

Climate targets are becoming outdated: India needs its own

The target in the Paris Agreement, to keep the planet's surface from warming by 2 degrees Celsius by 2100, has been touted as a monumental goal. However, despite negotiations for more than two decades, global carbon emissions have not slowed. Also, the target was not derived scientifically

Raghu Murtugudde

The 1.5 degrees Celsius warming target has received considerable press along with the El Niño this year. Reports claim that the planet could soon cross this temperature threshold due to this natural climate phenomenon.

But even if the world's average surface temperature warms by more than 1.5 degrees Celsius for a year, nothing dramatically different may happen - other than the heatwaves, floods, droughts, and similar events that are already happening. The bigger question is: where is all the end-of-the-world messaging coming from?

Humankind might do well with less hyperbole about the climate crisis.

It is a serious challenge today, yes, but a constant drumbeat of alarmist messages may only exacerbate climate anxiety and leave people feeling helpless - especially the young ones, who should be dreaming about saving the planet (or space travel) instead.

A questionable target

The target agreed to in the Paris Agreement, to keep the planet's surface from warming by 2 degrees Celsius by the end of this century, has been touted as a monumental achievement, and it may well be if we actually manage to achieve this goal by 2100. But we must bear two things in mind.

First, despite negotiations among the representatives of the world's countries for more than two decades, global carbon emissions have shown no signs of slowing down.

Second, the 2 degrees Celsius target was not derived scientifically. The economics Nobel laureate William Nordhaus cautiously noted in the 1970s that a warming of 2 degrees Celsius above the pre-industrial level could render the planet warmer than it has ever been in several hundred-thousand years.

He followed this claim up with a model of the socioeconomic impacts of crossing this threshold.

Some European politicians found this round number to be appealing as something to aim for in the 1990s, followed by climate scientists retrofitting their projected climate impacts to this warming level.

Indeed, no sooner was this figure enshrined in the Paris Agreement than the Alliance of Small Island States demanded that it be lowered to 1.5 degrees Celsius.

Once again, the climate community, now together with the socioeconomic-modelling community, retrofitted future scenarios to meet this so-called "aspirational" target.



Jitendra Kumar, a paramedic who travels in an ambulance, cools off in stifling temperatures at Lalitpur district hospital, Banpur in Uttar Pradesh, AP

Bringing science to serve society is a very noble goal, particularly when government officials demand scientific inputs for their decision-making. But many governments' planned reliance on bioenergy and carbon-capture technologies to accomplish these goals do not consider the potential consequences of climate change on food and water security, for example - let alone the possibility that such promises have a long way to go before becoming viable.

Earth system models

It is also not entirely clear whether the earth system models (ESMs) that scientists use to prepare climate projections can reliably reproduce the consequences of a world that has warmed by 2 degrees Celsius but at the scale of the Indian subcontinent.

As of today, they certainly cannot do so accurately at scales smaller than the subcontinent, particularly for rainfall. So the question automatically arises: can they really distinguish between worlds warmer by 1.5 and 2 degrees Celsius? The answer is 'no', at least at the scales required to inform climate adaptation policy.

The uncertainties in climate projections will be dominated by ESM deficiencies for the next decade or two. For the decades beyond two, the assumed scenarios for radiative forcing, resulting from greenhouse gas emissions and socioeconomic choices, determine the warming levels and rates.

Uncertainties for India

This brings us to the next point: the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic and



A constant drumbeat of alarmist messages may only exacerbate climate anxiety and leave people feeling helpless

Russia's invasion of Ukraine have made it abundantly clear that it is very difficult for us to imagine all the possible socioeconomic and geopolitical events that matter to the well-being of our world, including its people.

Even population projections may not hold considering China's population is currently peaking and India is on route.

The physicist Niels Bohr once said that prediction is very difficult, especially if it is about the future.

The best-case scenario, against this quote, is that climate projections cover all eventualities as well as all technological promises pan out, dragging the world's emission rates down considerably by 2030, giving us a reasonable chance of staying below the 2-degree mark by 2100.

The inherent uncertainties, however, leave India, and the economically developing world, with some tough choices.

This group of countries needs to develop its own tools to determine the crisis's local impacts, especially for adaptation plans that deal with unavoidable consequences.

India's engagement with the international community on climate mitigation, to try and avoid the unmanageable, should also keep an eye

on any Frankenstein's-monster experiments by richer countries, such as spraying dust in the upper atmosphere (a climate geoengineering solution that scientists know carries an unreasonable risk of droughts and crop losses).

India in front

More importantly, India should continue its leadership role by demanding that the community centred on the U.N. Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) be prepared to improve projections that quantify impacts at local scales.

The IPCC and India must also track climate change and its consequences continuously at the socially relevant timescale of a few years.

There is a real threat here of India 'agreeing' to colonise the future with imperfect models and unrealistic scenarios - especially when the paths to certain outcomes are based on technical and economic feasibility and dubious concepts like "negative emission technologies".

The country must consider non-market goods such as equity, well-being, and biodiversity more deliberately.

As things stand today, reducing emissions as a paradigm for tackling climate change has essentially failed. Decarbonising the system is more likely to save us from ourselves.

India can cash in on these opportunities and grow its economy by focusing on green technologies to decarbonise the future.

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THE GIST

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Final G-20 disaster risk meeting starts today

The Hindu Bureau
CHENNAI

The G20 Disaster Risk Reduction Working Group, under the Indian presidency, is set to hold its third and final meeting in Chennai from July 24 to 26.

This is the first time a dedicated working group on Disaster Risk Reduction (DRR) has been constitut-

ed, signifying India's commitment to addressing global challenges posed by disasters and climate emergencies, according to a press release.

Notable dignitaries include P.K. Mishra, Principal Secretary to Prime Minister, and Mami Mizutori, Special Representative of the United Nations Secretary-General.

Japanese Foreign Minister to visit India this week, discuss vision for Global South

Suhasini Haidar
NEW DELHI

Japanese Foreign Minister Yoshimasa Hayashi will visit India later this week as part of a six-nation tour in Asia and Africa, where he plans to focus on Japan's cooperation with the Global South and the Indo-Pacific policy unveiled by Japanese Prime Minister Fumio Kishida during his visit in March.

Mr. Hayashi, who also travelled to Delhi earlier to attend the Quad Foreign Minister's meeting, is expected to hold meetings with Prime Minister Narendra Modi, External Affairs Minister S. Jaishankar, business, and academic delegations. He will discuss bilateral ties, as well as continue efforts to coordinate priorities of Japan's



Yoshimasa Hayashi

Presidency of the G-7 with India's Presidency of the G-20.

At a press conference in Tokyo, Mr. Hayashi said that his focus during the visit to India, Sri Lanka, the Maldives, South Africa, Uganda, and Ethiopia was on enhancing ties with "South West Asia and Africa".

In July, Mr. Hayashi host-

ed Pakistan Foreign Minister Bilawal Bhutto in Tokyo for a bilateral visit.

"Strengthening relationships with international partners, including those in the Global South, is something that Japan attaches great importance to at this year's G-7 Presidency, and this round of visits is one such initiative," Mr. Hayashi told presspersons.

'Strengthen relations'

"In addition, the Government of Japan intends to further strengthen relations with the countries of South West Asia and Africa toward the realisation of a 'free and open Indo-Pacific', and we would like to hold discussions with these countries from this perspective," he added.

In the Indo-Pacific policy address Mr. Kishida

made in Delhi, he had emphasised a special focus on South Asia, including assisting Sri Lanka's debt restructuring process in a "fair and transparent" manner, as well as touting Japanese cooperation with India and Bangladesh for the Bay of Bengal-Northeast India "industrial value chain concept" to foster growth in the region.

Mr. Hayashi's visit to India, Sri Lanka and the Maldives is expected to focus on development initiatives undertaken by Japan in the region. His visit to Africa will also look at projects under consideration, while his visit to South Africa, which comes a month before the BRICS summit of emerging economies there, is expected to see significant announcements.

Downhill driving

Shrinking trade volumes pose a risk
for this year's growth hopes

After hitting a record \$775 billion in 2022-23, India's exports are off to a rocky start this year. Outbound shipments of goods, that had crossed \$450 billion last year, have contracted 15.1% through the April to June 2023 quarter. June's provisional export tally, just shy of \$33 billion, was the lowest figure in eight months and reflected a 22% drop year-on-year, a scale of contraction last seen amid the initial months of the COVID-19 lockdowns. There has been a decline in the import bill as well over the first quarter, albeit at a slower pace than exports. This 12.7% dip is largely driven by the prevalence of lower commodity prices this year compared to the same quarter last year, when the import bill had shot up 44.5% after the Russia-Ukraine conflict erupted. Excluding gold and oil imports, the value of shipments coming into the country is down 10.5% in the first quarter. Sequentially, the decline in non-oil, non-gold imports has accelerated from 2% in May to 16.7% in June, indicating that domestic demand triggers are also ebbing. While this implies the goods trade deficit may not widen as it had last year, it does not augur well for domestic growth impulses that form India's key armour against the gathering global slowdown.

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Services exports are still growing but at a far more sombre pace. That IT majors, who drive most of these intangible exports, have been tentative and decidedly downcast about their earnings guidance for this year, indicates the tide may get worse. Frail global demand may not just impact trade flows but also hurt foreign direct investments even as tightening monetary policies could exacerbate financial market volatility. As the Finance Ministry noted recently, if these trends deepen, the 6.5% growth hopes for the year could wobble. But retail sales in the U.K. have improved in June, although fractionally. The U.S. Treasury Secretary Janet Yellen has exuded confidence that a recession in the world's largest economy may be averted after all. Inflation numbers have eased in Europe and the U.S., triggering hopes of interest rate pauses instead of further tightening to throttle demand and activity. While driving on the hills, one has to prioritise the movement of vehicles climbing up, even if that means reversing a descending automobile up to a point of safe passage. Within the overall downhill trend of exports, the few bright spots such as rising shipments of electronic goods must flourish while trade curbs or obstacles affecting other products must be reviewed. Indian policymakers should redouble efforts to improve competitiveness *vis-à-vis* rivals such as Vietnam, and keep a closer watch on divergent trends in different markets to help exporters capture incremental, even if fractional, global demand.