Climate Faultlines: India's Lessons from the Glasgow Climate Negotiations

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The high-profile Glasgow Conference of Parties (COP), the 26th such meeting of countries attempting to advance global cooperation on climate change, was touted as our 'last best hope' to save the planet (Alexander 2021). Hyperbole is a given at such global negotiations, and while a single global negotiation seldom rises to this sort of billing, it is true that time is getting desperately short to address the scale and scope of the climate crisis. The March 2022 report on impacts issued by the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change clearly shows that climate change is a here and now issue (Pörtner et al. 2022). And it shows that India will be on the frontlines of climate impacts, facing substantial GDP losses and effects such as heat stress, water scarcity, climate migration and more frequent extreme events (Pillai, Chandra, and Mathew 2022). But India also has other important stakes in climate negotiations: will pressures related to decreasing emissions negatively affect our energy security or will it lead to new economic opportunities; what do broader economic shifts related an emergent global carbon economy imply for India's competitiveness; and what new foreign policy challenges or opportunities does climate change pose for India?

Given this broad framing, how do we understand India's role in the Glasgow climate meeting? And what does it imply for how India should engage this issue in the future? A discussion of international climate engagement, however, is best rooted in a prior understanding of domestic politics and interests, which provides the base from which to explore whether and how global positioning and articulation accounts for and advances Indian interests. Here, I suggest that India's engagement in the Glasgow COP, while storied and multi-faceted, also exposed faultlines in Indian climate politics and policies, which I broadly cluster around framing, policy, institutions, and diplomacy. I begin, however, with a quick round-up of the larger themes animating the Glasgow COP, which provided the context for Indian engagement.

Dominant Themes at the Glasgow COP

The central political theme at Glasgow was 'keeping 1.5 degrees alive' – extracting pledges that kept open the possibility of limiting warming by 1.5 degrees Celsius. In practice, this took the form of seeking 'ambitious' pledges from countries, and in particular, pledges for future 'net zero emissions', and calling on countries to update pledges by 2022, which is earlier than previously expected. India, in particular, came under substantial pressure prior to Glasgow, as the only G-20 country without a net zero pledge and did, indeed, announce a pledge to emit net zero emissions by 2070 as part of its 'Panchamrit' or five-part pledge, formulation. This emphasis on net zero is not without its critics. The political emphasis on future emissions pledges rather than near term policy and emissions commitments suggests that 1.5 degrees Celsius has been kept alive on paper, or rather in the outputs of emissions models, but rather less has been achieved in terms of short-term pledges to which today's political class can actually be held accountable. In other words, Glasgow focused on bridging an 'ambition gap' but did rather less to bridge an 'implementation gap'.

Salient to India, the Glasgow Pact (Glasgow Climate Pact 2022) included explicit reference to fossil fuels, and particularly to the 'phase down of unabated coal power and phase out of inefficient fossil

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fuel subsidies.' India was in the eye of this storm as the proposer of text replacing 'phase out' when referring to coal with the perceived weaker 'phase down',although ironically this language mirrored that in a joint China-US statement.

Adaptation and 'loss and damage' – compensating countries for unavoidable impacts – both received more limited treatment than mitigation, a long-standing trend at COPs. In a partially hopeful step, a two-year work programme for a global goal adaptation was established. For loss and damage, long feared by developed countries as opening the door to reparations, only a 'dialogue' was established, to the dismay of small, vulnerable nations.

Finance was a central issue, with the final Glasgow Pact expressing 'deep regret' that a long-standing pledge of $100 billion per year from developing countries by 2020 had not been met. While this remained unmet, there were calls to double adaptation finance by 2025 (albeit form a low base), indications that individual countries would strike bilateral deals for transitions support, such as South Africa's announcement that it would receive multi-donor support for its coal transition, and signals by groups of private financiers that funds running into more than $100 trillion would be available to support ambitious low-carbon transitions.

Finally, the meeting completed two important procedural agenda items: rules for creation of carbon markets and for the transparency framework, such as on reporting on emissions, pledges, and financial contributions.

Collectively, the Glasgow Pact saw several uneasy compromises, which is par for the course for climate negotiations. But it also set up the potential for exacerbated future conflict, including on the continued yawning short and medium term ambition and implementation gap, on the correspondence between commitments and finance, and on the perceived limited importance given to adaptation and 'loss and damage'. Notably, these themes suggest the deepening of a North-South divide in the climate negotiations. How best can we read deeper into the outcomes of Glasgow against the backdrop of Indian climate politics and policies?

Faultline 1: Framing of India's Interests

India's engagement with the Glasgow negotiation process is best understood if we explore the multi stranded and shifting framing India brings to climate debates. Historically, India has foregrounded the culpability of developed countries, and called for them to lead efforts at global emissions reductions. Mitigation was associated with higher costs and development burdens; India's focus was to be on development, and the focus of Indian diplomacy was ensuring this separation. Prior to Glasgow, both recent environment ministers emphasized the disparity in historical emissions between North and South (Press Trust of India 2021a, 2021b). Most memorably, following the Glasgow COP, perhaps stung by the criticism of India around the coal statement, the Prime Minister memorably referred to developed countries displaying a 'colonial mindset' at Glasgow due to their efforts to limit Indian emissions even as their historical emissions are disproportionately high (Mahapatra 2021).

However, India's climate narrative has also got increasingly multi-stranded, with growing recognition that mitigation and development need not always be in conflict and that there may even be economic opportunities (Dubash 2013). Early emphasis on a 'co-benefits' narrative in India's 2009 National Action Plan on Climate Change, recognising that energy efficiency and air pollution, for example, are convergent with climate policy, opened the door to a significant shift away from climate change as an exclusively diplomatic challenge of ensuring development continued unimpeded. In the last few years, this has morphed into a more muscular language of economic

opportunity and competitiveness on the back of low carbon technologies. These include the rise of rhetoric on renewable energy, electric vehicles and green hydrogen futures, the inclusion of clean energy and clean mobility technology in 'sunrise' sectors and proposals for green bonds (Ministry of Finance 2022). Arguments that India is among the nations at the forefront of addressing the climate crisis rest on these examples andserved as the foundation for India's net zero pledge at Glasgow.

The juxtaposition of climate equity and green growth narratives highlights the first faultline in Indian climate politics. Climate equity arguments are built on the view that mitigation is predominantly a burden to development, while green growth signals that there may be substantial economic opportunities. The first calls for defending India's space to emit carbon into the future; the second is about being in the forefront of a low-carbon transition to take advantages of competitive opportunities. Both narratives carry important and relevant messages, but cycling alternately between the two carries the potential for mixed signals, both internationally and domestically. Instead, India needs a strategic and synthetic narrative knitting the two together to give coherence to domestic action, useful elements of which are detailed below.

First, a useful and firm starting point would be to acknowledge that, in practice, high-carbon development futures are no longer viable for India. The only way India could take a high carbon path is if, as is dictated by the equity narrative, India can explicitly win a large share of the remaining carbon budget and if developed countries do, in fact, vacate carbon space. However, the problem is that winning this argument would yield a poisoned chalice: by developing a high carbon economy, India would almost certainly be a technologically backward economy in a decade, because the rest of the world would pivot to low-carbon technologies. Moreover, India would be exposed to competitive disadvantages as carbon tariff and tax barriers are erected in other countries. For these reasons, India's interests lie with advancing low carbon development.

Second, equity remains important, but is best understood in the context of how India negotiates the transition to low carbon development and has the time, space and support required to do so. To begin with, India can legitimately argue that the priority use of the limited fossil fuels available should be to increase welfare in poor nations. Specifically, where advancing development and addressing poverty requires use of fossil fuels – shifting from biomass to gas cooking to improve health outcomes is a good example – India should be fully entitled to do so. But there is also a broader argument. Low-carbon development transitions are challenging because they are necessarily systemic in nature, have the potential for disruptive outcomes, and may be financially costly. Recent analysis shows that India's emissions future is shaped as much by urbanisation and industrialisation choices as by technology adoption choices (Spencer and Dubash 2022). Accelerating renewable electricity will require not only investing in high up-front cost renewables, but also addressing the parlous state of the distribution companies and shifting an entire political economy that has co-evolved with fossil fuels (Dubash, Swain and Bhatia 2019). Managing such transitions are a particular challenge for countries like India where the cost of capital is high, institutions are often weak, and citizens are ill-equipped to bear the cost of economic shocks. Climate equity demands that developing countries like India are supported in this transition and that the risks of undertaking the transition are not placed on the poor.

Finally, India's narrative needs to emphasize not just north-south equity and related questions of development but also the fact that climate vulnerability is itself a justice issue. Calls for climate space need to be leavened by the reality that the poor, in India and elsewhere, will be hurt greatly by climate impacts. There has been growing attention to vulnerability in India's international positioning -- its leadership of the Coalition for Disaster Resilient Infrastructure a prominent example – and India's state action plans have foregrounded adaptation issues. Yet, India's articulation of

equity often focuses disproportionately on north-south development issues, to the relative exclusion of justice tied to climate vulnerability, leaving it open to criticism by vulnerable nations, as illustrated by the coal 'phase down' brouhaha at Glasgow. Neither domestic policy nor our negotiation stance has fully internalised the implications of climate vulnerability. Without this, India's equity stance is imbalanced.

A consistent narrative along these lines would help to inform both international negotiation and domestic policy. The current approach, which seems to oscillate between celebration of India as a climate champion and invocations of neo-colonialism, is less helpful as a strategic device for Indian climate policy.

Faultline 2: From Economic Opportunism to Strategic Policies

Policies driven by the co-benefits narrative -- development and mitigation can be made to work together -- have typically emerged opportunistically. For example, in areas such as energy efficiency and renewable energy, enterprising bureaucrats played a substantial role in showing how developing concrete policies could promote development, through cost savings in the case of energy efficiency, and greater energy security in the case of solar power. These efforts also helped deflect international pressure on India to demonstrate mitigation progress. Notably, these opportunistic approaches do not generate economic losers and so are easier to sell politically. However, embracing a narrative that goes beyond episodic opportunism to engineering a low-carbon future requires a shift to strategic policy making. This involves making strategic choices about development futures, bets on technologies, and sufficiently articulated long-run strategies.

This distinction between opportunistic and strategic policymaking is the second faultline in Indian climate politics. Strategic thinking requires balancing multiple objectives, such as identifying the most fertile arenas for low-carbon transition such as decarbonising electricity, creating a hydrogen economy, a cooling transition and so on; identifying approaches that maximise synergies around job creation, but also mitigate local environmental harms such as air pollution; identifying the costs of transition and how they would be paid for; building linkages to adaptation and vulnerability; and mitigating the distributional consequences for the poor. Politically, bringing about low-carbon transitions requires not only policies to reward some actors but imposing costs on incumbent actors locked into the fossil fuel economy to accelerate the transition. The political, policy and institutional needs of a transition-focused approach are higher than those of an opportunistic approach.

This as yet embryonic pivot from opportunistic to strategic thinking was reflected in the 'Panchamrit' pledge that PM Modi presented at Glasgow, which will likely form the basis for India's updated pledge, or Nationally Determined Contribution (NDC). There was certainly intent to signal a forward direction to India's decarbonisation plans, such as India's intensity pledge to reach 45% reduction of carbon intensity (presumably by 2030), an upgrade on the 2015 Paris pledge of 33-35%, a promise to scale up renewable energy, and a net zero target. But at the same time, there were indications of patchy strategic thinking.

The pledge of reaching net zero emissions by 2070 (whether for carbon dioxide or all greenhouse gases was not specified) received all the headlines, coming as it did after weeks of headlines in global media and growing diplomatic pressure on India. Yet, there was little analysis undertaken prior to announcing these pledges, and the implications of the pledge for India's development future – positive or negative – remain unknown. Indeed, the long-time frame, almost fifty years into the future, makes it very hard to conduct such analyses, and equally, for the pledge to shape current

policies. At best, the net zero pledge was probably an expedient response to growing international pressure to provide a definitive statement on this issue.

More interesting for current policymaking were a series of sectoral pledges, particularly on electricity. India pledged that by 2030, it would "fulfil 50% of its energy requirement from renewable energy sources" and also said it would raise its "non-fossil fuel energy capacity to 500GW". There was some confusion about how to interpret these pledges, because 50% of energy rather than electricity would be an enormous challenge. Even if the reference were to electricity, so, too, would be 50% of generation requirement rather than capacity. From subsequent clarifications, it seems likely that the 50% referred to capacity, not generation, and was intended as an upgrade on India's Paris pledge of 40% of electricity capacity from renewable sources, and the 500GW non-fossil fuel capacity was intended to build on India's domestic target of 450GW of renewable capacity. Ultimately, the pledges boiled down to an intention to build a lot more renewable energy capacity, starting from today's base of just over 100 GW of modern renewable energy (Ministry of Power 2022).[2]

There is no doubt this is a steep increase in renewable energy capacity. But the broader point is that as a blueprint for transition, this may be inadequate and could potentially skew decisions, because it focuses on building capacity, and not on incentivising using that capacity for generation. Moreover, it leaves the door open to simultaneously building a lot more renewables and more thermal power plants, opening the risk to future stranded assets in one or both types of technology. Arguably, a strategic approach to decarbonising electricity would have articulated a pledge in terms of percentage of renewable electricity generated rather than in capacity terms, encouraging consideration of all fuel sources and all aspects of the electricity system, including storage (Swain and Dubash 2021). The broader point, however, is that consideration of how best to frame a pledge in the context of a transition to decarbonised electricity was, perhaps, inadequately considered in the build up to Glasgow.

Closely related is the need to have deeper analysis and a more open conversation about the future of coal in Indian electricity. While it is certainly true that that India is not in a position to eschew coal in the short run, it is the case that the decarbonisation of electricity requires careful analysis of a transition path, and the role of coal in that path over time. This is particularly so given the likely declining competitiveness of coal versus renewables, the potential for lock-in to uncompetitive technologies and therefore stranded assets, and the need to plan ahead to avoid negative impacts for coal-dependent regions and communities. Notably, South Africa got the spotlight at Glasgow for announcing that they had negotiated an international package of support for a coal transition on the back of a clear domestic plan. Particularly with growing international pressure for a coal phase-out, clear-headed analysis is required so that India can ensure we retain the ability to use coal as needed, start planning for the future, and win international financial support for doing so. A strategic approach would include such considerations.

There are, however, emerging indications of greater attempts at strategic thinking around India's energy transition. The introduction of 'production linked incentives' for renewable energy and floating of green bonds indicated in the 2022 budget speech suggest an effort to link a renewable transition to job creation and industrial development, as part of a larger conversation about addressing the finance needs for a low carbon future. However, the lessons of academic literature

[2] The Indian statement also included a pledge for 1BT reduction in projected emissions by 2030, but it was unclear what the baseline from which reductions were to be reduced. Consequently, the significance of this pledge is also hard to assess.

regarding transitions are that isolated policy initiatives such as these can at most be a start, and need to be embedded in a larger transition strategy, that also looks at declining sectors, managing those who lose from a transition, and ensuring institutions and surrounding contextual factors support a transition (Markard, Geels and Raven, 2020; Victor, Geels and Sharpe, 2019).

The need for strategic thinking is, perhaps, even greater for adaptation. While State Action Plans provide some measure of forward thinking, there are few indications that adaptation and vulnerability to climate impacts have been mainstreamed into India's development thinking. For example, the 2022 budget announcement of infrastructure-based stimulus through the 'Gati Shakti' initiative does not appear to have been passed through the test of carbon resilience. Yet, increasingly, these considerations must be mainstreamed into India's development decision making.

Faultline 3: Under-prepared Institutions

The shift from a unitary climate equity narrative to a nuanced one bringing mitigation and development together, and the policy pivot from opportunism to strategic intervention both require building a climate-ready state. In brief, climate change brings extraordinary governance needs in at least three dimensions (Dubash et al. 2021). First, the scale and scope of the problem require both horizontal coordination across ministries and issue areas, and vertical coordination across federal scales. Second, the rapid and far-reaching changes will create winners and losers, and unless there are state-mediated efforts at building consensus, the losers are likely to try and stall transitions. Third, climate mitigation requires low-carbon transition on an accelerated scale, with attention to development implications, and strongly shaped by global trends; anticipating and planning for these transitions requires strategic capacity and high levels of analysis and knowledge. These challenges go well beyond the scope of an environment ministry alone, but rather requires the environment ministry working with planning agencies, dedicated knowledge bodies and coordination bodies across various levels of government.

Some of the ambiguities in India's statement at Glasgow bear the hallmarks of thin institutional capacity in the build up to this important event. This includes the seeming lack of adequate analysis prior to issuing net-zero pledge, the failure to state whether the pledge to reduce projected emissions by 1 BT by 2030 was per year, or cumulatively, and from which baseline, which makes a substantial difference to the interpretation of the pledge, and the confusion about generation and capacity in the renewable energy targets. While such detail need not belong in a Prime Minister's statement, it certainly should have been provided immediately afterwards for analysts and media to pore over.

But the needs go well beyond basic concerns of accuracy and background analysis. A more thoroughgoing effort is necessary to work toward a climate ready state. For example, to solve the strategy setting challenge, India could consider establishing a 'Low Carbon Development Commission' tasked with identifying key transitions, the synergies and trade-offs with development challenges, and harnessing the knowledge in business, civil society, and academia to develop well-articulated visions of the future (Dubash, Pillai, and Bhatia 2021). To solve the horizontal coordination challenge, India ostensibly has an Executive Committee on Climate Change, but this body risks reproducing implicit ministerial hierarchies. Vertical coordination with Indian states – that are the sources of experimentation and have jurisdiction over many climate-salient issues – is minimal; the centre can usefully be the enabler of knowledge and finance, while liberating states to experiment and self-organise around common concerns, such as forests, and coasts. The lack of a deliberative forum is particularly apparent, to enable building consensus on thorny transitions. For example, a coal transition commission might be a useful first step, to consult widely and deliberate

on both future coal needs as well as initial steps in what is likely to be a multi-decade transition involving new sources of livelihoods for coal states. While India has a Prime Ministers' Council on Climate Change, it is largely moribund, and when functional is a closed and non-transparent body. These are initial ideas, but they signal the scope and need for more thoroughgoing institutional reform to prepare for the governance challenges of climate change.

A further issue worth debating is whether a dedicated climate law may be useful in India. There is no easy answer, but the issue is worth debating. While some jurisdictions adopt an approach of writing laws aimed at emissions targets and implementing organisations and rules, others adopt a more open-ended approach aimed at enabling various parts of government to actively consider mainstreaming climate change (Sridhar 2021). Given the complexity of India's climate politics, and the continued salience of equity considerations, the latter would appear to be more relevant for India. However, it is further worth debating the relative merits of an overarching legal framework versus a patchwork quilt approach through which existing laws around environment, water, land, coasts and so on are amended to internalise climate concerns, or whether an overarching integrated legal framework is needed. Finally, if the key need is new institutions, do these need to be law-backed or can they be administratively created? These are all questions worth debating as the Indian state gears up for climate-readiness.

Faultline 4: Diplomacy

As the discussion above suggests, Indian climate diplomacy, such as at Glasgow, should not be understood independently of domestic context, but rather in terms of how well it serves domestic objectives. Clever diplomacy, by itself, cannot compensate for shaky foundations such as an inconsistent narrative, weakly-strategic policy initiatives, and thin institutions. The resultant faultline is the lack of clear articulation between domestic climate policy and foreign climate policy.

The experience at Glasgow was sobering. After acceding to issuing a net-zero target in part seemingly due to pressure of global public opinion, putting forward high-profile international collaborations such as the International Solar Alliance, and the Coalition on Disaster Resilient Infrastructure, India nonetheless unfairly received bad global press because it introduced the re-phrasing of coal 'phase-out' to 'phase-down'. This experience suggests that while skilful positioning is essential, building climate diplomacy substantially around a messaging exercise will founder against the hard rock of competing national interests.

Behind closed doors, India's arguments were more nuanced than at first evident: despite its greater carbon content, why should coal alone be singled out when other fossil fuels that other countries were heavily dependent upon – oil and gas – were not? What came across in the public narrative, however, was a blunter message, with India assuming the voice of a united South, asserting the right to use fossil resources because the North has disproportionately contributed to global emissions.

The problem, however, is that the South is not nearly united and, in large part, did not rally behind India. Vulnerable countries increasingly argue that climate vulnerability deserves as much ethical support as a right to use carbon for development. Other large developing countries, such as South Africa, have firmly plumped for arguing for financial support for a low-carbon transition rather than retaining their right to use their carbon. And the US, after wooing India with glimpses of the high table in exchange for playing good climate citizen, prioritises its now regular bilateral understandings with China, which have become the de facto shadowlines of the multilateral negotiation, over providing cover to India.

Under these circumstances, rather than prioritising reputational outcomes, Indian foreign policy needs to build on a clear headed but enlightened assessment of Indian interests. Specifically, India could continue to build pragmatic alliances with the developed world around technology transitions, as it is currently doing, particularly in bilateral contexts. But it could extend this by forging a more active and pragmatic strategic programme of low carbon transitions at home, which would be more likely to attract allies and support, backed by well-informed and specific requirements of financial support. It could also emphasize far greater common cause with climate vulnerable countries around the world, including in the South Asian neighbourhood, in their call for more, and more rapid, mitigation. In this context, the equity argument would be less one articulated, and viewed, as India doing less for reasons of differentiated responsibility, but rather a call for wealthier countries to do proportionately more, even as India undertakes ambitious low-carbon development transitions.

A solid domestic strategic base would also allow India to engage more effectively in long-term narrative shaping battles. One such is the forthcoming 'Global Stocktake' under the Paris Agreement, on the basis of which the adequacy of collective progress is to be judged. What constitutes a fair and adequate Nationally Determined Contribution? What is the relative balance of short-term immediate measures that enable a country to avoid locking-in to a high carbon future versus long-run pledges about net zero? These are questions that India should proactively engage and project as part of its positioning, rather than, as at the moment, being reactive when probed.

Finally, it would be misleading to consider climate change politics distinct from broader geopolitics. Based on a solid domestic strategy, India would need to articulate long-term strategies for its engagement in fora beyond the UNFCCC, notably the G-20, as well as consider linkages to emergent issues, such as heightened energy security concerns and the potential for climate-led trade measures. In all these cases, the most useful starting point is a clear, articulated and hard-nosed assessment of Indian interests, one that includes strategic concerns about low-carbon development transitions and the implications of climate equity, but also gives prominence to avoiding climate harms, and therefore prioritises an effective global climate response.

Conclusion

India is negotiating several faultlines in climate politics. The world of two decades ago, when domestic interests were understood as defending space for development and high carbon development if necessary, and the associated diplomatic agenda of providing that insulation, is long gone. Instead, we have a more complex set of intersecting domestic interests driven by the imperative of a low carbon future, important equity based carve outs of carbon for the poor and requirement of transition support, and attention to vulnerability and therefore the need for urgent global mitigation action.

India has made some strides in negotiating these faultlines. The climate narrative is more complex than in earlier decades; strategic policy initiatives are increasingly on the national agenda; a few experiments have been attempted on institutions; and climate diplomacy has become more sophisticated, particularly around new international initiatives. But these shifts do not, as yet, add up to a coherent strategic approach. As discussed here, a necessary starting point is a consistent Indian climate narrative that truly reflects the full range of Indian interests, upon which well-developed policies, institutions, and diplomacy can be built. A lesson from Glasgow is that India needs to advance cogently, and in an inter-connected way, on all these fronts.

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