

Options and Prospects for the BASIC at Doha, COP-18

Written by Swaran Singh

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SWARAN SINGH, NOV 26 2012

Unlike the last three Conferences of Parties to the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change (COPs) at Copenhagen, Cancun and Durban, the clout and cohesion of the BASIC quartet – Brazil, South Africa, India and China – have undergone visible and sustained diminution. This drift in this quartet of the fastest growing economies – that came together to defy an international order erected by industrialized countries and to set an example in bargaining in terms of mitigation of their rapidly growing carbon emissions – refuses to subside even in the run up to the next COP-18. BASIC, as a result, continues to slide to the margins and may no longer be the force that it has been when it comes to the COP-18.

It sounds unconnected yet the COP-18 is being held during November 27-7 December this year at Doha – a city that has already earned notoriety for the unending Doha Development Round of negotiations. These talks have been stalled since 2008 due to the international community's inability to lower trade barriers in the majority of countries. It was also in 2008 that the earliest thoughts on BASIC formulation had germinated and this continued stalemate in the so-called Doha Round reflects a similar divide amongst the developed and developing countries which has now become the bane of recent climate change meetings.

To focus on the BASIC profile, in climate change negotiations, their successive parleys for the last one year continue to betray shades of their increasing intra-group differences. Their differences have got further complicated as the BASIC has resorted to involving many other countries in their successive deliberations such as the Like Minded Countries or the Chair of Rio+20 dialogue hoping to gain wider audience and legitimacy as also to change atmospherics. Even formally, the BASIC quartet has sought to repeatedly underline that they are not an exclusivist group – as their critics allege –but are very much an integral part of G-77+1 (China), working together to safeguard the interests of developing countries.

Besides, each of the BASIC countries has not been growing as was anticipated. Slowdown in India's growth rate has been accompanied by rising growth rate in Indonesia making the wags suggest that 'I' of BASIC should now belong to Jakarta instead of New Delhi. China meanwhile has been preoccupied with transfer of power to its fifth generation of leaders. With the BASIC adrift, member states have been showing stronger inclination to focus increasingly on national priorities and parameters that ignite speculations about their distinctiveness rather than uniformity. This has resulted in an irreversible drift from their Copenhagen spirit that stood for negotiating like emerging economies willing to bargain jointly with major industrialized countries. This drift can but only partially be explained as a result of continued lack of progress in the overall climate change negotiations, which has impacted on the enthusiasm of all participating countries.

In their meeting in Brasilia last September, the representatives of BASIC, for instance, were last seen trying to evolve a common position ahead of this month's COP-18. Briefing the press at the end of their Brasilia meet, Brazilian negotiator Luiz Alberto Figueiredo stated that the underlying theme in their meeting was the future of the emission-limiting Kyoto Protocol of 1997 where 194 countries have agreed to reduce their greenhouse gas emissions (GHG) below their 1990-levels.

Figueiredo told the reporters that as their bottom-line, the BASIC bloc wanted to ensure extension of the Kyoto Protocol, which would expire at the end of 2012 up to the year 2020 along with drawing a chart for a post-2020

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climate change regime. This clearly indicated a noticeable lowering of their earlier benchmarks. The BASIC quartet was once known for its strong advocacy of additional demands from industrialized countries. Developed countries were to make commitments on making available to developing countries both finance and technologies to assist the latter in meeting their climate change mitigation obligations.

Second, this lowering of their benchmarks has also been interpreted as their last-ditch effort to rope in the support of the United States (US). The core regime of the Kyoto Protocol remains devoid of participation – let alone leadership – of the US. Despite brief indulgence of President Obama, the US remains outside this regime. The fact that the US is not a party to the Kyoto Protocol and that Canada withdrew from it makes any progress in the negotiations illusionary and ineffective, driving the BASIC into revising its goalposts and strategies.

Third, the European Union has been steadfast in insisting to include international aviation in the EU Emission Trading Scheme, while the BASIC group has been calling for “immediate withdrawal of actions that violate the multilateral rules-based system besides adversely affecting trust amongst countries.” BASIC believes that the emissions levels of developing countries remain far below what is required either by logic of science or by their historical responsibility. Meanwhile, they have also given up their rhetoric about measuring emissions on per capita basis.

As of today, with their unprecedented move to go backwards to seek accommodation with powers that be, it is the lack of ambition on the part of the developed world that has particularly undercut BASIC enthusiasm on proposing and negotiating specific levels and methods of emissions reductions. This has over time begun to dent the spectre and spirit of BASIC meetings. As a result, the BASIC itself appears increasingly a divided house. Conversely, moving away from initiating substantive global efforts, it is the shared ambition and grievances of the BASIC quartet that are today projected as driving their weakening commitment to climate change mitigation policies.

However, overcoming several intra-BASIC differences very much remains within their ambit and can be addressed as the first step in reviving their Copenhagen spirit. They, for instance, need to overcome their differences on the legal nature of the new regimes like the controversial European Union Emissions Trading Scheme. They can certainly evolve a joint response to it. Similarly, they need to revive their most celebrated common commitment to the general principle of common but differentiated responsibility (CBDR).

Other broader issues such as approach to equity, differentiation between the developing and developed countries, provisions of finance and technology transfer also continue to keep them together though they have so far failed to evolve any joint definitions or remedial strategies. As emerging economies, the BASIC has been negotiating with developed countries to extend the Kyoto Protocol, which is the only existing legal framework that prescribes cutting of GHGs by its signatories. They have also been propagating setting up of the Green Climate Fund (GCF) without much progress of any kind.

In spite of some signs of their falling apart at the last COP-17 at Durban in 2011, the BASIC had managed to stay unified in their demand for the second commitment of the Kyoto Protocol. Having failed to achieve any breakthrough since then, the trends of their recent meetings do not extend any promise for COP-18. The BASIC quartet believes that at the upcoming COP-18 at Doha, the parties must be in a position to unanimously adopt a ratifiable second commitment period under the existing Kyoto Protocol. They also call for its immediate implementation at the beginning of 2013. BASIC believes that logically, nothing much can be achieved in climate change mitigation until developed countries commit to reducing their emissions by 25 to 40 per cent below 1990 levels.

Finally, the Sandy super storm that preceded US presidential elections and Obama’s return to the White House for four more years is expected to revive lobbies of mitigation stakeholders in the US with regards to high stakes in the US returning to its leadership role at least of the developed world participating in these mitigation efforts. Similarly, China’s new leaders have also displayed their strong commitment to climate change issues. It can be argued that global media for the last several weeks had been overtaken by the leadership changes in the US and China but focus is likely to return as the world begins to gear up for the COP-18 and leaders must grab this very last chance they have.

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COP-18 is the last meeting before the Kyoto Protocol expires at the end of this year. World leaders are not oblivious to this fact. Several parallel efforts and formulations of various groups of nations show genuine commitment but these need to be collated to produce operable mechanisms agreeable to all countries. It is in this process of collation of multiple diverse views that BASIC quartet has had an impressive record of being the proverbial 'bridge' between the most developed and the least developed countries. As a mediator, it has also braved its share of hits. But with BASIC adrift much of the climate change debate stands fragmented. Reviving the Copenhagen spirit of BASIC therefore must be seen as an essential prerequisite for any conclusive bargain at COP-18. And, while BASIC has a special responsibility to shake itself to life, all other stakeholders must also put their pounds and pennies to make the BASIC quartet once again alive and kicking.

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