

Changing Climate

Two crouching tigers, some hidden dragons

The winds of change between the two giants are sure to impact not only the environment but also politics.

Barun S Mitra

OVER THE PAST HALF century, relations between the two Asian giants have been on a roller coaster ride. In recent years too the two countries have seen sentiments swing wildly on issues ranging from trade to Tibet, coloured periodically by the border issue.

Despite its history of turbulence, the two neighbours together made history at the climate summit in Copenhagen in December 2009, for the first time, the world got a glimpse of the possible consequence when China and India join hands for a common cause. prior to the climate summit, there had been a flurry of high level exchange between the two sides. Both countries came up with evidence to show that carbon intensity of their economies had been falling over the past decades. Both made unilateral announcements to reduce the carbon intensity further over the next decade. They also underscored the need for equitable share of the planet's atmosphere to meet the developmental aspirations of the people, and finally, they proposed to focus on a target of temperature increase in the

future, as an alternative to the carbon emission targets which had been the cornerstone of the global climate negotiations.

While much of this information was trickling out of Delhi and Beijing prior to Copenhagen, there was very little appreciation of the possible implications of all this at the UN climate summit.

That became clearer in Copenhagen, when it was acknowledged that China and India were in constant

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touch, developing their negotiating strategies together. Even the ministers on the two sides were meeting almost on a daily basis to ensure that issues were smoothed out.

Today, it is clear that this joint positioning was the most significant factor in the ability of developing countries to withstand the pressure mounted by the rich countries in Copenhagen. With all the hype that was built up prior to Copenhagen, hardly anyone could have believed that at an international event of this magnitude, at an European capital, would have led to the marginalization of Europe itself. It was the Americans who seem to have realised the tectonic shift that was taking place, and decided to cut the losses by striking a deal on the political statement at the end. European governments had banked on the prospect of an agreement in Copenhagen to infuse new life to the Kyoto protocol, which is to expire in 2012, and so the political statement left them quite shocked.

China has been a member of various developing country groupings, including the G-20. But hardly ever was China seen taking the lead at international negotiations. At the WTO meetings over the past decade, it was the Brazil-



ian and Indian ministers who typically articulated the developing country perspective. Copenhagen has changed all that. It is likely that the 2009 climate summit will be remembered not so much for its failure to reach an agreement to go beyond Kyoto protocol, but for the impact that China and India, by cooperating with each other, had on the whole process.

The question that arises: Is this a new phase of India-China cooperation in Copenhagen an exception, or would that become the norm for the future? Will the climate of relationship between the two giant neighbours undergo a fundamental shift in the aftermath of the climate summit?

Needless to say the two countries have a wide range of issues confronting each other. They range from economics to environment, from the unresolved border to geopolitics. While political frictions do surface periodically, both the countries seem to have matured enough not to allow the political cloud to affect the growing trade and economic relationship.

But the wide convergence on different environmental issues facing China and India, could help the two countries to seek common grounds on these areas. Without the historic baggage that affects the political relationship, and the periodic tensions that surface in any trade relationships, the prospect of better relationship on environmental issues because of the convergence of interest seem much brighter. and the cooperation on environmental issues may help improve the level of mutual trust and confidence that could rub off positively on political relationship as well.

The two countries are already cooperating on conventional and non-conventional sources of energy. Other potential environmental areas where there could be complementary relationship are newer and greener technologies, ship-breaking, recy-

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cling of material, etc. But perhaps the highest political capital lies in the possibility cooperation in the area of tiger conservation.

Tiger is an iconic animal in culture and history of both China and India. There are perhaps two dozen tigers left in the wild in China, mostly along the Siberian border. India currently estimates that about 1400 tigers are roaming in the wild. But globally, tiger is a highly endangered species, and remains so despite many initiatives launched to save it over the past four decades.

India believes that the demand for tiger parts in traditional Chinese medicine is one of the major sources of threat to tigers in Indian forests. Others think that the pressure of poaching to meet demand in China constitutes a smaller threat, about 25%. The bulk of the threat to tigers in India comes from shrinking forest habitat and the consequent conflict between human and wildlife.

Tiger conservation is not primarily an issue of law enforcement. India has problem of protecting its tigers, just as China has problem in completely eliminating all trade of tiger parts.

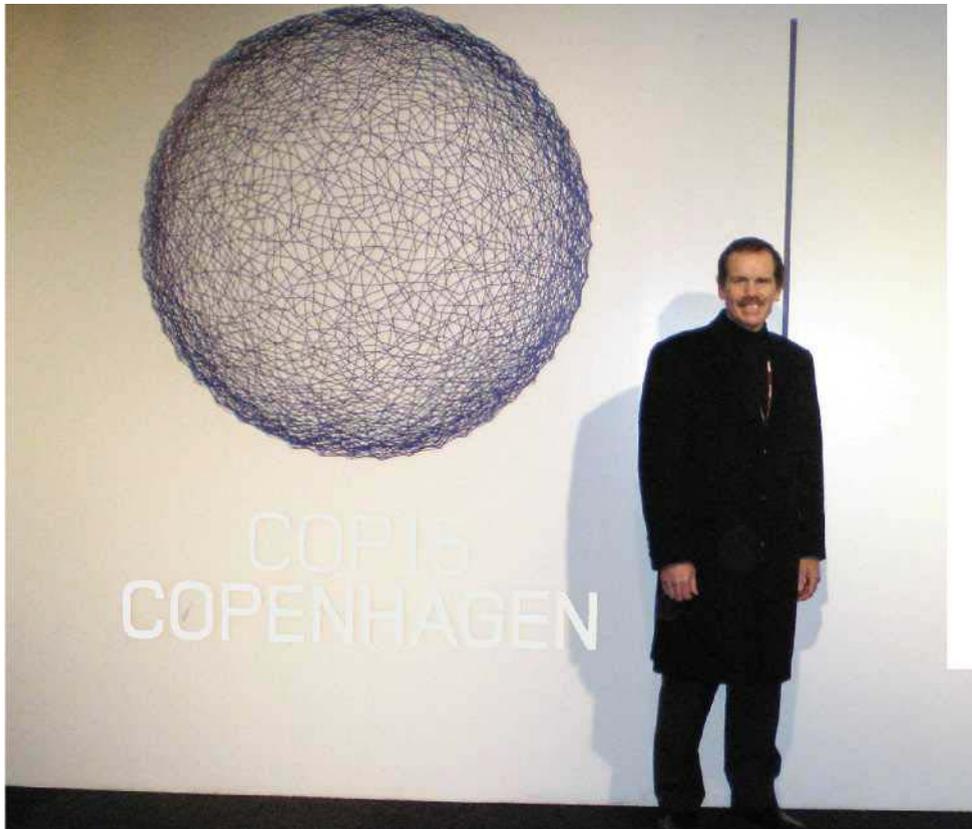
Recently there were some indications that there is perhaps a shift from this mutual blame game. India recently recognized that protecting tigers is primarily India's responsibility, since the Chinese do not come to India to poach the tigers.

China, on the other hand, is exploring alternative conservation strategies. following its economic rise, increasing number of people are finding non-rural economic opportunities, as a result, human pressure on forest and wild areas in many parts of China have significantly reduced. In some of these parts, forests have made a dramatic comeback. Some of these old tiger habitats could be ready again to host wildlife.

China is seriously looking for ways of reintroducing tigers in a controlled manner, in a few areas where tigers once roamed. Hardly any country has as much expertise and experience of managing tiger habitats as India. With recent relocation of tigers into areas from where they had vanished, India is also grappling with similar problems.

China does not have wild tigers ready for translocation. so they have set up an ambitious effort to try to develop ways of re-wilding tigers that have been born in captivity. This is a very exciting scientific opportunity.

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of tiger habitat, re-wilding and reintroduction of the tiger, China and India could cooperate, and if successful, it would secure not just the tiger, but generate huge amount of goodwill between the elephant and the dragon!

China poses an even more audacious challenge to old conservation mindset. It has almost perfected the art of breeding tigers in captivity. It has more than 5000 tigers in captivity in zoos and other facilities. It could initiate a controlled trade in tiger parts from its captive tigers, and that could lower the incentive to poachers to kill wild tigers.

Even if India does not wish to join in this effort to help the cause of conservation through commerce, it stands to gain if China is successful in meeting the demand for tiger parts from its stock of captive tigers.

From the history of world trade, it is clear that smugglers and criminals profit only when there is a restriction on trade, creating an unmet demand for goods and services. Naturally, when trade is outlawed, only outlaws trade!

If China were to legalize trade in tiger parts from its breeding facilities, the poachers in India would have little chance of competing with the market forces. Consequently, threat of poach-

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ing will almost get eliminated in India. There are many examples from across the world where legal trade has eliminated illegal trade. Over a million crocodiles are harvested each year from farms, yet there is hardly any evidence of any crocodile being killed in India in order to meet the demand from the international fashion industry.

China and India need to find ways of building on the new climate they sought to create in Copenhagen. Their common position on climate was premised on the belief that economic growth would actually enable the countries to improve energy efficiency, reduce pollution, compete effectively and clean up the environment. and as economies improve, they de-carbonise, as the history of human development illustrates over the past 400 years.

This is the real potential of the changing climate between China and India - harnessing the power of commerce, benefiting people and improving the quality of environment. Today, economic potential of both China and India are now openly acknowledged by all. Now is the time to reap the environmental dividend from economic development. □



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