

COP26: India Ends Up as Fall Guy

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Greta Thurnberg, the famous Swedish climate change activist, summed up that the deal reached at COP26 at Glasgow on Saturday was “very, very vague” with several loopholes. She told the media in Glasgow that the pact only “succeeded in watering down the blah, blah, blah”.

“There is still no guarantee that we will reach the Paris Agreement. The text that it is now, as a document, you can interpret it in many, many different ways. We can still expand fossil fuel infrastructure, we can still increase the global emissions. It’s very, very vague,” Thurnberg said.

The delegates at Glasgow failed to produce more finance or even new guidelines to support developing economies’ gradual switch to renewable energy, known as the “just transition”. Among developing country delegates, many said that COP26 had failed those countries most affected by climate change today: the small island states and zones in Africa hardest hit by extreme weather such as the Sahel and the Horn.

Most striking were the shortfalls and ambiguities on climate finance. G20 country contributions to the US\$100 billion fund for developing economies to adapt and mitigate the effects of climate are now set to reach the initial target by 2023. European and North American delegations resisted calls for the immediate establishment of a fund to compensate those countries suffering loss and damage caused by climate change. Instead, they proposed discussions on such a fund’s structure and mechanism. [read more](#)

At the end of the day, however, the British hosts have done a smart thing by creating the narrative that the COP26 would have been honky-dory but for China and India imposing a consensus at an eleventh hour change to “phase down” coal use, rather than “phase out”.

What really happened was that the EU, US and UK agreed and presented the new wording to the rest of the world on the phase out of coal power as a *fait accompli*, which of course backed India and China into a corner, with the eyes of the world watching. This sparked fury

from poor nations and climate activists, egged on from behind by the UK that a small cabal of powerful polluters — India and China — essentially held the world to ransom.

India in particular has been lambasted and made the fall guy. The game plan is to pressure India and China to come back and commit to further emissions cuts by next year's UN meeting. Neither China nor India has 2030 targets anywhere near in line with a 1.5 degree centigrade pathway, and so will be on the target list of nations under pressure to return next year with more ambition. The UK still holds the COP presidency for another year, so Alok Sharma will remain a key diplomatic player.

The UK prime minister **Boris Johnson** then took the centerstage to brag before the House of Commons that COP26 “proved the doubters and the cynics wrong,” and that, for decades, tackling the coal problem “proved as challenging as eating the proverbial elephant” (a sly metaphoric reference to India), but in Glasgow the world “took the first bite”.

Johnson was expected to tell business leaders and diplomats at the Lord Mayor's Banquet in London Monday evening: “I have been watching politics a long time now and I know when a tipping point is reached. The language does matter but, whether you are talking about phasing down or phasing out, the day is now not far off when it will be as politically unacceptable, anywhere in the world, to open a new coal-fired power station as it now is to get on an aeroplane and light a cigar.”

This is blackmail Johnson-style — hunting down the contender. The notorious rabble-rouser knows very well that both China and India are heavily reliant on coal power. Their leaderships are keenly aware of the role of coal industry in pulling some of the poorest citizens in the two countries out of poverty. The domestic politics of phasing out coal is highly sensitive for both countries, particularly in the midst of a global energy crisis and a pandemic. [read more](#)

The ugliest part of Johnson's finger wagging and blackmail is that he or his ilk in the rich industrial West have done nothing by way of offering the practical and financial support that developing countries may need for the transition.

The mother of all ironies is that both India and China went to Glasgow with good intentions. India's 2070 net zero announcement made headlines and even more significant was Prime Minister Modi's pledge to set the 2030 goal to ensure 50 percent of India's energy comes from renewables.

Ahead of Glasgow, Chinese President Xi Jinping also made a sweep of important commitments: that China would reach net zero emissions by 2060, that coal production would peak by 2026, and that China would stop funding the construction of coal plants overseas.

Despite these significant moves, India and China are being vilified and browbeaten. The BBC went to the extent of soliciting the Pakistani energy minister attending COP26 to badmouth India — with the latter of course gleefully obliging with the powerful metaphor of a cancer patient undergoing chemotherapy who still wants to smoke a packet of cigarettes.

The poor chap didn't know that even Europeans and North Americans are chain smokers. Bloomberg reported over the weekend quoting coal mining chief executives that the fuel they produce is far from being consigned to history, and “it will be two to three decades

before there's a dramatic change in coal's place in the energy space."

The Bloomberg report said demand remains robust in Asia and has picked up in Europe and North America as well this winter, with US coal prices surging to the highest in more than 12 years on Monday.

By the way, Japanese government and electric power industry too are relieved to see the COP26 climate pact urge countries to "phase down" instead of "phase out" the use of coal-fired thermal power to reduce greenhouse gas emissions. Japan plans to continue utilizing coal-fired thermal power (which accounts for about 30 pct of its electricity source) while trying to reduce its dependence on coal and suspend or abolish low-efficiency power plants.

The good part about all this is that it is a wake-up call for the Modi government, which has been naive to fall for western flattery and start fancying Johnson's Global Britain to be India's key partner in the Indo-Pacific. For India, an equal relationship with Britain is never possible. The guileful British mindset surfaced at Glasgow. India should not be delusional about duplicitous characters like Johnson.

Equally, it is crucial at the present stage of India's development that it has a selective engagement with China at least on such profound issues of common interest like climate change. An all-of-government hostility is neither warranted nor agreeable for a mature country. [read more](#)

COP26 highlighted that when it comes to the creation / transfer of wealth, high stakes are involved and the West collectively safeguards its interests and will not hesitate to tap into the divisions among the developing countries. The fortnight-long event in Glasgow is been a stark reminder that history has not ended.

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Featured image: A coal mine in Dhanbad, India (Source: Indian Punchline)

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