

Climate Issue's Turning Tide

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The forthcoming Durban conference comes at a major crossroads in international relations, with continuing economic malaise in the West being counterpoised with the increasingly rapid shift of power to emerging economies. Mirroring this structural change is a fundamental shift in the center of gravity of the global climate change debate that few have yet to recognize.

While the outlook for Durban is highly uncertain, a critical mass of countries is currently advancing landmark domestic climate change legislation at a pace that contrasts sharply with the UN-brokered talks. This trend, which is being largely driven by emerging economies, is nothing less than game-changing.

In the last six months alone, as a forthcoming study by the Global Legislators Organisation (GLOBE) and the Grantham Institute at the London School of Economics documents:

- China has developed comprehensive climate change legislation and has included carbon targets in its latest Five-Year Plan.

- South Africa's government has released its climate change white paper, including a raft of measures such as renewable energy targets and a carbon tax.
- In Mexico, all political parties in parliament recently agreed to come together to back a comprehensive climate change law.
- South Korea is in the process of passing legislation for an emissions trading scheme that would be binding by 2015 and covers those facilities producing more than 25,000 tons of CO₂ per year.
- The Australian government's carbon tax bill will become law in 2012.
- Germany has outlined a radical new energy plan in response to the Fukushima disaster, including a massive increase in renewable energy investment.

Adoption of such landmark initiatives is — with a few notable exceptions (Australia being prominent) — largely bipartisan. One key reason for this encouraging move toward bipartisanship is that many legislators increasingly recognize the positive co-benefits of climate change legislation, which range from energy efficiency and increased energy security to the reduction of air pollution.

This, in turn, symbolizes a crucial shift that is a key part of the wider change. Previously, the political debate on climate change has been largely framed around the narrative of sharing global burden — with governments, naturally, trying to minimize their share.

Now, legislators increasingly view the issue as one of national self-interest, with each nation trying to maximize the benefits of climate change legislation. Indeed, those countries with strong national legislation are already attracting most inward investment on low-carbon technologies because there is business certainty (rather than high regulatory risk) for such investments.

Encouraging as this shift is, it is as yet insufficient to avoid dangerous climate change. Nonetheless, the national legal and policy frameworks to measure, report, verify and manage carbon that are now being created could potentially be ratcheted up, especially as governments experience the benefits of lower energy use, reduced costs, improved competitiveness and greater energy security.

As this happens, the goal must be to translate such progress into a comprehensive, global deal brokered by the UN to build on the Kyoto Protocol's first commitment period expiring at end-2012.

Such a deal — as opposed to the incremental one agreed at Cancun last December — will probably only be possible when even more countries are committed to taking action on climate change because it is to their advantage rather than out of perceived altruism. In other words, such a deal will only reflect domestic political conditions, not define them.

Given this outlook, and as difficult negotiations in Durban approach in uncertain economic circumstances, a key danger is that some countries, including here in Europe, might lower their long-term ambition and harden their stances in dealing with other countries. At a time when, as we have argued, the climate change debate is undergoing such profound change, this would be ill-timed. Indeed, the forthcoming UN summit is exactly the right time for countries to invest more in climate diplomacy and practical international cooperation to help expedite the creation of conditions on the ground that will enable a comprehensive global treaty to be

reached in future.

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