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India, like China, has been a largely passive onlooker to the debate in the Western world about the causes, likely fallout and responses to the issue of climate change. Officially, India has never disputed any of the conclusions of bodies like the United Nations Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change. Domestically even the issue of carbon emission limits – the most controversial and most drastic solution proposed to counteract global warming – receives only academic discussion.

The reason: Such discussions are seen as largely irrelevant. What does exist is an overwhelming consensus that India's overriding priority is rapid economic growth. Any Indian contribution to international climate change policy cannot be at the cost of growth. This is perceived to largely rule out carbon emissions limits. Therefore, the scope of debate in India is extremely limited with even mainstream environmentalists arguing, as former Indian Prime Minister Indira Gandhi once said in the 1970s, "the ultimate polluter is poverty."

With more poor people than sub-Saharan Africa, the dominant national goal of India has been to lift as much of its population as possible out of poverty. At present, some 350 million Indians live on less than one dollar a day. Thanks to the strongest economic boom in its modern history, India can for once contemplate, to paraphrase a World Bank economist, eradicating poverty within the next generation. The idea that it should endanger this effort, even theoretically, by burdening its economy with carbon emission limits simply has no support within the country. This underlies the decision of India – and probably also China – to sign the

Kyoto Protocol only on the understanding that they would not be liable to carbon emission limits. The repeated calls that a second round of Kyoto negotiations should include carbon emission limits on developing countries like India and China is one reason both nations are dragging their feet about holding such a second round.

This is fully understood by the international environmental movement. The Executive Secretary of the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change and the UN's leading climate change official, Yvo de Boer, said in New Delhi in January this year, "Developing countries fear that a new round of climate negotiations would impose on them obligations that would hurt their economic growth."

The belief that there is a trade-off between carbon emission limits and economic growth – and therefore poverty alleviation – is at the heart of India's refusal to countenance carbon emission limits. The linkage is obvious. Carbon emissions are directly linked to energy consumption and almost every possible study on the Indian economy that exists indicates that India's economic growth will result in an enormous increase in energy consumption.

India's present prime minister, Manmohan Singh, said in July last year that the Indian government's Integrated Energy Policy document estimated that if India maintained a growth rate of eight per cent a year until 2030, energy requirements would increase by a factor of between four and five. Electricity generation would have to increase from our installed capacity of 131,000 MW to "between 800,000 to 950,000 MW." Most of this, on the basis of present trends, will be fueled by hydrocarbons.

India, according to the US Department of Energy, produced 312 million metric tons of carbon in 2005, making it the fifth largest carbon emitter in the world. However, measured on a per capita basis, each Indian only produces two tons of carbon a year.

India is not averse to working towards curbing carbon emissions so long as these are not in a form that is inimical to economic growth. It is an active participant in the carbon trading market. As of January this year, it had 155 registered clean development mechanism projects with another 400 or so in the pipeline. It is a partner in a number of clean energy projects sponsored by the US government, including FutureGen – important to a country with large reserves of coal with high ash content – and the Hydrogen Fuel Initiative. When it reaches fruition, the recent Indo-US civilian nuclear agreement should allow India to expand its civilian nuclear program. India is also part of the six-nation Asia-Pacific Partnership on Clean Development and Climate that includes China and the US and seeks to address climate change without mandatory carbon emission limits.

India has not been and is unlikely to be swayed by arguments that the supposed long-term costs of climate change will be damaging to its economic prospects. Its present record of economic growth and the millions of people this has lifted out of poverty is a clear and present reality. To argue that India should sacrifice such immediate and tangible benefits to avoid costs predicted by disputed computer models that would materialize several decades into the future would find little or no support inside India. A bird in hand is worth two in the bush.

De Boer argues that the key to the climate change problem is to provide incentives for economies to grow along a greener path. The CDM is one such incentive, he argues, and “more of these incentives are needed to have significant impact on protecting the world’s climate.” In his own speeches in India, he carefully avoids reference to carbon emission limits. This is almost certainly because he knows they will receive no support from India and, I would suspect, China and would only engender greater reluctance by both countries to address climate change. Both countries are driven by a far greater political and moral task, inherently tied to their own sense of nation-building, of economic growth in anyway possible. This is an incontrovertible truth.