

Can Asia Change The Climate?

Puneet Kumar*

Who is a climate leader? The Paris Agreement ensured that climate leadership became diffuse and distributed. But immediately after President Trump's Rose Garden speech on 1 June, commentators jumped to pass the leadership mantle on to China. They might have wanted to convey the message to many other countries that all was not lost. They might have wanted to reassure affected communities and thousands of climate activists that there was a Plan B in China. Or they might have simply wanted to win over the air waves in a toxic media battle for climate hearts and minds.

There are three problems with this approach. First, its underlying premise is flawed. It presumes that the United States (until 31 May) was the world's climate leader. It was indeed central to the problem and is needed for a practical solution. But the US has been, primarily, a "climate squatter".

Secondly the argument presumes that China was both ready and willing to become the climate leader. China's response, while aggressive, in ambition and action, is still very much a mixed story until now. The clean (China as the renewable energy capital -of the world) goes hand in hand with a lot of dirty (more than 92100 MW of coal power, a third of which is perhaps overcapacity).

Thirdly this technocratic passing of the baton from one country to another is deeply flawed. It measures climate leadership in presidential statements and academic charts, not from the perspective of communities impacted and people suffering. By doing so, it raises false expectations and undermines trust even further. It is clear that climate politics will be driven by national interests; and climate action will be affected by economic interests,

Asia-with the most number of poor people and being the most economically dynamic region in the world - will encounter climate change like no other. Asia must persevere-for a different kind of climate politics, a reformulated climate economics, and an inclusive climate ethics.

On climate politics, there is not one but three Asias. The first is China, which stands apart in terms of its economic size and share of emissions, The second is India, along with several other South and South-east Asian economies, which are growing rapidly still have hundreds of millions in poverty need to industrialise and create jobs, and whose opportunities are getting squeezed by the shrinking carbon space. The third is West and Central Asia, with many economies heavily dependent on fossil fuels, limited diversification in their economic structure, or limited capability to develop the industries of the future.

Asia - and India - could map a new geography for institutional leadership on climate change. The institutions of the 21st century need to be nimble, They need to recognise that emerging economies increasingly demand a seat at the rule-making table; that international regimes are more complex now, with many actors (including the private sector); and that networks of governance will plot the direction of travel rather than top-down diktats.

Climate economics needs to defeat persisting mercantilism, National security economic prosperity and climate resilience will have to all go hand-in-hand with resource efficiency. But the economic opportunities presented would need a rethink of the mercantilist policies in some Asian economies, particularly China. Asian economies can tap into these opportunities if they become part of global/regional supply chains for new technologies and products, maximized resources available at home, aid created trained workforces suited to these rapidly shifting trends.

Climate ethics requires new voices on issues that have largely escaped attention or on which developed countries have dominated the discourse so far. Asian economies need to emphasise that there will be many energy transitions and due space must be yielded for countries to discover and pursue their respective paths. We don't need an Asian voice; we need many Asian voices to describe many energy transitions. Mere tokenism in representation will not do.

Another area with even fewer Asian voices is the governance of climate geoengineering or the deliberate large- scale intervention in Earth's climate system, to limit adverse global warming. Asian countries must help design an international research programme on geoengineering, taking account of research capacities, funding mechanisms, liability rules, and intellectual property. This is a frontier that cannot be left ungoverned.

Lastly Asia must look inwards, to promote greater transparency on climate change within the region and within countries. Asia's leading economies should open the space for non-party stakeholders, who could bridge the challenges of building national capacity monitoring both emissions and financial flows, evaluating inter-country initiatives, and contributing to overall assessments of the effectiveness of global collective action.

The world has changed, the climate is changing, and we must change too. As the beneficiaries of the dynamism of Asian economic transformation, and the custodians of its future sustainability we need to recognise the direct and systemic risks climate change poses for our region, We need to celebrate the disproportionately aggressive targets we have set for climate mitigation, but also acknowledge that our efforts will fall short of what is needed. Most of all we need to resist false pretensions of grandeur about climate leadership. It is a collective burden we carry.

Asia is poised for climate leadership. Except it is not the bravado of leadership that must titillate us; rather it is the quiet self-confidence that comes from knowing and shaping the future.

Extracted from a speech delivered at IHC, Delhi. The writer is CEO, Council on Energy, Environment and Water.

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