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Road Ahead For India's Climate Politics

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This article is based on “**Proposing a new climate agenda for India**” which was published in The Hindustan Times on 23/03/2021. It talks about the road ahead for India in achieving the net-zero emissions target.

The year 2021 is an important year for global climate change negotiations, as Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) will release its report this year, updated national pledges on emission limits are expected at a climate Conference of Parties in the United Kingdom (UK), and Joe Biden-led United States (US) has promised to rejoin **Paris climate deal**.

Also, India has recently pledged to achieve net-zero emissions by 2050. This pledge will earn India diplomatic credit by assuming climate leadership. However, these diplomatic gains could come at the cost of domestic developmental objectives.

This is because without dramatic changes in policy and technology, India, at least, needs the option of increasing emissions to develop. Therefore, the trick for India is to focus on squeezing more development out of less carbon.

Challenges For India At Global Climate Politics

- **More Likely To Miss Target:** Analysis by the International Energy Agency illustrates the scale of change — an immediate and dramatic shift is required to shift Indian emissions from stated policies to sustainable development.
 - Further, this dramatic shift would still only get us to net-zero by 2065; 2050 would be even harder.
 - Also, net-zero emissions targets may not be able to meet, because they rely on future promises rather than current action, and on uncertain technologies to remove greenhouse gas emissions from the atmosphere.

- **Silo-Based Climate Decisions:** India’s climate governance structure is designed for silo-based decisions, whereas the climate crisis requires cross-sectoral collaboration. For example, electricity decisions may be tied to decisions on urban policy, transport systems, and building design. However, cross-sectional collaboration is still lacking in India’s policymaking.
- **Fossil-Fuels Needed for Development:** If India wants to achieve the net-zero target, its emissions would have to decline to start now, and never again reach levels achieved in 2019.
 - However, India’s greenhouse gas emissions are growing, and, because complex energy and economic systems take time to turn around, will grow for some time.
 - Further, limiting emissions from industry is a longer-term prospect because technologies are nascent, and will require international collaboration for new technology and approaches.

Way Forward

- **Sectoral Transition Plans:** Rather than a broad ambitious target, there is a need to identify and build a future pledge around sectoral transition plans for key areas of the economy.
 - Attention to sectoral transitions likely sends a clearer and more direct signal to the private sector on the need to shift investment patterns than does a broad and diffuse economy-wide net-zero target.
 - For example, to accelerate the electricity sector transition requires fixing distribution companies, transitioning from coal while protecting coal communities, and enhancing investment in renewable energy investments.
- **Strengthening Climate Governance:** India needs to build and strengthen its domestic institutions for climate governance. This will require identifying linkages between development needs and low carbon opportunities. In this context, a climate law can be useful.
- **Reaffirming CBDR:** In this upcoming climate change negotiations, India needs to reaffirm the long-standing principle of “common but differentiated responsibility” (CBDR) that requires richer countries to lead and argue against any pledge that risks prematurely limiting Indian energy use for development.

Conclusion

The Indian road to leadership should be based on specific near-term actions, institutional strengthening, and a combination of mid-and long-term targets. Longer-term targets, including net-zero, can, and should, be clarified and strengthened as we learn by doing overtime, as part of our transition to a low carbon future.

Drishti Mains Question

India needs to define its climate policies in ways that meet diplomatic, developmental, and climate interests simultaneously. Comment.
