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Opinion – Post-COVID-19 Climate Change Politics

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ANU UNNY, JUN 3 2020

With the outbreak of the novel coronavirus, the full attention of the world has been shifted to two things primarily – health security and compensating the economic loss caused due to the lockdowns imposed by the pandemic. Indeed COVID-19 has reprioritised the concept of security itself, and where climate security stands is a critical question. With the outbreak of the pandemic, all major international climate conferences including the 2020 Glasgow Climate Conference were postponed. While some point out that COVID-19 has brought down the intensity of carbon emissions which is one of the contributing factors to global warming, some others argue that the reduction in emissions is only a temporary phenomenon and emissions may go up in future. In this scenario, how this pandemic would change the nature of climate change politics in the long-run, requires examination.

It is expected that emissions would escalate in a post-COVID world as countries may intensely engage in the efforts to revive their economies by emitting more carbons. In this scenario, whether countries would be meeting their emission reduction targets is doubtful as the immediate priority of almost all countries world would be their economic recovery. The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) has already warned the world about the severe consequences of climate change if the global temperature level rises by more than 1.5 degree Celsius above the pre-industrial level. The majority of countries in the world are already experiencing the impacts of climate change in the form of extreme weather patterns, sea level rise, melting of glaciers etc. In this situation, if countries focus only on pushing their economic plans and give low priority to environmental issues that would likely lead the world to a worse catastrophe.

In such a world, the Paris Climate Agreement, which is the only existing global emission reduction agreement is likely to be weakened as the chances for non-compliance of countries with the emission reduction targets is high. The United States, which is the world's second largest carbon emitter, has already announced its decision in 2017 to withdraw from the Paris Agreement. In this scenario, the responsibility for the implementation of the Paris Agreement is vested with other major countries – such as China. As of now, China is the largest emitter of carbon dioxide. Though China has declared that it will not withdraw from the Paris Agreement, scepticism looms over whether China would sustain its interest in the Paris Agreement and climate security in the longer term.

In terms of per capita emissions also, emissions from developed countries are far ahead compared to that of developing countries. As per statistics, while United States emitted 16.24 tonnes of per capita in 2017, China's per capita emissions was only 6.98 tonnes and India's 1.84 tonnes. In terms of cumulative carbon dioxide emissions also, in a period from 1751 to 2017, while United States held responsible for 25.35 percent of the total global emissions, China accounted for only 12.7 percent of total emissions and India 3.08 percent of emissions. This points towards the fact that while all countries share the responsibility for combating climate change, developed countries which have intensified the climate change problem and have a relatively high socio-economic and political capacity for addressing the challenges must show more commitment towards leading the climate change negotiations at the international level. The idea of common but differentiated responsibility has to prevail as a norm for addressing the present inequality issues in climate politics.

Effective combatting of climate change requires the transferring of adequate financial and technological resources from the developed countries to the developing countries. With this objective, a Green Climate Fund was created in 2010 and developed countries had pledged to mobilise US\$ 100 billion through this fund. However, developing

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countries have not received even half of the promised amount. With the COVID-19 impact on economies, the transferring of Green Climate Fund might be facing another delay.

COVID-19 is reshaping globalisation and the multilateral world order, which also hold significant implications for climate change. Nationalist narratives had started gaining momentum long before the outbreak of COVID-19 – Brexit and Trump's 'America First' policy are some cases worth mentioning here. With the outbreak of COVID-19, many countries have closed their borders and imposed restrictions on migration and travel, leaving millions of people stranded fearing the repercussions. Refugees and migrants were the worst victims of this unilateral decision. The failures of international institutions which were partly responsible for coordinating the actions of states in fighting COVID-19 and states' reluctance to extend helping hands to those pandemic-stricken states are posing new dangers to the spirit of multilateralism.

If multilateralism is declining in a post-COVID world that would indicate drastic consequences for the fight against climate change – as addressing the climate is something that necessitates multilateral engagements. Though realists would not agree, strengthening international institutions and complying with international agreements is the only solution before states at the moment for addressing the issue effectively. For reaching consensus, reprioritising issues, fixing climate targets and framing climate adaptation strategies and at last for ensuring climate change cooperation transnationally, multilateral institutions need to be strengthened, not weakened post-COVID-19.

In sum, COVID-19 is a reminder of a more unequal world wherein the role of international organisations may be restricted due to the highhandedness of dominant states. If the climate change issue is to be addressed, a global multilateral order needs to be revived, strengthening the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC). The call for climate change equity and justice from the least developed countries can be voiced effectively only in a multilateral world. The nationalist discourses that COVID-19 is projecting is a dangerous signal and states need to understand that cooperation, trust and collective action is the only alternative at the moment for addressing our shared climate challenge.

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