

# Red lines on a green field: What India should do at climate talks

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We are only weeks away from the 21st Conference of Parties (COP-21) in Paris, scheduled in December. A preparatory negotiating session ended on September 4 in Bonn without apparent progress. A final negotiating session before the summit itself will also take place in Bonn in the third week of October. Given the failure to expand the agreed portions of the heavily bracketed Geneva Negotiating Text (GNT), it is unlikely that the five working days allotted in October would be able to come up with a relatively clean text for Paris. We may then be confronted with the familiar 'dilemma of the deadline' with pressures mounting in the final hours to reach consensus by having to abandon strongly held positions in a familiar process of attrition. Which is why it is necessary to work out an appropriate negotiating strategy for India with clarity over what we should be able to compromise on and what constitute red lines. Having been through the painful experience of the previous climate summit in Copenhagen in 2009, I would offer some personal observations.

One, high-level pronouncements emanating from government should be consistent and not create ambiguity and loss of credibility. On the eve of Copenhagen, unfortunately, there were several such statements, which cast doubt on India's negotiating posture. These statements encouraged the Americans and Europeans to believe that Indian positions were flexible. They confused our constituency of emerging and developing countries, suggesting that we were drifting away from the solidarity we had painstakingly built up during the 2007-09 negotiating process. The recent leak of a paper allegedly put forward by a very senior functionary of government has the potential of similarly undermining our negotiating position at Paris.

Two, the host country's actions need to be carefully watched. In Copenhagen, the Danish prime minister played a brazenly partisan role, assembling a group of about 25 leaders, to conjure up a negotiating draft overnight and then try and have it quickly adopted the next day in a similar, informal conclave, shutting out a large number of heads of state and government. Our negotiating team had to fight a bitter, rearguard battle to amend the draft the best it could. The point is that such a draft should not have been allowed to be tabled in the first place. I do hope we do not face a similar situation at Paris, where the host may graciously offer to come up with a text reflecting a broad consensus because no agreement could be reached. This is usually when our defences tend to fall. This is the stage when red lines become important. Paris is only one

milestone in what is likely to be a long-drawn-out process and we should ensure that certain key principles such as equity are not abandoned.

Three, some emerging warning signals must be heeded. At the recently concluded Bonn meeting, the 86-page GNT was divided into three separate boxes, one for the text that would be most suitable for a legal instrument, another more appropriate for COP decisions and the third for those whose placement needed to be determined. Despite assurances that there was no hierarchy to these categories, the contents reflected the priorities preferred by the developed countries. As if on cue part of the western media began to refer to the first box as constituting the 'core' while the other two, which included several items of importance to developing countries, were deemed to be of less worth and dispensable. It is reported that the principle of common and differentiated responsibilities and respective capabilities (CBDR) does not find place in the first category. The co-chairs of the working group, which produced the three category 'tool' to facilitate negotiations, is now mandated to produce yet another negotiating draft at the final preparatory meeting in Bonn. The Indian side must ensure that key principles of the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) do not get diluted or, worse, eliminated in the negotiating nitty gritty. It is already a matter of worry that at COP-20 at Lima, the CBDR was diluted by adding the phrase 'in light of different national circumstances'. Our acquiescence on this may prove costly later.

Four, in the run-up to Copenhagen, there was a systematic attempt on the part of our western partners to project India as the spoiler, obstructing a consensus outcome. This was despite the fact, which continues to be the case, that India's emissions are low both in overall and per capita terms and our record in reducing the carbon intensity of our GDP growth has been quite impressive. The reason for targeting India has been more because its positions on multilateral issues, whether climate or trade, influence the large constituency of developing countries and this discomfits western countries. We get put on the defensive by the portrayal of our country as a recalcitrant player. This was certainly the case at Copenhagen. For Paris we must do a better job of projecting the logic of our negotiating position and the ambitious climate change actions that we have already taken and intend to take. We should aim for a climate change regime in Paris and beyond which enables the country to achieve this without limiting our development prospects. We must not be seduced by notions of being in the big league or at the high table and thereby sacrifice our interests and lose the bargaining clout that we have precisely because much of the developing world takes its cue from us.

India's energy security and sustainable development necessitate a strategic shift from our current reliance on fossil fuels to development based on renewable and clean sources of energy. But as citizens of the world we carry collective responsibility to protect our planet and that too must be part of our negotiating mandate.

(Shyam Saran, a former foreign secretary, was PM's special envoy for climate change 2007-10. The views expressed are personal. )

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