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Article: Lower The Temperature

Nitin Desai 22 July 2009,

A chorus of criticism has greeted India's endorsement of the 2 degrees C goal for containing global warming risks at the Major Economies Forum (MEF). An anonymous senior negotiator for India, quoted in this paper on July 16, describes it as a "body blow to everything that we (Indian officials) have fought for". If that is the case, Indian officials have been fighting the wrong battle.

India is a low latitude tropical country highly vulnerable to the consequences of temperature increase. Weather variability, a major constraint on growth and welfare in India, will increase with global warming.

Temperature increases in the Tibetan plateau, the Hindu Kush and the Himalayas will affect the volume and timing of river flows in north India and may well become a security issue that roils relations in South Asia far more than anything so far.

Projected precipitation changes will also increase the variability of water availability in peninsular India. Rise in sea level will affect all coastal settlements. The Ganges-Brahmaputra delta has been listed as an exceptionally vulnerable area by the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC).

Early signs of the potential impact can already be seen in the Sunderbans and in Bangladesh, and India faces a serious prospect of climate migrants.

Given these and other impacts, it is in India's national interest to seek a global commitment to limit the risk of temperature increase as much as possible. News reports suggest that Indian negotiators agreed to the 2 degrees C goal at the MEF meeting reluctantly and would have preferred silence. This is inexplicable. We should have been in the lead demanding this goal as a minimum.

Two inferential steps are needed to move from the temperature goal to emission caps. The first is to assess the level of ambient greenhouse gases (GHGs) that is consistent with the temperature goal. The second is to spell out the global emission path that will contain ambient global GHGs to the required level. On the basis of current science, it would appear that a 2 degrees C goal implies a limit of 450ppm on GHG concentration in the atmosphere and this in turn will require at least a halving of global emissions by 2050.

This inference is perhaps the basis for the fear expressed that the acceptance of the temperature goal implies a commitment to take on obligations in the form of emission caps. But individual country caps require a further political step concerning how the burden of effort will be distributed. On that, India has not given away anything. Its

demand for climate justice remains on the table and is strengthened by the acceptance of the 2 degrees C goal. Without an agreed global goal, the space available for sharing cannot be defined and talk of climate justice makes little sense.

The temperature goal also strengthens India's case for more vigorous action by developed countries in the medium-term time frame of 2020. We can now argue that unless they take on an obligation at the higher end of the 25-40 per cent reduction by 2020 recommended by the IPCC, the chances of reaching the agreed temperature goal are quite low. We should, of course, reject the argument that because developed countries are unwilling to do as much as they can and should, developing countries should step up to the plate and deliver.

Our case for a better medium-term offer from the developed countries has been strengthened. But are we entirely off the hook when it comes to long-term action? It has been argued that the halving of emissions implied by the 2 degrees C goal may not be achievable without a reduction in developing country emissions below business as usual even if developed country emissions are reduced to nothing.

A sudden reduction in 2050 is hardly practical. Restraint would have to start earlier. That may well be the case. In the long-term horizon of 2050, we have to accept that our children will be living in a carbon-constrained world. In India, China and other fast growing developing countries, the bulk of the sources of emissions of 2050 have yet to be built. They have the option of leapfrogging to the low carbon technologies of the future and secure the competitive advantage of the early mover.

Climate negotiations have much more on the agenda than long-term vision and there have been some signs of a thaw in frozen positions. At G8, the goal of 80 per cent reduction by developed countries by 2050 was endorsed for the first time.

The US Senate is considering a house Bill that mandates major, but still inadequate, cuts in emissions. British prime minister Gordon Brown spoke recently about the provision of \$100 billion a year in climate change finance to developing countries outside the aid framework. The MEF's outcome must be seen as part of this process of compromise and a step towards an effective climate agreement which is in our national interest.

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