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Hurdles before climate deal

A marathon meeting on climate negotiations in Geneva last week has raised expectations for a global deal later this year

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A marathon meeting on climate negotiations in Geneva last week has raised expectations for a global deal later this year. If all goes well, leaders from 194 countries will unveil a climate pact when they congregate in Paris in December. That accord will suggest how nations are going to reduce carbon dioxide (CO_2) emissions to curb the increase in the average global temperature to below 2 degrees Celsius. But the Paris agreement is not going to be easy—although the Kyoto Protocol was agreed in 1997, it remained unimplemented by the US and other industrialized nations. These countries have contributed more than half of CO_2 emissions over the last two centuries. New members such as China and India are rapidly emerging as major players on the carbon atlas.

Small wonder that The Economist in its 7 February issue urged the Narendra Modi government to draw lessons from China's mistakes before it is too late. Delhi, according to the magazine, is now "the most polluted city on Earth". But the publication is silent on the economic processes that are causing climate change.

"Indeed, the three pillars of the neoliberal age—privatization of public sphere, deregulation of the corporate sector, and the lowering of the income and corporate taxes, paid for with cuts to public spending—are each incompatible with many of the actions we must take to bring emissions to safer levels," says Naomi Klein, the renowned Canadian journalist, in her book This Changes Everything—Capitalism vs. the Climate. "And together these three pillars form an ideological wall that has blocked a serious response to climate change for decades."

At a time when the new Indian government is embracing the mercantile economic model of the "Make in India" programme and investing heavily in coal-based power plants instead of accelerating people-centric renewable and solar energy policies, it is not clear how the government is going to adopt its climate negotiating positions when push comes to shove. Making strong statements in the international forums is one thing but standing up firmly for safeguarding one's own autonomous space for developing clean industries is another thing.

The Geneva meeting is a step forward after the conference of parties (COP 20) meeting in Lima, Peru, last December. It was specifically tasked to convert what was essentially an informal Lima agreement into a draft legal structure involving the nuts and bolts that go into the final plumbing of the Paris pact. The five areas in the Paris deal include mitigation for reducing CO_2 emissions, adaptation to new carbon-free activities, finance for assisting countries, transfer of technology for clean energy generation, and capacity-building. In addition, there are proposals for institutional arrangements to oversee work in all these areas. Also, for the first time, there are proposals for curbing carbon pollution caused by giant container ships and international flights. Effectively, all the commitments that countries are required to undertake as part of the Paris accord are now captured in an 86-page draft legal text that was finalized in Geneva. The discussions during various sessions gave an early glimpse of what is in store when negotiators battle it out in Bonn, in June. Prior to that meeting, countries are required to submit the so-called "intended nationally determined contributions" by the end of next month. The flow of those commitments, involving hard figures for reducing the CO_2 emissions, will suggest how serious the big players are, particularly the industrialized countries who created the problem. This does not mean that the Chinas and the Indias of the developing world which are now climbing up the carbon ladder because of their rapid industrialization can ignore their polluted air and rivers.

While there are some early indications about the likely reduction commitments of the two largest polluters—China and the US—the strength of the final deal will depend on how the industrialized world will comply with the commitments, adaptation, finance and transfer of technology. To put finance in context, the so-called climate sinners of the industrialized world are required to deliver funds on three separate fronts. First, the rich countries had agreed in Copenhagen to raise immediate short-term funds to the tune of $30 billion through a fast-track mechanism in 2010-2012 to help the poorest and most vulnerable nations who need to undertake adaptation measures on a war footing. Second, the rich countries had agreed to $100 billion per year by 2020 from a wide variety of sources to address carbon mitigation in developing and least-developed countries. And third, they had also committed to establish a clean energy fund, referred to as "The Green Climate Fund". In all these three areas, the results till now are few and far between.

When it comes to transfer of technology, the industrialized nations are silent on issues concerning how they intend to waive intellectual property commitments for sharing the latest technologies. If anything, the very mention of intellectual property rights issues in the climate agreement is anathema to the world's sole superpower. Patrick Michaels of the Cato Institute in

Washington has argued against giving resources to countries “because, for some reason, their political system is incapable of adapting”. Instead of adaptation, countries must settle for more free trade, he has argued, according to Klein.

Is it any surprise, therefore, that when the issue of transfer of technology is being debated in the climate negotiations, a group of 14 industrialized and developing countries are negotiating a plurilateral agreement on how to eliminate tariffs on some 400 environmental goods, an initiative that would put paid to any autonomous development and growth of renewable and solar energy sectors in the developing world. Further, two trade disputes graphically illustrate that the free trade rules of the World Trade Organization are at the heart of problems in tackling climate change. The disputes involve Canada’s feed-in tariff programme for renewable energy providers to sell power back to the electricity grids offering long-term contracts with guaranteed premium prices (like the public stockholding programmes for food security in developing countries) and the ongoing legal challenge by the US against India’s Jawaharlal Nehru Solar Mission.