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Global nationalism

Gandhi once explained the relationship between nationalism and internationalism thus: “I want the freedom of my country so that other countries may learn something from my free country, so that the resources of my country may be utilised for the benefit of mankind.”

If there is ever a time for us (and indeed all of the world) to embrace this very generous and internationalist definition of nationalism, in our interest and that of the world, it is now.

I have an axe to grind here. I was a part of a United Nations (UN) panel recently, the somewhat immodestly titled High Level Panel (HLP) on the Post-2015 Development Agenda, and it has just submitted its report to the Secretary General of the UN.

While such a report is inevitably a product of multiple compromises, it nevertheless stands out (even if I say so myself) for its unequivocal stance on a number of key issues. For that reason and because of who is saying it — most people on the panel, unlike me, were past or serving senior ministers in their own country or in some cases, past or present heads of state — the report has received a fair amount of attention already and its progress through the UN system over the next year or so will afford an occasion for a conversation among nations that is desperately overdue.

Among other things, the report makes no bones about the fact that if there was ever a trade off between development and environmental sustainability, at this point there is absolutely none. We are on the verge of a precipice (if not already in free fall) and unless we do something about climate change now, we run the risk of a disaster big enough to wipe out the entire premise of development.

Given the magnitude of the actions that are called for, it is also clear that neither foreign aid nor technology transfer from rich countries will be a big part of the action plan for a country like India, which is both huge and while still poor, not among the poorest in the world.

The report bends to the fact that in today’s post-crisis world getting rich countries to up their level of aid giving is not going to happen, though it tries to make the already committed (but rarely honoured) 0.7% of GDP in aid more mandatory by actually scoring countries on how well they do on it in exactly the same way that poor countries will be scored on their performance in reducing infant mortality.

Even if this artifice does its job, the total flow of resources will simply not be large enough to make a material difference to us. Likewise, while the report emphasises the need for loosening access to green technologies, it is not clear how much leverage anyone has over the private companies that own most of these technologies. For the most part, we will have to find our own resources for whatever we have to do.

This is obviously grossly unfair, as the HLP report acknowledges — we (like the rest of the developing world) are bearing the cost of a mess that is mostly the consequence of profligacy in rich countries and a model of development that evolved there.

A natural reaction for us might be to focus on that and the general perfidy of the rich nations, and privately try to go it alone (in fact India's latest five year plan already puts sustainability as a goal and lays out unilateral targets for carbon emissions intensity reduction).

This, however, would be a huge mistake. Climate change is something that we cannot fix alone — it is the original collective action problem — it will not work unless almost all the large economies of the world act together. Such coordination is not easy to get to for three reasons: first, many of the rich countries probably have much less to lose from climate change than we do — warmer winters are not exactly a threat in Boston, for example.

Second, reducing dependence on carbon is harder for them given that they are so much more reliant on energy intensive technologies.

Indeed my sense of the literature is that the costs for us may be relatively small if we act now and act smart, and the potential economic benefits large if we can jump on to the green technology bandwagon, as China clearly has (which explains why China is now very much into constructive engagement with the management of climate change).

Finally, several rich countries will need to contemplate actual reductions in consumption (probably temporary, pending technological improvements) if we have to have a real chance of getting there, especially because some other rich countries, like my adopted homeland, will shamelessly evade their responsibilities.

The HLP report creates a framework for sustaining coordination by promoting partnerships between country governments (and potentially other actors) based on the idea that there will be a clear mechanism for measuring progress and countries will hold each other accountable for their commitments towards sustainability including by naming (and implicitly shaming) those who do not do their part.

Perhaps more importantly, the hoopla around 2015 (bringing closure on the first 15 years of international tracking of development achievements and the kickoff for the next 15 years) might actually get countries to sign up for such agreements.

The last thing we want to do is to make a huge fuss and demand concessions (however warranted) that are entirely unrealistic given the compulsions of domestic politics in rich countries, giving them a chance to walk away (observe the recent tussle over the carbon tax in Australia).

This will require some repositioning in our foreign policy stance, since we have traditionally focused on just how unfairly a lot of the global processes have played out.

We have a potentially brief window where we have both a prime minister and a foreign minister who think globally. Perhaps it is time for them to step in and show us the way.

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The views expressed by the author are personal

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