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China-India Collaboration on Global Economic Issues: Strengthening South-South Bonding?

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During the last decade, China and India along with other emerging market economies have repeatedly assumed identical postures in international negotiations on major economic issues like trade and climate change. This paper reviews the reasons behind such posturing. Arguing that similar domestic concerns have led to common negotiating agendas, the paper interprets the Sino-Indian collaboration as an example of contemporary South-South cooperation between emerging market economies. While the collaboration is expected to continue in the foreseeable future, the paper warns against possible cracks surfacing within the South from the increasing economic gap between China and India and other developing countries, and distorted domestic perceptions on trade and climate preventing both countries from being more flexible in global negotiations.

INTRODUCTION

The world's largest developing economies and politically estranged neighbours could hardly have been visualised collaborating even a decade ago. But the rather remarkable Sino-Indian co-operation on global trade, climate and financial issues during the last few years has surprised many. Not only are they collaborating bilaterally, they are also stitching together coalitions of emerging market economies and low-income countries for proposing alternate approaches on global development concerns.

The paper examines Sino-Indian co-operation on global trade and climate issues in the context of the cooperation exemplifying contemporary South-South engagement based on common economic concerns. Arguing that

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identical domestic concerns of maintaining high economic growth and sustaining marginal livelihoods have encouraged bilateral collaboration in trade and climate negotiations at multilateral forums, the paper outlines potential challenges to both countries continuing to lead the global South on these issues.

Trade

China's entry in the WTO on 11 December 2001 followed the flagging off of the Doha Development Agenda (DDA) on 14 November 2001. The DDA has been instrumental in dividing the world trade community into distinct blocks of countries articulating contrasting and conflicting positions.

The most contentious issues in the DDA are developed country subsidies on farm exports, limited access of manufactured exports from developing countries in advanced country markets, enforcement of trade-related intellectual property rights (TRIPS), rationality of preference in government procurement from domestic enterprises and movement of people from labour-surplus economies of the South to high-income economies of the North. The Doha Declaration committed to withdrawing export subsidies and other trade-distorting market support through negotiations that were to end by 1 January 2005. It also intended to address developing country concerns over high tariffs on their manufactured exports to developed country markets. In this context, the DDA aimed to strengthen special and differential (S&D) treatment for developing countries, which turned out be to be a major point of North-South discord in world trade.

China's accession to the WTO was noteworthy for the conditions accompanying the entry. The caveats attached hardly reflected China's status as a developing country and underlined anxieties which several WTO members, including developing countries, had about China's entry in the multilateral trade club. The biggest worries were Chinese exports threatening prospects of indigenous producers in several member markets, and domestic institutions and systems in China not being consistent with WTO-specified market-based rules of trade. These led to imposition of the 'Transitional Product Specific Safeguard Mechanism' in the Protocol of Accession for China (WTO, 2001), a special transitional safeguard for Chinese textile exports till 2008, and China's classification as a 'non-market' economy till 2016 for anti-dumping investigations.

But in spite of hardly receiving the sympathetic S&D treatment usually extended to developing members, China's official posture at WTO has consistently been supportive of developing countries. This became evident from the first ministerial after its entry, at Cancun in 2003, where along with India and as part of the G-20 group of countries on agriculture,[1] it expressed disappointment over lack of progress in dismantling subsidies and market support on agricultural products from developed countries. China and India's articulation of common concerns for developing countries at the WTO has been noticeable in terms of the difference in approach. In contrast to China, which has been usually relatively low-key in the WTO, India has been more forceful. It has led a large group of developing countries, all equally concerned over adverse impacts of greater agricultural imports on domestic livelihoods. India, Brazil and South Africa were the main emerging market economies building coalitions of developing countries and creating the G-20 group on agriculture. The group's capacity to influence trade talks increased markedly following China's entry. The G-20 demanded deeper cuts in export subsidies and domestic support from the US and EU along with elimination of Article 6.5 of the Agreement on Agriculture (AoA)[2] (GOI 2003). The G-20 resistance at Cancun Ministerial was the first example of China and India collaborating at the WTO by bringing together a formidable grouping of emerging powers capable of proactive diplomacy (Narlikar and Tussie, 2004).

Both China and India came together at the G-20 in spite of significant difference in levels of market access in agricultural sectors of the two countries. Tariff walls in China's agriculture were much less following the commitments it made at the time of its annexation to the WTO. On the other hand, India's agriculture was far more protected with higher tariff walls. Even today, the relative degree of access available to imports is much less in India's agriculture as well as manufacturing compared to China's. Chinese mean tariffs are 15.6 per cent and 8.7 per cent for agriculture and non-agricultural exports respectively, which are much less than India's mean rates of 31.8 per cent and 10.1 per cent. The difference is particularly conspicuous in the upper bound tariff rates between India and China, which are 113.1 per cent (agriculture) and 34.4 per cent (non-agriculture),

1 Other than large emerging market economies such as Brazil, China, India, Mexico and South Africa, the group included several developing members from South and Central America (Argentina, Bolivia, Chile, Colombia, Costa Rica, El Salvador, Guatemala, Paraguay, Peru and Venezuela) and Asia (Pakistan, Philippines and Thailand). Egypt and Kenya joined later making the group G-22

2 Article 6.5 of AoA refers to 'blue box' subsidies, which are given to farmers for limiting production. These can be challenged by other members but imposing countries are not obliged to remove them.

as against 15.7 per cent (agriculture) and 9.2 per cent (non-agriculture) for China.[3]

Higher bound rates give India the flexibility of raising its tariffs much higher than China for protecting its farmers. Given its heavily protected agriculture sector, it was strategically natural for India to organise an alliance like the G-20 by including countries with similar interests. For many, however, China's support of G-20 was surprising given that it had already liberalised its domestic agriculture and therefore hardly had as defensive interests as India's. This is where China's unique dilemma in the WTO – of being a developing country and yet a major player in world trade – becomes evident. On one hand, it wishes to support developing countries; on the other, it cannot be as obstructive as India and other developing countries, since progress in world trade through faster removal of market access barriers is in its interest. In this regard, at Cancun, China was hopeful of convincing the developed world into more market access concessions by highlighting the generous 'sacrifices' it had made in its own domestic agriculture sector despite being a developing country and with substantial sections of the population depending on agriculture for livelihood.

China's postures at WTO have continued to be similar to those of India and other developing countries even on issues like grant of more flexibility in reducing tariffs on manufactured products. While India's demand of the same is arguably on grounds of allowing domestic producers and industries greater time for becoming competitive, China has also been reluctant to expose its domestic industry to manufactured imports without allowing the former enough time for upgrading themselves and competing with imports. Clearly, both have been worried about the prospects of indigenous industries in the wake of high imports; such concerns have been similar despite both countries adopting increasingly outward-oriented economic policies.

The Geneva Ministerial in 2008 was remarkable for the stalemate that it produced in the DDA talks. The impasse continues even today showing little possibility of resolution. Ironically, China and India's convergence on common concerns, and the wide gap in their posturing vis-à-vis the developed North, contributed to the emergence of the stalemate. The DDA talks broke down over disagreement on a special safeguard

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3 The first set of tariffs are MFN (most favored nation), while the latter are final bound tariffs, all for the year 2009. http://stat.wto.org/TariffProfile/WSDBTariffPFView.aspx?Language=E&Country=CN,IN Accessed on 5 May 2011.

mechanism for developing countries as the WTO members could not agree on the quantum of agricultural imports that would empower developing economies to trigger the safeguard of higher tariffs. The frustration over the inconclusive talks provoked sharp reactions from various quarters, some of which accused China and India of stalling movement on global trade.

China and India's posturing at Geneva was largely identical to their stance at Cancun with India articulating concerns of developing countries forcefully, supported by China. The role of both countries in championing the cause of the developing country coalition was well-defined. India was the forceful presence unwilling to compromise on defensive interests in agriculture trade. China, notwithstanding less defensive interests, was keen on assuaging domestic constituencies. And this is where its concerns matched with those of India and other allying countries. While India could not afford to ignore the interests of its farming community and the adverse political ramifications of acceding to freer imports, China too, had to convince rural and agricultural constituencies about protecting their interests (Zheng and Kong 2009) particularly in the backdrop of it earlier having conceded large market access during annexation to the WTO. For both countries, domestic concerns and compulsions were instrumental in choosing the positions they did.

The collapse of the DDA talks in 2008 underlined the sharp split in the international community with China and India posited at an extreme of the spectrum. It was clear that both had acquired considerable economic clout in the world economy, so much so that global trade talks could not proceed without accommodating their demands. The refusal of both countries to budge on non-negotiable issues indicated their confidence in maintaining expansion of their economies through growth impulses exclusive of the world trade mechanism run by the WTO. Since then, both, at different points in time, have urged for speedy conclusion of the DDA. Simultaneously, along with Brazil and South Africa, they have been particular in reiterating their core concerns and insisted upon substantial improvement of the provisions mooted in July 2008. The joint emphasis on non-acceptance of bulk concessions by developing countries and demand for grant of equal reciprocation from the developed world suggests that none of them are likely to deviate from the positions they have taken in the WTO till now.

Climate Change

Like the global trade talks, the multilateral talks on climate change also reflect the deep divide among the international community. While the DDA has been the rallying point for developing country and emerging markets led by China and India at the WTO, the Kyoto Protocol has served a similar purpose in climate change negotiations at the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC).[4] The Protocol ordains developed countries (mentioned in Annex 1 of the Protocol) to bear a proportionately larger burden in curbing greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions responsible for global warming by reducing such emissions by an average of 5 per cent from the levels prevailing in 1990, by the period 2008-2012. Developing countries like China, India and Brazil were exempted from any 'binding' commitments under the Protocol. The US and other developed countries have been unhappy over the exclusion, with big emerging market economies such as China, India, Brazil and South Africa being the particular targets of ire. The US has refused to ratify the Kyoto Protocol labelling it unfair since it exempts almost four-fifth of the world from commitments. The reluctance of the developed world to take precipitate action under the Protocol has provoked developing countries to question the former's commitment in addressing global warming.

Given the dissatisfaction among parties to the Protocol, its success was always questionable. Barring limited examples from the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) and East Europe, emission levels have actually gone up in advanced nations, creating serious doubts about their commitment to the Kyoto Protocol targets (World Bank 2008). The UNFCCC's principle of 'common and differentiated responsibilities' underlying the Kyoto Protocol is unlikely to be heeded in letter and spirit by the developed world unless large emerging market economies like China and India, who are also now among the world's leading emitters, undertake some binding commitments indicating that they are also equal contributors to the global process of mitigation in climate change.

As two of the world's fastest growing and rapidly industrialising economies, China and India have become major contributors to the GHG emissions. China and India are the first and fourth largest GHG emitters in the world accounting for 17.0 per cent and 5.0 per cent of total global GHG

4 The Kyoto Protocol was adopted in December 1997 in the 3rd Conference of Parties (COP) of the UNFCCC. The Annex 1 of the Protocol includes forty industrialised nations (including the EU).

emissions.[5] In terms of carbon-di-oxide (CO2) emissions measured in 2007, China is now the world's largest emitter accounting for 22.3 per cent of total emissions, while India ranks 3rd contributing 5.5 per cent (UN 2010)[6]. However, in per capita terms, for both GHG and carbon emissions, they remain much below their developed counterparts. For China and India, agreeing to binding mitigation commitments is difficult as that would have serious implications for their economic growth prospects. The growth-energy correlation is positive and high for both countries with empirical research underpinning the energy-intensive nature of economic growth in both. During 1980-2007, while China's and India's respective annual average GDP growth rates were 9.9 per cent and 6.0 per cent respectively, the corresponding annual average growth rates in energy consumption were 5.5 per cent and 5.3 per cent (ADB 2008). The mutually reinforcing pattern of economic growth and energy consumption is typical of rapidly industrialising developing economies where producers deploy additional energy for increasing output and growth; and high growth and rising incomes, in turn, generate greater demand for energy-intensive commodities and services. While both countries have achieved improvements in energy efficiency over time,[7] fossil fuels like coal remain the dominant source of electrical energy for industrial use in both, as does the extensive use of biomass in rural households. Given their current growth imperatives, China and India would find it almost impossible to reduce their current levels of energy consumptions, and alter the pattern of such consumption in a manner that implies lesser use of fossil fuels, since both course of actions have immediate adverse implications for their growth and would also adversely affect livelihoods.

Notwithstanding the difficulties for China and India in shifting to a pre-decided system of binding emission cuts, similar to that specified under the Kyoto Protocol for developed countries, both countries are becoming increasingly aware of the larger role they are required to play in global climate change talks for imparting a constructive thrust to the latter. The expectation of the international community that as the world's leading GHG and carbon emitters both would be proactive in curbing emissions is gradually dawning upon both. As a result, they have spelt out their own national mitigation goals while persisting with efforts to combine with

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5 The estimates are for the year 2005.

6 The annual rate of growth in China's carbon emissions during 2001-2007 were 9.9 per cent while India's was 4.5 per cent during the same period.

7 Despite improving, China and India's energy efficiencies are still below those of OECD countries (Wu, 2009)

other emerging market economies for proposing broader action plans feasible for developing countries. The current proactive policy posturing of both countries is a departure from the more defensive positions they held in climate talks earlier.

The G-8 summit[8] at Heiligendam in Germany in 2007 was the first occasion on which the China-India collaboration on climate change was noticed by the international community. The summit intended to arrive at an alternative to the Kyoto Protocol by including developing countries such as China and India in the action plan on climate change. Both countries reacted strongly to suggestions for setting binding emission caps. They held the view that given the historical responsibilities and current capabilities, developed countries had to take the lead role in cutting emissions and help developing countries adapt to environment-friendly technologies.[9] Along with Brazil, Mexico and South Africa, they formed the G-5 and appealed for continuation of differentiated responsibility in handling climate change and allowing unimpeded transfer of environment-friendly technologies from the North to the South (Devarakonda 2007). The 'North-South' divide became even sharper in the next G-8 summit at Hokkaido in 2008 with industrialised countries refusing to stick to differentiated responsibility.

It was becomingly increasingly clear that much as emerging market economies resisted pressure to enforce binding commitments they had to propose an alternate model outlining constructive action. For China, India and other emerging market economies, while an arrangement implying forced reductions in carbon emission as in the Kyoto Protocol was unacceptable given their growth compulsions, it was also essential to act in view of the long term sustainability of their own development prospects. A few weeks before the then looming UNFCCC session at Copenhagen in December 2009, China and India entered into a bilateral agreement on cooperation in addressing climate change on 21 October 2009.[10] Energy conservation and efficiency, renewable energy, clean energy technologies, clean coal, methane recovery and utilisation, sustainable agriculture and afforestation, transportation and sustainable habitat are some of the key areas of possible cooperation indicated in the agreement. The agreement

8 The G-8 comprises Britain, Canada, France, Germany, Italy, Japan, Russia and the US.

9 Spencer and Foster (2007).

10 'Agreement on Cooperation on Addressing Climate Change between the Government of the Republic of India and the Government of the People's Republic of China'; See http://moef.nic.in/downloads/public-information/India-China%20Agreement%20on%20Climate%20Change.pdf Accessed on 10 May 2011.

formalised the intention of both countries to overlook outstanding differences in other aspects of their relationship to work together on common development concerns. It also indicated that the forthcoming UNFCCC meeting was likely to witness continuation of combined efforts on part of both countries to influence the climate change agenda.

As further indication of the seriousness of both countries in addressing rising carbon emissions, China and India announced their respective plans to reduce carbon-intensity (carbondioxide released for generating an additional unit of GDP) in production over a period in time in the run-up to the Copenhagen summit. China planned to trim carbon intensity by 45 per cent by 2020 (Eilperin 2009), while India announced proposed cuts of 20-25 per cent by the same year (Dhar 2009). Viewed in the context of the US announcement to cut GHG emissions in 2020 by around 17 per cent from the 2005 level, the decisions reflected positive intentions on part of both countries to act positively on tackling emissions, while doing so differently from the way proposed by the developed world. Reducing carbon-intensity in production is a different strategy from fixing physical curbs on GHG or carbon emissions as it enables producers to shift to cleaner and convenient means of production in the long term as opposed to drastic changes in production techniques and technologies in the short term necessary under the latter. China and India were clearly trying to find solutions that would be consistent with imperatives of maintaining growth while not compromising on environmental sustainability: physical curbs on volume of emissions would have serious implications for industrial output growth in both, while trimming carbon-intensity would imply much less of so.

Despite the hype surrounding its build-up, the Copenhagen summit did not live up to expectations and failed to produce specific outcomes. In an atmosphere underlining lack of trust between the North and South, helped in no small measure by the poor climate diplomacy of European countries led by host Denmark, the Copenhagen accord was a legally non-binding deal though it tried to accommodate most contrasting demands and concerns in the climate debate. Urging developed nations (Annex 1 parties of the Kyoto Protocol) to commit to national emission targets, the accord also appealed to non-industrialised developing nations like China and India for pursuing national mitigation actions (NMAs), which would be subject to international verifications (UNFCCC 2009). The verification requirements drove another wedge between the developed and developing countries. China, India, Brazil, South Africa and other emerging markets are distinctly unhappy over the demand of industrial countries to scrutinise mitigation and adaptation in implementing countries. On the other hand, developed countries are unwilling to commit financial resources for aiding technology transfer and other adaptation actions in developing countries unless such actions are verifiable. In line with the posturing showing China and India playing a constructive, rather than an obstructive role in climate negotiations, India proposed a flexible mechanism of international assessment of verification actions before the Cancun climate summit in December 2010. Nonetheless, little progress was achieved at Cancun primarily because of the US insistence on proactive measures in cutting GHG emissions and providing financial support to developing countries being contingent on China and India committing to measurable, reportable and verifiable actions (IANS 2010). The lack of trust between the North and South was again evident as the climate change talks failed to produce a globally acceptable and binding action agenda.

Will the Partnership Last?

Multilateral negotiations at both the WTO and UNFCCC have been largely fruitless during the last decade. The ostensible reason is the sharp division of the international community between well-defined North and South blocks. With negotiations in both forums hinging on achievement of consensus for arriving at globally acceptable action plans, and extant cracks between the international community showing little signs of bridging, meaningful progress on trade and climate in the foreseeable future appear difficult.

China and India have been instrumental in solidifying resistance from emerging market and developing economies for pursuing alternative agendas in trade and climate talks. In the process, they have been perceived as obstructionists, particularly by the G-7.[11] From their own vantage points, both have been driven to their current postures by domestic concerns. As the largest developing economies housing more than 57 per cent of the world's people living below less than US$1.25 per day (UNDP 2010)[12], both have large economically marginal populations. World trade rules and binding climate mitigation actions have significant implications for future

11 G-8 excluding Russia, which is considered an emerging market economy.
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prospects of these marginal populations in a globalised world, where they can hardly remain unaffected by external exchange relationships.

For China, India and other emerging market economies, which comprise the vibrant South in the current world economic order, identical domestic priorities are shaping national approaches on trade and climate change. Apart from generic concerns on sustaining livelihoods for economically marginal populations, there are considerable anxieties over loss of economic space for indigenous producers in agriculture and manufacturing, which might be an unavoidable outcome of liberal imports; difficulties on part of domestic producers in shifting to cleaner, carbon-friendly technologies given the high costs involved in developing and imbibing such technologies; and extensive dependence of rural populations in both countries on traditional sources of consuming energy by burning biomass. For both countries, the predicament between high growth and sustainable and equitable development is considerable with the trade-offs involved entailing significant economic and political costs. There is little possibility their resolving these trade-offs in the foreseeable future. Similar domestic concerns, therefore, will encourage China and India to collaborate for defending identical interests in global trade and climate talks. Such collaboration is expected notwithstanding differences between the two countries in the structures of their economies and degree of global integration.

The Sino-Indian alliance on trade and climate, which also includes other emerging market developing countries, can be interpreted as evidence of the increasing South-South cooperation based on domestic political realities and driven by concerns on public policy. Economic engagement among the South is increasingly assuming significant dimensions with the South-South trade growing at an annual average rate of 13.0 per cent and accounting for a fifth of world trade (Puri 2010). The ramifications of the global financial crisis will strengthen the momentum of South-South economic engagement as most OECD economies continue to suffer from deep drags on their economic growths, and emerging markets, particularly Asian economies like China and India, reposition themselves on high growth trajectories.

Indeed, even before the financial crisis, the resistance offered by China, India, Brazil, South Africa and other emerging market economies to developed country agendas at the WTO and the UNFCCC peaked at a time when their own economic clouts were increasing rapidly. For a considerable part of the last decade India has been growing at an average rate of 8.5 per cent, while China has been recording double-digit growth. The increasing strategic influence of the two countries in the world economic order has clearly influenced their ability to resist and respond constructively to global issues.

The collaborative urges shown by both countries on trade and climate have surprised many given the political estrangement between the two countries. Both countries realise that achieving common goals at international forums is easier collectively than individually. As both aspire to play roles commensurate with their size in the global arena, reforming international institutions and economic systems in a manner suiting their interests is high priority. As a result, they have consciously pursued issue-based collaboration on fundamental concerns such as trade, climate change, and transformation of international financial architecture, through coalitions involving other emerging market economies and developing countries. International institutions have traditionally been bastions of the developed North and have mostly failed to accommodate specific concerns of developing countries. At both the WTO and the UNFCCC, where developed and developing country interests are markedly different, and progress cannot take place without consensus, headway is impossible till the major emerging markets and the G-7 arrive at mutually acceptable solutions. Such a scenario looks distinctly unlikely in the near future.

As both countries strive to seek alternate solutions in global trade and climate change, they run the risk of distancing themselves from the vast majority of non-emerging market low-income economies, as the economic gap between China and India on one hand, and the latter group on the other, increases due to disparate economic performances arising principally from differentials in scale and size. As China and India become larger economies and inch closer to the North in strategic significance, they might find themselves becoming increasingly isolated within the South as their interests deviate from the rest. China has already encountered this dilemma and has had to manage its interests as a developing country with not only contrasting, but apparently irreconcilable interests of being a major player in global trade as well. India might also encounter similar difficulties in future.

It is important for both to carefully manage their relationship with the rest of the developing world. Fortunately, they have shown considerable sensitivity in this respect, particularly on climate change, by extensively consulting small island countries on mutually acceptable patterns of emission cuts and climate policies. At the same time, it is important for both to approach issues involving delivery of global public goods with responsibility without appearing unduly obstructive to the international community. Both are showing signs of aligning their postures in global trade and climate talks in more responsible manners, which is certainly welcome.

What might also be a critical concern for both countries in devising constructive agendas on trade and climate is the distorted perceptions among domestic stakeholders on these issues. Protective tendencies continue to remain strong in both despite decades of economic liberalisation. In China, these are reflected in several non-tariff measures (NTMs) hindering market access; and in India through unreasonably high tariff walls. Barriers on access to domestic markets impart intrinsically defensive dimension to trade negotiation strategies. Unless these barriers dissipate, it is difficult for both countries to assume more offensive and meaningful positions in world trade.

On the other hand, climate change is yet to become a visible concern for the common person in both countries, and hardly figures in public discourse beyond academic and intellectual spaces. Low public awareness to pitfalls of climate change affects the ability of both countries to implement effective climate policies. Climate change is yet to dawn upon people in China and India as a serious threat to lives and livelihoods. Large majorities of Chinese and Indians do not comprehend that climate change can entail loss of human security particularly through deleterious impacts like forced migration of populations from unsustainable lands and habitats, food shortages, malnutrition and vulnerability to diseases (Elliott 2011). Unless domestic interests and perceptions change – both in international trade and climate change – China and India might find it tough to lift their collaboration at global forums to more effective levels and might find themselves wanting in efforts to reform international institutions the way they wish.

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