

Two Cheers to Kyoto Treaty

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We live in an age of risk – the “risk society” to use a notable phrase of German sociologist Ulrich Beck. There seems to be no escape from the culture of warning and the politics of prediction, prevention and compensation. Every now and then, the world is subjected to comprehensive reports on the global impact of climate change. They underline the things that have now become all too familiar: melting ice caps in the polar region and submergence of tropical islands, with the poor underdeveloped countries bearing the brunt of these devastating changes. All in all, a grim picture of floods, drought and suffering. For the not-so-amused green-bashers, who consider all this a load of hubris and exaggeration, there is an element of concern too – collapse of the tourism industry, as tourists bound for tropical paradises and the glistening Alpine skiing retreats will have no destination to go to. Clearly, endless prosperity, a hi-tech economy, a bullish market and titanic mergers that stimulate greater growth as well as many of the human activities (anthropogenic factors) that modify or destroy the natural ecosystem are at the heart of the problem. Problems that get compounded due to faultlines like the oil crisis, the debate over renewable and non-renewable energy resources and, of course, atmospheric warming – all of which are interlinked. The message is frighteningly clear; more freak weather conditions, massive displacement of populations and enormous loss of life.

On February 16, 2005, the world took its first concerted step to roll back the emission of ‘greenhouse gases’ believed linked to climate change with the enactment of the Kyoto Treaty. After seven years of wrangling and harangues that made the 1997 Kyoto Protocol a typical case of ‘no step forward, two steps back’ and despite all scepticism challenging its efficacy, the 2005 Treaty has a certain symbolic value attached to it that there is no mutual gain, unless there is collective cooperation.

This symbolism finds resonance in Rousseau’s fable about the ‘hunter and the stag’. Rousseau describes five hunters who join hands to hunt a stag. They agree to cooperate and mount a coordinated hunt and to share the spoils equally, giving

each sufficient meat to feed his family. But then one of the five breaks the ring to pursue a rabbit that provides enough food for his own family. As a result, the stag escapes and the other four hunters go hungry. The moral is that placing personal needs (read individual interests of States) over the collective destroys cooperation. Issues relating to global warming have for long been bitterly trapped in this fable. Negotiations on environmental issues are a complex process, for they are a combination of scientific uncertainty with national interest and of social activism with economics. Any negotiations towards cooperation can only be successful when competing interests find a way to generate mutual gain. From 1997 till the enactment of the Kyoto Treaty, politics and economics played a key role in policy discussions on global warming and routinely took precedence over scientific arguments. The following factors were evident:

First, the linkage factor. The ability of the 'South' developing countries to use environmental issues as an important tool for bargaining is a significant feature in the 'North-South' divide. For developing countries, linking environmental destruction to their poverty and population was a way to extract aid and technology transfer from the developed 'North' countries in order to speed up development activities, putting them on the road to solving the ills present in their sphere.

Second, the scientific findings. These invariably come into conflict with the political choices the countries exercise. While scientific findings clearly indicated that the environment was rapidly declining with the rise in global temperature, yet State policies, as witnessed in the negotiation process, were conditioned by the impact of such findings to their interest. For example, the low-lying countries felt more vulnerable to the global rise in temperature which could submerge their countries owing to the rise in the sea level, accompanied by the melting of the ice in the polar region. For such countries, which fall mainly in the 'South', it was imperative that the 'North' cut down carbon emission. Against this, the 'North' countries were not vulnerable to rising sea levels. Instead, reducing emission was a major domestic worry, as it would mean closing industries leading to unemployment. This, in particular, was the tone of the US vis-à-vis the Kyoto Protocol – a mindset articulated by George Bush Sr. in Rio in 1992: "I have some responsibility for a cleaner environment, and also a responsibility to families in this country who want to work, some of whom can be thrown out of work if we go for too costly an answer to some of these problems. And I am not going to forget the American family. And if they don't understand that in Rio, too bad."¹

Third, the political consideration. National interest, sovereignty and the right to development overshadowed the negotiation process. Despite the realisation

that the North could not do without the South and vice-versa, power politics between the two sides dominated discussions, particularly on issues relating to the emissions' 'trading' mechanism, the clean development mechanism and carbon 'sinks'. The US, in order to set the agenda, strongly advocated emission cuts to those industrialised countries that backed clean-up projects in the developing countries. The 'South', on the contrary, felt that such a swap offer would restrict their right to development, making them hostage to US dictates.

The Kyoto Treaty: Key Features

Under the 1997 Kyoto Protocol, industrialised countries committed themselves to binding reductions in greenhouse gases emissions (GHGs), averaging 5.2 per cent below 1990 levels between 2008 and 2012. The mandated reduction ranged from 8 per cent for the European Union to 7 per cent for the US and 6 per cent for Japan and Canada. Australia was allowed an 8 per cent increase, while Russia's target was fixed at 0 per cent. Compared with the opening positions in the negotiations – 15 per cent for the EU; 5 per cent for Japan and 0 per cent for the US² – the end result in the Kyoto Treaty can be summed up as a tidy compromise.

The agreement, ratified by 141 nations, calls on 36 industrialised countries – the US, Australia and Monaco are not part of the treaty – to rein in the release of carbon dioxide and five other gases, i.e. methane, nitrous oxide, hydrofluorocarbons, perfluorocarbons and sulphur hexafluoride, from the burning of oil and coal and other processes. Implementation of the agreement was delayed by a struggle to meet the requirement that the Treaty be ratified by those countries that account for 55 per cent of the world's emissions. The Clinton Administration signed the protocol in 1997, but the Senate refused to ratify it, citing potential damage to the US economy and insisting that it also cover countries with fast-growing economies, such as China and India. President Bush's unilateral withdrawal from the protocol temporarily jeopardised the Treaty.³ However, the '55 per cent' goal was reached in October 2004, nearly seven years after negotiations had begun, with Russia's formal ratification.⁴ As the agreement comes into force, the industrialised countries will be scrambling to put together a strategy to make sure the Treaty's obligations are met. Some countries are pondering a 'carbon tax' to punish polluters – a move opposed by business groups – while others favour expansion of renewable energy, particularly nuclear power, and promotion of energy-saving technologies.

The underlining feature of the Treaty is the encouragement of international cooperation. The clean development mechanism, for example, will encourage the rich industrialised countries to finance projects that reduce emissions in developing

countries in return for credit against their own emissions targets. The Treaty has significant implications for developing countries. Although they will not be required to reduce emissions towards specific targets, they will be required to act voluntarily to limit production of GHGs. The developing nations will benefit from the Kyoto Protocol Adaptation Fund, which they can use to pay for measures to anticipate and protect themselves from negative impacts of climate change.

The Message is in the Warming

Can then the Kyoto Treaty help initiate an environment-conscious energy policy? Given the fact that international politics is deeply rooted in the power axiom, a green-clean energy policy will continue to clash with national and strategic interest.

The world needs energy. World population has passed the six-billion-mark, yet one-third of the population lacks electricity. Poverty, suffering and global development requires constant, stable and affordable supply of energy. The current high price of oil, though not good for the public mood, is a boon for alternative energy, in particular, nuclear energy. But central to the debate on conventional/non-conventional energy are the oil lobbyists, who have orchestrated an anti-nuclear campaign solely to protect their business interests. Here, the role of the media is striking: it readily gulps bad news on nuclear plants, whereas their effectiveness and safety standards are hardly ever analysed. The subject has to be demystified.

Nuclear energy is neither dead nor dying; 31 countries use nuclear energy and accounts for 16 per cent of world's electricity.⁵ France generates 79 per cent of its electricity through nuclear power; Belgium 60 per cent; Sweden 42 per cent; Switzerland 39 per cent; Japan 34 per cent, Britain 21 per cent and the US 20 per cent.⁶ In the true spirit of the Kyoto Treaty, developing countries must encourage alternative sources of energy and fund the technology to the developing countries. Increasing global warming should make the case strong for nuclear energy and 'North-South' cooperation in this field will be welcome. Given the fact that the US has expressed grave reservations over Russia's nuclear technology supply to India, its recent offer to part with civilian nuclear technology for energy-hungry India is indeed a positive signal. Moreover, the IAEA can be effectively strengthened to check whether such technology is being diverted for military purposes.⁷ In the light of this development, External Affairs Minister K. Natwar Singh's recent remark at the Conference on "Emerging Nuclear Proliferation Challenges" organised by IDSA and Pugwash-India is significant. He said, "There is a need for a mindset change in dealing with emerging nuclear proliferation challenges. Approaches which have

failed to restrain, let alone punish those guilty of proliferation need to be replaced by a new framework which, on the one hand, is effective in curbing proliferation and, at the same time, does not inhibit legitimate cooperation in peaceful uses of nuclear energy by States whose non-proliferation records are beyond doubt... We are committed to further strengthening our regulatory framework in keeping with the changing technical and security challenges.” In the case of India, some of its nuclear plants are under IAEA safeguards, including the Russian-built Koodankulam plant in Tamil Nadu.

The risk attached to nuclear energy – health hazards, cost effectiveness and environmental scare – though not baseless, should not be an excuse to negate the importance of clean energy. There surely have been more human deaths and health hazards from oil exploration cum shipping and coal mines than nuclear plants. Moreover, nuclear plants follow health security and safety precautions more than any other conventional energy units. Sometime halfway through this century, there will be 10 billion energy-hungry people and taking the exhaustibility of fossil fuels and global warming into consideration, surely nuclear energy defines its point. We may yet be glad that we know how to tame the atom.

References/End Notes

- ¹ <http://www.cddc.vt.edu/tim/tims/Tim599.htm>
- ² For the Text of the Kyoto Protocol see <http://unfccc.int/resource/docs/convkp/kpeng.html>
- ³ See Thomas C. Schelling, “What Makes Greenhouse Sense?”, *Foreign Affairs*, 81(3), May/June 2002, pp. 2-9.
- ⁴ For an interesting account of Russia’s flip-flops on the Protocol, see http://www.iol.co.za/index.php?set_id=31&art_id=qw11096552260913B2516oct04
- ⁵ <http://www.world-nuclear.org/education/intro.htm>
- ⁶ Ibid.
- ⁷ IAEA projects 60 new small and medium sized nuclear power plants in the next 15 years. See, <http://www.bellona.no/en/interntional/russis/npps/37581.html>. For the Final Statement on the International Conference on Nuclear Power for the 21st century see, <http://www.parisnuclear2005.org/deroulement/declaration-finale-ang.pdf>

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