A consistent Indian demand in climate change negotiations is green technology transfer from the developed to the developing countries, and a longstanding principle is that of Common But Differentiated Responsibilities and Respective Capabilities. Across political affiliations, Indian policymakers agree that India needs to be better equipped to tackle challenges related to climate change adaptation, and to improve preparedness for drought, flooding, and other extreme weather events.

Brief Points

- Since 1992, Indian negotiators have demanded that developed countries take more responsibility for carbon emissions, adhering resolutely to the provisions of the UNFCCC.
- The COP meetings in Copenhagen, Cancun and Durban demonstrated that India’s political leadership can be more willing to give up entrenched positions than the professional negotiators.
- India strongly supports the Paris Agreement, green technology and clean energy collaboration.

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Indian Realities of Climate Change

India has come to terms with global warming as a contemporary reality, rather than a distant threat. Amidst concerns about erratic weather conditions with record temperatures, drought and flooding, the Parliamentary Standing Committee on Science and Technology, Environment and Forests has warned of a sharp increase in forest fires in 2016, in central India and the Himalayan region in particular (Rao, 2016). The self-propelling nature of the links between forest fires and global warming are a source of concern for policymakers. Rising temperatures combined with decreasing rainfall contribute to a greater frequency of forest fires, while forest fires exacerbate global warming through the loss of carbon sink resources and an increase in carbon-dioxide (CO2) in the atmosphere (TNAU Agritech Portal).

Water shortage is another growing challenge. As expressed by Uma Bharati, Minister of Water Resources: “From being a water rich country, we have become a water scarce nation” (Sehgal, 2017). Lack of adequate water supply entails the risk of rising social tensions as irrigation farmers compete with water-dependent industries, and politicians are held accountable for providing safe and accessible drinking water to the public. Indian policymakers are aware of the daunting challenges of climate change adaptation, including preparedness for drought, floods and landslides, disaster management, and planning for large-scale relief efforts after extreme weather events. Across political affiliations, policymakers agree that India needs to be better equipped technologically and structurally, whether in mitigation of climate change, preparedness for climate-related hazards, or adaptation of food production to global warming.

At the Negotiating Table

Climate change is not a one-way street of cause and effect. International negotiations on climate change and the reduction of emissions are equally complex. India’s involvement and its position in international negotiations has developed over the years. At times, there have been rapid shifts and confusing relationships between statements of principle and actions. India’s negotiating position is not easily summarised. However, a consistent Indian demand is for green technology transfer from the “high-emitting” developed countries, and a longstanding principle is that of Common But Differentiated Responsibilities and Respective Capabilities, or CBDR-RC. Any reduction of greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions is by definition covered under the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC), the Kyoto Protocol and the Paris Agreement.

While the science of climate change – built on decades of data-gathering – demands working globally towards solutions, state actors in an anarchic international system take anti-ethical positions based on state-centric interests and gains. Paradoxically, there is no dearth of statements or acceptances acknowledging the dangers of climate change and the huge risks of inaction, yet decisions are not easy and negotiations are fraught with contestation.

India’s Negotiating Position

India is an emerging economy that is rapidly industrialising, as well as the world’s second most populous country. As such, it is a principal actor in the climate debate. India’s stand in climate change negotiations continues to have far-reaching implications for global climate cooperation. Developed countries and their negotiators have often ignored, dismissed or lacked the knowledge and information about India’s developmental aspirations and its principal position of equity and Common But Differentiated Responsibilities and Respective Capabilities (CBDR-RC). There has been a marked failure or presumptuousness in the way some of the major western powers have dealt with India through the frame of power axioms, dependency and trade supremacy. Indian negotiators have countered this attitude through developmental arguments, historical contextualisation and moralistic positions.

Five defining periods can be identified in climate change negotiations. The first period from Rio in 1992 to Kyoto in 1997 saw the formation of the tenets of climate change negotiations and the finalization of a Protocol to quantify Annex I emission reductions. The second period from Montreal 2005 to Bali 2007 saw the culmination of the Bali Action Plan. The third period between Copenhagen in 2009 and Cancun in 2010 resulted first in the failure of the Bali Action Plan at Copenhagen and then its revival at Cancun. The fourth period from Durban in 2011 to Paris in 2015 was a period of negotiations for a post-2020 climate agreement. The fifth period (post-2015) has focused on the implementation of the Paris Agreement. Each of these periods has been marked by India’s strong political leadership in negotiations. Interestingly, it has been the Indian political leadership which has been bold and visionary in creating new circumstances of engagement with the developed world.

From Rio to Kyoto

In the 1992 Earth Summit in Rio de Janeiro, India positioned itself as a flag-bearer for the South, or developing countries. This was the time of the post–Cold War realignment of the international political system. During the negotiations, a sharp North-South divide emerged in which India took a custodian role and projected itself as a coalition-builder and protector of the global South. Kamal Nath, India’s Environment Minister, emerged as one of the chief spokesmen for developing countries, contributing significantly to the contours of the Climate Change Convention, the Biodiversity Conservation Convention and the Forestry Agreement. The Group of 77 representing the 128 developing countries – on behalf of which India claimed a moral voice – repositioned the Earth Summit’s objectives from “environment” to “development”, thus putting humans at the centre of environmental concerns. The emphasis on development linked to poverty eradication has been India’s mantra in all Conference of Parties (COP) negotiations since 1992.

The very first climate change negotiations resulted in a differentiation between large and small emitters. This format began in Rio in 1992, where the participating countries signed the UNFCCC, “Noting that the largest share of historical and current global emissions of greenhouse gases has originated in developed countries, that per capita emissions in developing countries are still relatively low and that the share of global emissions originating in developing countries will grow to meet their social and development needs.”

In 1997, with the signing of the Kyoto Protocol, the world was divided into Annex I industrialised countries taking responsibility for reducing emissions, and Non-Annex developing countries being exempted from emissions reduction. The Kyoto Protocol attempted to quantify emission reductions by developed countries.
during its first commitment period of five years, beginning from the year after the Protocol came into force – which happened to be 2007, after Russia ratified the Protocol in 2006. Non-Annex I countries were encouraged towards their mitigation efforts through the Clean Development Mechanism under the Protocol. Differing responsibilities for climate change have since divided the world, but the common goal and objective continues to be an international agreement to reduce emissions of carbon dioxide (CO2) and limit the increase in temperature in the balance of the 21st century to 2 degrees Celsius above the pre-industrial era baseline.

Since the 1992 divide, the global landscape of carbon emission has changed dramatically, with China's emissions in absolute terms rising from 11 per cent in 1992 to 29.52 per cent in 2015. Correspondingly, US emissions have dropped significantly from 24 per cent to 14.34 per cent. India's emissions in 2015 were 6.81 per cent. In absolute terms, India is thus the fourth largest emitter after China, the USA and the European Union. Despite the increase in emissions, both China and India, along with Brazil, South Africa and Indonesia, have argued for the continuation of the 1992 differentiation. The argument is now based on the per capita emission, which in comparative terms to the USA (16.1) are significantly less for China (7.7) and even smaller in the case of India (1.9). The absence of per capita income calculations in the earlier protocol frameworks became a rallying point for the developing countries in the Copenhagen meeting in 2009.

The Copenhagen Summit

The Copenhagen Summit in 2009 came in the wake of strong US resistance to accept greenhouse gas (GHG) emission reductions until emitters like India and China equally took commitment actions. The geopolitical dynamics were casting an influence on the climate talks while, on the other hand, the G77 coalition was showing signs of withering over differences in concerns over climate impacts, as well as the capacities to deal with these impacts. Jairam Ramesh, then India’s Environment Minister, was clearly aware of US concerns, considering the recently concluded US-India Civil Nuclear Agreement (2008), which was a huge political victory for his government. Ramesh felt strongly that India should review its earlier negotiating position. He enjoyed great confidence with the president of the Congress Party and, according to media reports, he had written a letter to Prime Minister Manmohan Singh before the Copenhagen Summit, articulating that India should take radical steps to curb emissions for its own interest, even without a guarantee of finance and technology from the developed block. He also expressed that India should ease itself out from the G77 and become more engaged with the G20. Ramesh considered the strategic gains and advantages from such a departure as a great improvement on India's earlier climate position, which, he felt, was becoming untenable. India's aspirations for permanent membership of the UN Security Council were a key driver of Ramesh's calculations.

Carving out a New Role for India

In the Copenhagen COP meeting in 2009, Jairam Ramesh's non-conformist vision of a new leadership role for India based on emissions reduction disturbed the Indian climate negotiators who were comfortable basing their arguments on the principles as defined under the 1992 UNFCCC. Unlike the US, United Kingdom or European Union, India has no professional cadre of climate negotiators, and hence no lead negotiator. Indian civil servants holding transferrable positions in various ministries participate in the negotiations and work as a team in a decentralised format, with a set of red lines as defined in the Cabinet Brief that they strictly adhere to. As a force multiplier, the negotiation team also uses the knowledge and experience of some of the advisers to the Prime Minister's Council on Climate Change. In 2009, this was Ambassador Chandrashekhar Dasgupta. Earlier, in April 2008, Shyam Saran was appointed a Special Envoy on Climate Change, tasked with the responsibility to bring together a coherent strategy at the multilateral level of negotiations, and to harmonise it with the National Action Plan missions domestically.

Burning of harvest residues in Punjab, India. Photo credit: Neil Palmer (CIAT) @ Flickr
Before his arrival at the Copenhagen COP meeting, Ramesh had asserted that India should be seen as “dealmaker and not a dealbreaker” and that India’s stance should be “pragmatic and constructive and not argumentative and polemic”. India’s strategic partnership with the US could be viewed as an important driver for Ramesh’s side-talks, particularly with the US lead negotiator Tod Stern. Before Copenhagen, Ramesh had visited Washington DC, and engaged in numerous discussions in Capitol Hill. But more than the style, it was the substance of his views that was challenging. According to Ambassador Dasgupta: “we have been offering unilateral concessions, without obtaining any reciprocity”. Even India’s industrial apex body, the Federation of Indian Chambers of Commerce and Industry (FICCI), expressed its serious reservations against Ramesh and what turned out to be India’s new position. Jairam Ramesh continued to break the old-guard thinking in India’s stance on climate change. At the COP meeting in Cancun in 2010, he once again suggested that all countries must take binding commitments under appropriate legal forms. At the Mexico City pre-COP ministerial, Ramesh circulated a ten-point paper on International Consultation and Analysis (ICA) to facilitate “transparency and accountability” for the actions of all countries, including developing countries. This not only meant creating a new category of “major emitters”, but also effectively undermined the per capita principle that India had long argued in defence of its emissions. Ramesh’s proposal was rejected by other developing countries. In the final Cancun Agreement, however, Ramesh exercised his political leadership and replaced India’s demand for equal per capita access to the global atmosphere with equitable access to sustainable development. At the Durban conference in 2011, Ramesh was replaced by Jayanthi Natarajan as the Environment Minister. Hers was a strong public position on defending equity, insisting on CBDR as the centrepiece of India’s climate discussion. On the other hand, Natarajan also reinforced the Indian political leadership’s significance by signing on an agreement that made no mention of the two principles. The COP meetings in Copenhagen, Cancun and Durban demonstrated that the Indian political leadership was more willing to give up its long-standing position in climate change negotiations than the professional negotiators, who were more comfortable with playing the custodian role of bringing developing countries together to form a counter-narrative in the debate on global warming.

**Post-Copenhagen**

While the binary differentiation between developed and developing countries has been reduced, there is now more of a division between the emerging economies and the rest of the developing world. The G77+ China survives, but many of its member countries have formed alliances and blocs, expressing different concerns. Likewise, large developing countries have formed BASIC (Brazil, South Africa, India and China) and Like Minded Developing Countries (LMDC), a group that includes India, China, Malaysia, Saudi Arabia and other low- and middle-income countries. The Durban Coalition – the EU together with Least Developed Countries, Small Island Developing States and some African and Latin American countries – is perhaps the most potent group today, though it does not exist formally but emerges in COP negotiations.

**The Paris Agreement**

The earlier defensive Indian negotiation line has given way to a much more proactive approach. A recent example is India’s initiative to form an alliance of 120 countries pursuing greater utilisation of solar power at the 2015 Paris summit. India strongly supports the Paris Agreement, highlighting the need for collaboration between countries to develop eco-friendly technologies, and to strengthen the 2009 Green Climate Fund to help developing countries achieve their goals.

The Trump administration’s decision to withdraw from the Paris Agreement was a discouragement, but it will only strengthen the resolve of Indian policymakers to go above and beyond the Intended Nationally Determined Contributions (INDCs) as agreed in the 2015 Paris summit. With the new ambitions to “Make in India”, we may see an even more self-confident India in future climate change negotiations.

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