

History repeated itself at Cancun

The Economic Times, January 17, 2011

 print

By Pradeep S Mehta

Global negotiations are not an easy task. For that matter, every negotiation requires maturity of understanding of what one party will give and what the other party is able to accept. In negotiations that involve many parties and contentious international issues such as trade or climate change, things become much more complex and need to be approached on an incremental basis.

Following the Climate Change Summit at Cancun in December 2010, environment minister Jairam Ramesh is once again under attack for selling out India and the developing world. That is because the deal did not go all the way of legally-binding rich countries to cut down their emissions and so on. Before the Copenhagen Summit on Climate Change, I wrote in ET, "Nations need to realise that climate change is already upon us. They should now put their best foot forward to temper it and soften its impact." (Climate: Don't shoot the first mover, October 28, 2009). It was easy to criticise Jairam for thinking out-of-the-box - then and now. I too was criticised for applauding Jairam's strategy. He deserves it again.

Did India change its position at Cancun? There is nothing wrong in changing a stand while engaging in negotiation if it can lead to the best-possible and widely-acceptable result. At Cancun, India reinforced its position on climate change negotiations, and emerged as a proactive leader. Contrast this with the India that has always had the notorious reputation of being a naysayer, particularly in international negotiations - and has often ended up losing.

In 2003, we witnessed at Cancun a fundamental shift to the negotiation dynamics with respect to another contentious international accord: the Doha Round of global trade talks. Many, mostly Western, commentators described the Cancun Ministerial Conference of the WTO as a failure when it was not. It was a turning point in north-south relations. If only the Mexican minister/chairman of the trade conference was as wise the one on climate change conference in 2010, the Doha deal could have been done with lesser ambition than what it had set out to do.

But many believe that the US had urged the Mexican trade minister to call off the conference because it did not want to agree to the proposed farm subsidy cuts. The same could have happened on the climate change meeting if the emerging economies alliance's proposals were equally strident. Thanks to Jairam, the Cancun meeting on climate change became a stepping stone in global climate change negotiation.

That was the realpolitik, and how do we ensure that our aspirations succeed. Jairam explains this to our lawmakers in a letter, that our negotiating position is based on our need to grow, develop inclusively and eradicate poverty. This is combined with our national environmental policies and, crucially, the need to project India as a responsible and big country. A careful look at major elements of the Cancun agreements and India's contributions toward those pacts will show that these principles were adhered to.

Among India's contributions at Cancun, phrase 'equitable access to carbon space' was changed to 'equitable access to sustainable development'. This means that late developers like India need equitable access to address their priorities and to eradicate poverty. It was due to India's efforts that the world avoided a decision on 'legally-binding agreement'.

It is true that at Cancun, Jairam made a statement saying that "all countries must take on binding commitments in an appropriate legal form". This caused tension at home and was touted as 'shifting position'. Much of that criticism did not look at the whole of it. The term 'appropriate' underlined the need for differentiation between developed and developing countries. It can be correctly inferred that developed countries' commitments could be legally binding internationally with penalties, while for the developing countries, it would be domestic commitments to be enforced by the national governments.

At Cancun, there was no change in India's position that it will not take on emission cuts or agree to peaking year for its emissions. Our position was the same as before: that India will undertake voluntary mitigation action, including reducing emissions intensity by 20-25% by 2020 with 2005 as the reference year.

Given the level of development that India has achieved and will have to achieve to eradicate poverty, for us to adapt to the impact of climate change is as important as mitigating it. In this regard, a significant development took place at Cancun.

A Cancun Adaptation Framework was agreed upon. As Jairam wrote to our MPs, "It exhorts developing countries to prepare and implement national adaptation plans and, at the same time, calls upon developed countries to provide finance, technology and capacity-building support for the same. It also decides to establish an Adaptation Committee to promote implementation of adaptation actions."

A Green Climate Fund to help poor nations was also agreed upon, reaffirming a goal of raising an annual \$100 billion for poor countries by 2020. This will be a crucial link to future negotiations. Frameworks for low-carbon technology cooperation and to prevent deforestation were agreed upon. Poor countries will be able to seek funds to protect their forests and restore degraded areas. There was progress on how to monitor emissions. And, Cancun reinforced a continuation of the UN process that was seriously undermined at Copenhagen. One can certainly hope to see a better deal at Durban in the December of 2011.

On a different note, if only Jairam can be as pragmatic and balanced on his approaches on the domestic scene of environmental clearances for industrial purposes, he will help the country's economic progress hugely. Without the growth, we will not be able to eradicate poverty or tackle environmental issues.

(The author is secretary general of CUTS International)

This article can also be viewed at: <http://economictimes.indiatimes.com/>

Copyright © 2010 CUTS All rights reserved.

CUTS Centre For International Trade, Economics & Environment (CUTS CITEE)

D-217, Bhaskar Marg, Bani Park, Jaipur 302 016, India, Ph: +91.141.2282821, Fx: +91.141.2282485 , Email: citee@cuts.org, Web: www.cuts-citee.org