



NOTHING SUBSTANTIAL was concluded on trade and climate change during US President Barack Obama's recent visit to India, despite expectations that agreements in those areas would be key outcomes of the summit. On the latter, before the visit, senior White House officials had stated they were hoping to ink a deal along the lines of the agreement Obama signed with Chinese President Xi Jinping in November last year. But the fact that no such deal was concluded does not mean Obama or the US establishment will stop treating climate change as a bilateral issue, or that they will not try to cajole India into taking on targets to reduce greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions.

It is not surprising that Obama, in the last two years of his presidency, should do so. There is limited scope for him to push his domestic agenda on climate change. Thus, bilateral deals on climate, as with China, have taken on importance. But the irony of Obama seeking curbs on India's GHG emissions is inescapable. The US Senate twice rejected that humans are causing climate change as recently as January, even as their own scientific bodies unequivocally concluded that 2014 was the warmest year on record. Thwarted as he is on the

domestic front, Obama seeks bilateral accord with China and, now, India. Paradoxically, the Obama-Xi accord to reduce US GHG emissions by 26-28 per cent in 2025 compared to 2005 means little. Without the force of a globally binding treaty agreed under the auspices of the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC), bilateral deals mean little. It is also evident that many American politicians and the public have little appetite for deep and rapid cuts in their own emissions. At the same time, they are beating up on India for using coal to eliminate the energy poverty of its people.

The climate bilateralism Obama pursues sets a dangerous precedent that undermines the multilateral framework under which the world seeks a meaningful global treaty on climate change. The key principles of this treaty, as articulated in the UNFCCC, are of equity and "common but differentiated responsibilities" (CBDR), whereby rich countries were to take the lead in addressing climate change in accordance with their level of development and historical contribution to the problem. In bypassing this multilateral framework, Obama is re-enacting the ad hoc Copen-

hagen agreement he cobbled together in the dying hours of the 15th Conference of the Parties (COP 15). The most surreal moment of the 15 hours he spent there in 2009 was when he reportedly burst into a room where the BASIC leaders were gathered. An hour later, with the "accord" drafted, he confronted another roomful of leaders from the EU, Australia and Canada and made them agree to it. It was at best a statement of intent and at worst a dangerous

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distraction, even a threat to global negotiations under UN auspices. As expected, nothing much came of it.

Obama's agenda is aligned with that of the US, which would like to undo the UNFCCC and blur the distinction between developed and developing nations along the CBDR principle. In its view, large emerging economies, such as India and China, should also take on cuts in GHG emissions, since they now emit large amounts. This ignores the historical contribution of countries that were early industrialisers. Further, the principle of equity embedded in the UNFCCC implies it is unfair that a country such as the US, with less than 5 per cent of the world population, should ac-

count for 16 per cent of current emissions of GHGs, and for almost 30 per cent of cumulative emissions of carbon dioxide since 1850.

The most productive manner in which India should respond to this bilateralism is not to stonewall or push back on Obama's and the US's demands. Instead, it should proactively propose the year and level at which its emissions will peak. In this context, the former prime minister's statement in June 2007 at the G8+5 summit in Heiligendamm, Germany would come handy — namely, India's per capita GHG emissions would never exceed those of developed countries, even while pursuing policies of development and economic growth. What this means is that India is willing to negotiate on the basis of equal per capita emissions, and this could also be used to formulate a peak year and a peak level of emissions. It is time our government converted such a statement and the principles of the UNFCCC into a formal negotiating position.

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