Chapter Five

CONCLUSION

The phenomenon of climate change has been a major shock to the international system. With the kind of threats it poses, it has challenged the very manner in which humans beings have organized society, and the way in which this society is currently functioning. The concepts of growth and development, always held up as goals that are not only desirable, but absolutely beneficial for human advancement, have been held up to sharp scrutiny under the shadow of climate change. Today, these very concepts have become problematic, and are at the centre of the debates and discussions surrounding climate change.

In a deeply competitive world, several countries have embarked on a race to the top of the economic growth ladder. Economic growth, however, has increasingly come to be defined in very narrow terms – that of the rate of growth of Gross Domestic Product. It is on the basis of this measure of growth that there is a growing optimism about the progress of developing countries like India and China all across the world and within these countries. It is also this particular measure which is increasingly becoming an indicator of the extent to which a country is developing.

India and China are both involved in a race to secure their position as one of the superpowers of the world, a position to which only the United States of America has had legitimate claims so far. The two countries have made high-speed economic growth, which is referred to as development, as their ultimate aim. It is undeniable that both countries have become increasingly influential as a result of the economic growth they have experienced in the previous two decades. They have gained entry into elite clubs of the developed world such as the Group of Eight (G-8). The leaders of both countries, along with some other select developing countries, regularly attend meetings of the G-8. All of these are viewed as indicators of their upward mobility in the world community.
In the specific context of climate change, India and China have become particularly crucial participants in the international negotiations. Even though they are competitors, on the issue of climate change, the two countries have consisted allied with each other in order to protect their interests, and have also claimed to protect the interests of the Group of 77 (G-77), a caucus of seventy seven developed countries that was created in 1964. In a sense therefore, both countries straddle the small space between the developed and developing countries. They have been vehement in opposing any attempts by the developed countries to constrain their right to develop in the face of the looming challenge of climate change. They have fought for being granted the same ecological space that has been claimed by the industrially, economically and socially advanced countries of the west over the past 200 years. All the arguments so far have been based on the principles of common but differentiated responsibility.

The questions of climate change and economic growth are deeply intertwined. Most of the resistance to take action on an issue that is already affecting people across and the world stems from an insatiable desire for purported economic growth. The anxiety that the growth of India and China is causing within the United States of America has led it to consistently refuse to sign the Kyoto Protocol, and therefore undertake any commitment to ameliorating the problem in which it has played the most major role in creating. The intransigence of the United states, combined with a strong sense of confidence in their own rise in the world, and the potential benefits of further economic growth, is leading India and China to be equally intransigent in taking any serious action on climate change, inspite of increasing contribution to the problem.

The growth story of India and China is not without its critics though. Noted economist Pranab Bardhan states that there is sufficient reason to exercise caution while billing India and China as the next super powers. Purely in economic terms, China is being cited at the manufacturing hub of the world. Bardhan points out that the impression being given out is that all of the world’s manufacturing occurs in China. However, this is far from the truth. Although Chinese manufacturing has grown by leaps and bounds, of
the total world manufacturing income, only 15 per cent is in China, while 24 per cent is in the United States.

Similarly, he argues that although liberalisation of the economy has certainly made the corporate sector in India more vibrant, 94 per cent of the country’s workforce is employed outside of this sector. The service sector, employing highly skilled staff, particularly those skilled in information technology, and which is the main driver of India’s growth story, employs merely one per cent of the country’s workforce.

Although he does not deny the achievements of both the countries, he sounds a very strong note of caution. He says that the hype surrounding the growth of the two countries is leading to a very dangerous trend of ultra-nationalism, especially among its main beneficiaries, which is the middle class. This has led to deflection of attention from the main problems that afflict both the countries. In India, even as some parts of the country progress, major parts remain in the clutches of poverty and related problems such as inequality, illiteracy, malnourishment, lack of access to basic services such as health. In China, although poverty has been radically reduced, problems relating to income inequality remain. China is also suffering from unrest among its labour force, and the quality of the environment continues to be degraded inspite of professed plans and proposals to counter this problem. Bardhan’s argument is that although both countries have done quite well, but neither is yet at a stage where they can aspire for superpower status. Worse still, the foundations of any economically strong country comprises of being able to provide basic social services to its citizens, and on this count, both countries have a long way to go. Thus, the very foundations of their economic strength are shaky (Datta 2010). It is this premise of economic strength, purported to be growing, that arguments shaped by both countries on climate change have been based.

In a normative world, the interest of the citizens of a state must be priority while deciding what will be in a country’s national interest. In the real world however, the state makes decisions based on what it perceives to be national interest. What will constitute national interest is further decided by various constituencies operating within the country.
While various interest and pressure groups within each country will have their own requirements, and therefore either own conceptions about what really will be in the national interest. Ever so often, the interest of the particular constituency and what constitutes nation interest gets conflated. Under such a situation, there is competition between diverse notions of national interest. The perspective of the more powerful, influential groups often wins the day when it comes to defining national interests, and the perspectives of relatively weaker constituencies do not get included in the bouquet of national interest.

In the case of both India and China, especially vis-à-vis climate change negotiations, national interest is clearly defined by the right to continue economic growth at high rates, and also the right to ecological space. The latter, translated in lay terms, essentially refers to the right to be able to pollute on the way to development, in much the same manner as the developed nations occupied ecological space on their path of advancement and growth. The right to use ecological space, however, can only be justified if the fruits of development are distributed among those who are in the greatest need for it. If economic growth becomes an exercise in amassing wealth that can be shown statistically to have improved the economic might of the country, but is unaccompanied by distributive justice, then, it cannot be justifiably be used as the plank on which to base arguments about not taking action on climate change.

The situation is grave primarily because it is the poorest in every country which has to bear the brunt of climate change. However, there is only a limit to which other sections of society, namely the middle classes and the elite can remain insulated from the various natural as well as social shocks that will inevitably come with the increasing severity of climate change.

The impacts of climate change threaten to set of another vicious cycle. Any inaction on this problem now will impact the very economic growth that is sought to be protected by aggressively protecting the right to growth. The GDP of many countries, including India and China, are facing losses as a result of climate change. The projected
losses in future are even higher. All economic activity, directly or indirectly, depends on natural resources. The depletion of these natural resources may lead to material benefits up to a point. However, after this, the depletion of resources will also lead to massive changes in the way economic activities are conducted.

Under these circumstances, the role of domestic constituencies in shaping the foreign policy related to climate change in both India and China are limited in many ways, or overwhelmingly in favour of a few powerful constituencies. In China, the nature of the regime has led to a deeply shrunk political space. Authoritarian regimes do not have to account for public opinion. They do not have to return to their citizens for votes periodically, and therefore, there is far less pressure on the rulers to pay heed to the requirements of citizens. Decisions related to climate change are thus dependent primarily on the bureaucratic institutional structure. The structure is dominated by those who will follow the party line, although it is clear that those with an alternative point of view do manage to put across their opinion. These differing opinions however, are not radical in nature and therefore not threatening in any way.

In fact, in the entire decision making structure dominated by concerns of energy security and securing economic growth, at the forefront are the planning machinery of China, important ministries such as Energy and Foreign Affairs, and the oil companies. While the institutions set up to protect the environment, the SEPA and NEPA, are represented, but their voice comes across as that of a minority. Even the academic community is not entirely free of state influence and mostly endorses the viewpoint of the government.

In a political context where public opinion does not matter very much, the first challenge is to gauge public opinion. Given that the information disseminating to its citizens is sought to be subject to tight controls, it is also possible that the citizens are not armed with sufficient information to make judgements about the seriousness of the situation at hand. The opinions polls conducted by a foreign organisation among a sample of urban Chinese citizens threw up vastly contradictory results. While on one hand, a
majority of those polled concurred that global warming is a serious issue meriting action, at the same time, they were not in favour of jeopardizing economic growth.

The non-governmental organizations in China that deal with environment are few and far between. Most of them are chapters of international NGOs. The NGOs operate primarily by allying with members of the media community. Although the media has become relatively proactive in China, they still face strong constraints. The coverage of politically sensitive issues is very difficult, and most media give out information which the government wants it to give out. This is particularly true in terms of issues related to environment and climate change. The only change that has been witnessed in this trend is the incremental rise in freedoms given to media to cover local environmental issues.

Inspite of being an authoritarian regime that would not tolerate dissent, the Chinese government is now beginning to grant space to protestors. Dissatisfaction within China over issues relating to labour, social services and environment has been increasing since it impacts the daily lives of its citizens. The media in some cases has support the protestors. As long as the protests do not demand radical changes to the political system, the government allows them to happen. The protests act as a safety valve, and helps give vent to dissatisfaction. Secondly, it enables the government to keep a track of issues that could potentially cause unrest in society, and thereby take action to redress these grievances. However, such protests in China have not acquired the nature of a nationwide campaign, and their efficacy remains limited to local level issues. This is also the case with environment and climate related issues, which are already beginning to affect China.

The corporate sector in China does not come across as an influential actor in climate change related decision-making. This is a departure from large parts of the rest of the world, where business plays a huge role in determining actions and policies related to climate change. In most other parts of the world, the business lobby is very strong and active when it comes to climate change.

However, for an authoritarian regime, such a trajectory of political decision making is entirely predictable. It also helps the government to take quick and firm
decisions with regard to foreign policy in issue areas such as climate change, since deliberative and consultative processes, not with other decision-making institutions but with the citizens, has already been dispensed with.

India, on the other hand, is a robustly functioning democracy. The nature of the regime dictates a political trajectory whereby the political space given to various constituencies is not only high, but also impacts the kind of decisions that are being made and the manner in which they are being made. Since the political parties have to periodically return to the electorate to be able to be voted into power, it is essential that the will of the people be taken into account.

India’s institutional structure in dealing with climate change came up much after the issue had gained salience internationally. Various groups, particularly civil society and the business community in India, had grasped the important of the consequences of climate change much before the issue came onto the political agenda, albeit in very different ways.

Business groups spotted an opportunity in an issue that was potentially threatening to become a major constraints, particularly if the internationally community was able to arrive at an agreement to effectively curb greenhouse gas emissions. With the CDM regime coming into place, Indian business groups were the first to capitalize on the vast business opportunity it represented, as well as having the potential to reduce harmful emissions through a system based on incentives. It was the pressure from influential business umbrella groups that led the government to formulate clear cut policies and rules with regard to CDM.

Energy security was another issue area where business groups in India have major stakes. Economic growth is proceeding at a fast pace, and any action on climate change that restricts the growth of industry in India would not be welcome by the business community. On one hand, India is highly dependant upon its reserves of coal for economic growth, as it forms the most important component of the energy mix. On the
other hand, fossil fuels are absolutely essential to growth. Either ways, India is on the high carbon emission path to growth.

Post-liberalization, the prominence of the corporate sector in India has been growing. This has been the result of the shift from market controlled economy to a free-market economy. The achievements of the corporate sector have also been responsible for their growing influence. The various governments that have come to power have been supportive of business groups. Privatization of public undertakings has also been part of the trend. This reflects that the government is signalling a receded role for itself, and a growing role for the private sector in India.

As a result, the influence of business communities has grown by leaps and bounds. They are a very powerful lobby, are increasingly involved in decision-making by the government, and wield a considerable amount of influence in the decision making process. It is very easy for business groups in India to bring their set of interests to the table and ensure that decision-making protects their myriad interests. In the case of climate change, business groups have not been in favour of any binding action to restrict emissions. This stance has bolstered the negotiating position of the government.

Civil society in India is very vibrant, especially environmental NGOs. Same as the business community, civil society was ahead of the government in shaping its perspectives on climate change, and disseminating knowledge related to the consequences of the problem. In fact, environmental NGOs can be given credit at par with business groups for bringing issues related to environment and climate change to the notice of the government. Civil society has been very critical of government apathy towards the environment in favour of increasing industrialization, at the cost of flouting acts of the constitution that are meant to protect the environment. It has led vehement campaigns against the dilution of these rules and regulations in order to encourage industry, even when industrial activity has been harmful not only for the environment, but also for the people whose lives and livelihoods are dependant on it.
Inspite of its vigilance domestically, civil society concurs with the negotiating position of the government internationally. It is also quite vehement in its view of securing India’s right to develop. Its arguments however, are not based so much on economic growth but on questions of justice and equity. The only departure is that civil society has also pressurized the government to take strong action at the domestic level to protect its citizens from the scourge of climate change, whereas business groups have been less forthcoming in terms of their social responsibilities.

As far as the Indian media is concerned, both the mainstream and alternative media is very vibrant and has played an important role in disseminating knowledge and coverage of major debates related to both environment and climate change. Although the media is often critical of the government, it mostly adheres to the official negotiating position.

Public opinion is again divided. While acknowledging the gravity of the problem, the public is not keen to pay costs for a problem created by the western world. However, the bottom rung of this public, i.e., the poorest and the underprivileged, who also form the largest group in society, is already paying costs in terms of loss of health, life and livelihood due to the disastrous consequences of climate change.

Thus, although the Indian government is being democratic in that it has taken into account the larger opinion while articulating itself on climate change at the international arena, it has to a great extent lost ground as a welfare state that takes care of the poorest of its population, which is also suffering the most.

It is a distinct possibility that in the process of delaying current economic costs, not only India and China but even the rest of the world may have to pay even higher costs in the future. Therefore, it is imperative that for a problem that does not respect boundaries of state, immediate action is taken.