countries, will be hit by a tsunami of moral posturing on global warming in 2009. It is best to begin preparations for the moral tsunami before it hits our shores.

The best way to do so is to capture the moral high ground first. So far, all the discussions on global warming have been led by Western experts, who inevitably have to defend Western interests. Even the highly praised report by Nick Stern looks at resolving the problem of global warming only through the dimension of 'flows' and pays little attention to the 'stock'.

So, both China and India need to develop their own comprehensive analysis of the global warming problem. One economist who has tried to bring some balance to this discussion is Professor Jagdish Bhagwati of Columbia University, whose article in the Financial Times argues that "While emissions today are substantial and growing for India and China, the emission of yesterday and mainly by rich countries. The accumulated fossil fuel CO2 emissions for 1850 to 2004 shows the damage attributable to China and India to be less than 10%, while the EU, Russia and US jointly account for nearly 70%". However, Professor Bhagwati represents a lonely voice. India needs to marshal considerable intellectual resources to support the arguments that he has tried to make. Only this will erase the impression developing in many leading Western minds that India is the global laggard in responding to global warming.

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