Climate Strategy Is Critical for India’s Future

By Anmol Vanamali

The world cannot achieve its climate and other common goals without engaging with a country that currently houses one-sixth of the global population, is a vibrant democracy (a rarity in its neighborhood) and is an emerging economic superpower.

In recent years the foreign policy arena has witnessed a more assertive and collaborative India. The international climate policy negotiations especially have received a shot in the arm through India’s proactive engagement. Bridging the yawning chasm between the developed and developing countries on such a controversial international topic is not a simple exercise, and India showed unprecedented leadership in moving the sides closer together. However, in spite of the unnatural degree of flexibility and compromise at the UN Climate Change Conference in Cancun, the path forward for international climate negotiations, and India’s role in it, remains unclear.

Until recently, India’s position in climate negotiations was rigid and overly pedantic. From a developed country point of view, this was archaic, irresponsible and bordering on obstructionist. From a developing country perspective, India was holding a deeply entrenched position that developing countries were under no obligation to take on mandatory emissions reduction targets because the problem of climate change was primarily created by the unbridled industrialization of the West. For more than a few reasons, this position shifted to the point where it was agreed through the Bali Action Plan (BAP) in December 2007 that developing countries would also undertake mitigation actions appropriate to their individual circumstances given adequate support from developed countries.

In May 2009, there was also a change in the Indian political structure that few realized would create the sort of impact that we have since witnessed. Jairam Ramesh was given independent charge of the Ministry of Environment and Forests (MoEF). Hitherto, India’s role in climate change negotiations used to be steered by foreign policy mandarins working in lockstep with the goals of the broader external affairs portfolio. Under Ramesh’s leadership, climate change policy appears to have taken on a life of its own, and in the process he has stepped on some antiquated toes and ruffled a few moldy feathers.

Since his arrival, India has announced some impressive domestic initiatives (tax on coal production for capitalizing a green fund) as well as bilateral ones (agreement with the US to discuss the impact of hydrofluorocarbons) and multilateral ones geared towards combating climate change. One such multilateral initiative was the formation of the BASIC group comprising Brazil, South Africa, India and China that acted as a strong negotiating bloc both in Copenhagen and Cancun. The combined strength of the BASIC countries acted as an effective counterweight to the more organized so-called Annex 1 group of industrialized countries in Copenhagen and Cancun.

Individual Efforts

As promising as recent actions have been, it is not clear whether there is enough political momentum and stakeholder engagement to continue making the sort of progress we have seen over the past two years. To the skeptical observer, India’s current wave of inspiration in climate change negotiations is probably due to the yeoman’s work of certain far-sighted individuals rather than a systemic response to a global policy problem.

As has been the case in the past on other issues, the nation’s ambitions seem to be inextricably linked to the person heading the efforts, rather than the institution or the constituency that he or she represents. Perhaps India’s long-term commitment to combating climate change can be deciphered from the 2011 Indian Economic Survey announced on Feb. 26. The survey is presented by the Finance Ministry prior to announcing the annual budget. In the chapter on “Human Development, Equity and Environment” is a section on climate change that concludes with the words: “The increasing importance of climate-related issues should not shake the foundations of our inclusive growth strategy. Careful planning and customized policies are needed to ensure that the green growth strategies do not result in a slow growth strategy.” This confirms that while India will continue to include climate change mitigation in its overall development planning, it will not be at any cost to its development goals.

Considering the evolution of India’s attitude towards climate change and the realization of its leadership role, India needs to lay down a few guiding principles to effectively engage with the world on climate change: Focus on pragmatism

If one views India’s track record in foreign affairs through the parochial lens of anti-imperialism, one starts noticing a pattern. Hallowed foreign policy claims such as spearheading the non-aligned movement and refusal to sign the nuclear non-proliferation treaty have one distinct central thread. India used to feel a need to assert its individuality by underlining its immunity from the machinations of the Western (read imperialist) nations. The caretakers of the nation were also wary of appearing too close to the erstwhile imperialists lest they attract accusations of cozying up with those very forces that once unjustly ruled the nation.

India also tended to approach global policy issues as if it were the sole moral voice and an upholder of rights for the world’s marginalized and oppressed citizens. India has at times clumsily tried to chisel a path that is true to this mission by refusing to take sides in geopolitical gamesmanship, in some cases to its detriment. India in the 21st century, however, has regularly displayed a brand of realpolitik that has a whiff of self-assuredness that one tends to associate with a mature nation, or at least one that has realized that pragmatism often trumps ideology. The recent assertiveness to demand recognition (a permanent seat...
Nuclear Power: ‘We’ll Manage’ Just Won’t Do

Japan’s recent disaster could be replicated multiple times in India, warns John Elliott

The nuclear disaster in Japan in the wake of the recent earthquake there must surely lead to a rethink of India’s $175 billion plans to build a new generation of nuclear power plants with technology from France, Russia and the US. It is inconceivable that India could begin to match Japan’s approach to limiting the impact of such a disaster, so the plans should be halted for the foreseeable future.

This is because India has shown in recent months that despite economic growth of near 9 percent, great successes in IT and manufacturing, and undoubted scientific skills, it is incapable of efficiently managing mega-events, planned or unplanned.

It would thus be terrible for the country to go ahead with the nuclear program that it has been planning since it struck a historic accord with the US in 2008 giving it access to international nuclear power and allied dual-use technologies. In a moment of apparent euphoria at the time, Prime Minister Manmohan Singh even talked sacrificially of India raising its nuclear power capability 100 times over the next 40 years to yield 470,000 megawatts by 2050.

“This event may be a big dampener for our program,” says Shreyans Kumar Jain, chairman of the state-owned Nuclear Power Corporation. “We and the Department of Atomic Energy will definitely revisit the entire thing, including our new reactor plans, after we receive more information from Japan.”

India currently has 20 ageing nuclear reactors supplying 3 percent of its total power generation. Two were built by GE in the late 1960s to the same possibly risky designs as those at Fukushima in Japan.

The new program envisages at least doubling capacity in 20 years. Three months ago, $9.3 billion in plans were signed for two reactors to be built by France’s Areva group, plus more to be built by Russia. US companies such as GE are also chasing contracts.

In the days after Japan’s disaster, the Nuclear Power Corporation said it was checking to ensure that current plants would “be able to withstand the impact of large natural disasters such as tsunamis and earthquakes.” but that is not enough. India is of course capable of checking such things in the normal course of events, but what is needed here is efficient management to avoid crises, and quick and efficient responses when disaster strikes. There is an assumption in India that, to use the British theater phrase, “everything will be all right on the night.” The Hindi word is jugaad, which implies innovative and sometimes rule-bending fixing so that “we’ll manage.” Then there is kaam chalo, meaning “make do.”

Till recently, one could indeed rely on India turning chaos into last-minute success, in the Monsoon Wedding film’s kind of way. But it has begun to look over the past year or so as if the country’s corruption and managerial inefficiencies have shown it incapable of responding effectively to the quickening pace of high technology and changes in many areas.

This was shown most dramatically with the Commonwealth Games’ corruption and managerial fiascos late last year. Other examples include a multitude of railway crashes, Delhi’s inability to manage the crowds and road congestion caused by an annual auto fair, gross inadequacies in police readiness and functioning, a disastrously inefficient reaction to a massive fire in Kolkata a year ago, yearly fog problems at Delhi airport and so on.

Each example shows, in different ways, the impact of a combination of waning government authority, lack of managerial focus and authority, poor and unsustained training, unwillingness or inability of professional experts to challenge the often-corrupt dominance of self-serving top officials and politicians, and over-riding greed and corruption.

Nuclear power is already controversial in India. Opposition has built against the imminent building of an Arecus plant in a quake-risk zone in southern India. The government was also forced by opposition parties last year to buck international practice and make nuclear plant suppliers liable for accident compensation claims. Now it will be hard for political parties to authorize construction of most plants.

This is indeed one of those moments when India can be thankful that it has a powerful, if fragmented, political democracy. As Uday Bhaskar, director of the New Delhi-based National Maritime Foundation, said: “Democracies are reactive, and an accident of [Japan’s] magnitude will raise concerns among the population about the safety of the technology.”

John Elliott is a foreign correspondent who blogs at ridingtheelephant.wordpress.com, which is carried on the web site Asia Sentinel (www.asiasentinel.com).
capitalize on its new found “favorite son” role and put in place long-term relationships and commitments that will help it leapfrog into first-world status without having to go through the regulation carbon-intensive industrial phase.

Leverage intellectual capital
India’s vast resources of intellectual capital and entrepreneurial drive are best positioned to ride the clean technology gravy train and produce world leaders in R&D, manufacturing and related services. For starters, the hordes of Indian students who graduate with basic training in science and technology can be co-opted to advance humanity’s knowledge of climate change and how to deal with it. At the moment, India has few academic institutes specializing in clean technology, but these could provide it with the edge that it needs in what is a very competitive market. While India may have some stellar technical and management institutions that provide world-class education at a fraction of the cost in the US and Europe, they also tend to be a few years behind cutting-edge practices. There is a great case for India to relax restrictions on foreign direct investment in the education sector especially related to clean technology. As with the information technology sector, the lack of institutional accountability is nothing but an aggregation of the ethical turpitude of its employees; but there is obviously something wrong with a system that breeds and perpetuates such callousness. India needs to endure some short-term agony and revamp the gilded institutions that are responsible for recruiting and training its future administrative leaders.

The other point that regularly surfaces as a huge concern for foreign investors is the glacial pace of dispensing justice in India. The paucity of adjudicators and the gargantuan backlog of cases are only getting worse, and there seems to be no reversal in sight.

In conclusion, there is now a palpable realization in India that the nation’s fate is unequivocally intertwined with climate change given its dependence on monsoon rains and vulnerability to natural disasters. However, this has yet to filter entirely through its policy-making machinery. India and the rest of the world need to work together to ensure that this happens by supporting those individuals and institutions in India that will shape its long-term commitment to combatting climate change.

Anmol Vanamali is a Director at the Center for Clean Air Policy in Washington DC. The views expressed here are those of the author alone and are not related to the Center for Clean Air Policy.