**Coal: down and out?**

BY H U M A Y US U F 2021-11-29

THE UN climate summit is over, and the headlines about climate change are beginning to recede (though the crisis rampages on). What remains beyond the gossip of a Pakistani ministerial spat in Glasgow are the geopolitical tensions that underpinned climate discussions. By reflecting on these, we can reveal the extent to which global discourse on climate mitigation is politicised, and hopefully push past the politicking to get on with meaningful climate action.  
  
COP26 was hailed for finally, explicitly tackling fossil fuels such as coal and oil, which when burned heat up our planet (never mind that it has taken more than a quarter of a century to call out the real culprits behind global warming). After several impassioned speeches in Glasgow, the world agreed to `phase down` unabated coal use and `phase out` inefficient fossil fuel subsidies.  
  
Through most of the negotiations, the goal was to phase out unabated coal use, but an intervention by India and China at the last minute led to the language being changed to `phase down`. This sparked disappointment and outrage among participants, and drove the COP26 president to tears. The resulting narrative is that India and China are the world`s climate villains, intent on destroying the planet through the unchecked use of coal as an energy source, while the West strives for a green transition.  
  
Pakistan responded smugly to these developments, having pledged to reduce its greenhouse gas emissions by 50 per cent by 2030, including through the suspension of new coal projects or coal imports (we dwelled less on the fact that emissions cuts are conditional on climate finance support, and that we plan to increase our reliance on domestic coal in the near term). We took several swipes at India for sabotaging the climate negotiations, while staying silent on China`s role.  
  
It is true that India and China are the world`s largest coal consumers, accounting for about 64pc of global coal consumption (followed by the US, Germany and Russia).  
  
The world in 2020 experienced the first increase in global coal capacity development since 2015, largely driven by an increase in Chinese coal plant development to meet domestic energy demand. India`s coal capacity also slightly increased in 2020, though far less than it had in the preceding years since 2010.  
  
But it is also true that on a per person basis, emissions in both India and China are still markedly lower than almost all developed countries. For example, according to Our World in Data statistics from 2019, India`s per person emissions are less than a quarter of the global average, and one-tenththose of the US. About a quarter of India`s and China`s carbon emissions link to manufacturing products which are exported to other countries, predominantly in the West.  
  
China and India have emphasised the need to continue using coal through 2060 and 2070, respectively, while their economies play catch up. But the trend lines are for declining coal use. Many of India`s existing plants are operating at half capacity while renewables become cheaper, indicating that plans for future plants may not come to pass. China, for its part, has announced that it will not fund overseas coal projects and, earlier this year, China`s Central Environment Inspection Group issued a landmark report criticising the National Energy Administration for failing to enforce the country`s restrictions on coal development. This suggests future coal production in China, too, will be constrained.  
  
Meanwhile, although US President Joe Biden has pledged to decarbonise the American power sector by 2035, only onethird of America`s coal plants are scheduledfor retirement by that date. And going back to the big picture, according to the Centre for Climate and Energy Solutions, the US and Europe jointly contributed47pc of all greenhouse gas emissions through 2017, compared to China`s 13pc and India`s 3pc.  
  
The Glasgow Climate Pact language also focuses on `unabated` coal meaning you can still burn coal if you also manage carbon capture and `inefficient` fuel subsidies -meaning you can still subsidise fossil fuels, language introduced to protect the US`s reliance on oil and gas for energy.  
  
In other words, it`s harder to tell the good guys from the bad guys in the climate context than the politicised anti-China and anti-India rhetoric coming out of COP26 may suggest.  
  
The goal is not to point fingers, but to emphasise the bottom line: we need to cut greenhouse gas emissions, and do it now.  
  
Rather than play politics, perhaps the world`s economic powerhouses could consider a radical solution being proposed by thousands of scientists, including Nobel laureates: a Fossil Fuel Non-Proliferation Treaty which calls for the complete end to fossil fuel use in a fair way (that gives emerging economies some time to catch up), and on a binding schedule. The writer is a political and integrity risk analyst.  
  
Twitter: @humayusuf