

Effecting climate change diplomacy

COLLECTIVE ACTION:

Heightened priority, more resources a must to tackle issue



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CLIMATE change is often quoted as “a fundamental threat to development in our lifetime”. The recently released 11th Malaysia Plan acknowledges that “climate change continues to be a major threat as it adversely impacts economic and social development gains and deepens economic inequalities”.

Within the security arena, cli-

mate change is viewed as “a threat to global peace and stability” or “a catalyst for conflict in vulnerable parts of the world”. But although climate change is well recognised as a global problem that requires a global solution, it does not receive the same level of prioritisation or resources as other policy issues, such as nuclear non-proliferation.

Questions abound on why global collective action to address climate change is a failure. To many climate sceptics, climate change diplomacy — after more than 20 years — is ineffective and has taken one full circle.

Diplomacy, reportedly, is “the practice of conducting negotiations between state and group representatives, (and) is critical to integrating climate change into foreign policy and to developing the conditions, domestically and internationally, for securing a global deal”.

At the core is the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) adopted at the Rio Earth Summit in 1992. The ultimate objective of the UNFCCC

The Bugey nuclear plant in Saint-Vulbas near Lyon in France. The United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change aims to stabilise greenhouse gas concentrations in the atmosphere, but has no enforcement mechanism. AP pic



is to “stabilise greenhouse gas (GHG) concentrations in the atmosphere at a level that will prevent dangerous human interference with the climate”. The convention, dividing parties into different groupings, is near universal but not legally binding as it does not set mandatory limits on GHG emissions and has no enforcement mechanism.

Linked to the UNFCCC is the Kyoto Protocol, which introduced legally binding emission targets for developed parties, the so-called

Annex I countries, because of their historical responsibility. Countries such as the United States and, initially, Australia, objected and withdrew. The Non-Annex I countries, largely the developing countries, were exempted under the principle of “common but differentiated responsibilities”.

International climate negotiations, the Conference of Parties (COP) and the Meeting of the Parties to the Kyoto Protocol, meet annually, but the process is slow and problematic. Moreover, the

changing economic landscape has witnessed some advanced developing countries becoming large emitters of GHGs, and engaging these countries constructively is no longer considered an option.

Yet, years of negotiations and attempts to design a new regime, including the second Kyoto commitment period in 2009, saw, instead, a political agreement — the Copenhagen Accord and voluntary pledges. But, the bottom-up Copenhagen pledges and second

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commitment period will end in 2020. Parties, including the major emitters, have agreed to negotiate. So, COP21, to be held in Paris in December, aims for a binding and universal agreement from all the nations of the world — a full circle, indeed.

It is, however, unclear what form the agreement will take: a protocol, a legal agreement or an instrument with legal force. Questions raised include who will monitor or compare the Intended Nationally Determined Contributions by countries, and what kind of differentiation is allowed.

Such is climate change diplomacy. Why has it been a challenge? Reasons include the complexity, uncertainty and diversity of interest.

The first complexity is reducing emissions — getting away from fossil fuels and decarbonising the economy. The massive energy transition required involves policymakers, regulators, investors, producers and consumers. Incremental change in terms of renewable energy or energy efficiency is observed, but a massive scaling-up is required in all sectors — energy, transport, building and many more.

Second of concern is no longer scientific complexity, but economic complexity — taking costly action now for unspecified economic benefits and environmental gains in the future.

Hence, the issue of free riding: allow others to act first. But, affected by climate change are many developing countries in Asia, as well as small island states that have not historically contributed to carbon dioxide concentrations. Adaptation measures, very much in the periphery, have been somewhat elusive, and efforts need to be assessed.

Third is the diversity of interest — justice, equity, technology transfer and funding.

Nonetheless, climate change diplomacy, within or outside the UNFCCC, has a role to play. It provides a framework and sets a level of ambition. Climate change diplomacy can provide the moral force for countries to act. Diplomacy begins at home; domestic consensus is important, and so is political and social will at all levels. Appropriate and effective communication is also a prerequisite to diplomacy. But, who has the power to act? Power is diffused and vested in a number of actors, and we all have a role to play.

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