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India and China at Cancun: A New Approach to Climate?

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Abstract

The decisions at the Cancun conference on climate change have been accepted positively by the international community. China and India refrained from taking obstructionist positions at Cancun. This paper argues that such posturing does not indicate their dilution of commitment to the Kyoto Protocol and the principle of ‘common but differentiated responsibilities’ in global action on climate change.

The two-week long United Nations (UN) Conference on climate change ended at Cancun on 10 December 2010. Beginning from 29 November 2010, the conference involved around 25,000 participants from 193 countries negotiating the future multilateral agenda for tackling climate change. This was the 16th Conference of Parties (COP) on climate change and the first after the much-discussed Copenhagen conference in December 2009.

The outcomes from the conference have been greeted positively by the international community. The positive response is probably due to the conference producing certain agreements, which had seemed exceedingly difficult given the sharp differences between major countries on several issues. The fact that the negotiations did not break down on these

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differences and concluded by making some new beginnings, however tentative, was a major relief for all concerned.

From a more objective perspective, the conference stayed away from declaring a binding multilateral target for reducing emissions of greenhouse gases (GHG). The Kyoto Protocol of 1997 remains the only such agreement. The future of the Protocol was a major subject of discussion in the conference. The Protocol has well-defined emission targets for advanced developed economies. Success under the Protocol, however, has been limited with the United States (US) refusing to adopt binding targets unless China, India and other large developing economies also did so. The first commitment period under the Protocol is to end in 2012. Several countries had expected that the Cancun conference will be able to extend the life of the Protocol beyond 2012 and ensure that the advanced countries implement their commitments to reducing emissions. The conference, however, has refrained from taking a definite view on the continuation of the Protocol. It has simply urged the parties in the Protocol to continue negotiations for completing their work.²

The decisions from the conference point to the adoption of a ‘pledge and review’ approach to climate change rather than taking up binding targets for cutting emissions.³ Instead of fixing targets for countries, both advanced and developing countries have been allowed to proceed on their respective courses of action for reducing emissions. Developing country mitigation actions will be matched and recorded with respect to the technological and financial support they receive from developed countries. This was the issue on which China, India, Brazil, South Africa and most developing countries had differences with developed countries as they were unwilling to allow the latter to scrutinise their climate management programmes. However, both countries, decided to soften their stance with the hope of obtaining a balanced outcome. The fine print is not yet clear on what kind of monitoring, reporting and verification (MRV) requirements will finally emerge.

From the point of view of developing countries, the financial pledge by developed countries to build a US\$30 billion fund for helping developing countries to pursue mitigation and adaptation measures for fighting climate change is a welcome development. The fund is expected to grow to US\$100 billion by 2020. The process to design a ‘Green Climate Fund’ has also been established⁴. Consensus was also reached on taking urgent action to provide financial and technical support for curbing emissions from deforestation and forest degradation in developing

² ‘UN Climate Change Conference in Cancun delivers balanced package on decisions, restores faith in multilateral process’, Press Release, United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) (11 December 2010), http://unfccc.int/files/press/news_room/press_releases_and_advisories/application/pdf/pr_20101211_cop16_closing.pdf. Accessed on 12 December 2010.

³ Cancun Pact Inked, Kyoto on Way Out’, *Sunday Times of India*, New Delhi (12 December 2010), p.18.

⁴ As in 2 earlier.

countries. Similar support is also to be provided to developing countries for planning and implementation of adaptation projects through a new framework set up at Cancun.

For China and India, two of the world's largest developing countries and major GHG emitters, the Cancun conference involved considerable tightrope walking. Climate change is an issue where both countries are collaborating with the objective of resisting the developed world from influencing the climate action agenda in a way that is detrimental to developing country interests. Both have emphasised upon 'common but differentiated responsibilities' (CDR) – the principle underlying the Kyoto Protocol – as the key principle for all global initiatives on climate change. They have been pressing for continuation of the Protocol with the main onus of emission reductions on industrialised countries and resisting imposition of binding emission targets on developing countries. In the Copenhagen conference in December 2009, both countries had remained firm on their stances. Both, however, subsequently endorsed the decisions taken at Copenhagen and moved ahead on their individual plans for addressing climate change. During the run-up to the Cancun conference, both expressed solidarity with other developing countries in opposing the MRV requirements insisted upon by developed countries. At the same time, however, both have also probably realised that they have major roles to play in shaping a constructive and long-term global action agenda on climate change. In this respect, they could not be seen adopting an entirely obstructionist agenda at Cancun.

The final agreements at Cancun have been received positively by both China and India. This reflects the responsible and meaningful position that both countries have decided to assume in the climate change agenda. The Cancun texts hardly outline a dedicated and focused long-term action plan. However, they do underline a willingness on the part of the international community to address climate change concerns in a collective albeit sketchy manner. Both India and China have hailed this collective spirit.

India's posturing at Cancun has surprised many. It has also raised questions over whether India has sacrificed its commitment to the Kyoto Protocol. From a non-negotiable position on binding commitments on emission reductions, India advocated the need to consider binding commitments in a legally appropriate manner.⁵ At the same time, it also underscored the necessity to look at MRVs according to an internationally acceptable system of standards. These views underline India's perceptible shift from a somewhat obdurate position and adoption of a more flexible stance. China also demonstrated flexibility by assuming the role of a facilitator during the Cancun talks on various occasions.

⁵ 'Was Jairam's remark pre-scripted?', *Sunday Times of India*, New Delhi (12 December 2010), p.18.

In spite of welcoming the outcomes from Cancun, both China and India realise that the outcomes are far from perfect and leave much to be desired. China has already indicated that it will stand firm on the Kyoto Protocol and will emphasise on the second period of commitment under the Protocol⁶. India is likely to take a similar stand. Thus Cancun, notwithstanding the bouquets it is receiving, has not been able to iron the main creases in the global divide on climate change. China and India's responsible posturing at Cancun should not be interpreted as deviation from their emphasis on the Kyoto Protocol and the principle of 'common, but differentiated responsibilities' as the bulwark of climate change actions.

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⁶ 'Continuing Kyoto is the 'Key Issue', *China Daily* (11 December 2010), www.chinadaily.com.cn/china/2010cancunclimate/2010-12/11/content_11686732.htm. Accessed on 12 December 2010.