

# On climate, India must reclaim leadership role

The COP29 outcome suggests that India needs to rethink its domestic and international climate strategy

An angry Indian delegate dismissed the outcome document of the recently concluded 29th Conference of Parties (COP29) to the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) as an "optical illusion" which had been "stage-managed" by the Azerbaijani hosts. The stage-managing of the multilateral negotiating process and the selling of optical illusions by advanced Western countries is a long-running saga of short-changing developing countries in tackling the challenge of the global climate crisis.

Up until the Copenhagen climate summit in 2009, India did not hesitate to call out Western hypocrisy and mean-minded selfishness. Its position in the climate negotiations was clear and compelling: Countries that had freely signed up to the principles and provisions of the UNFCCC concluded at Rio in 2001, must fulfill their commitments. The principle of historical responsibility acknowledged that the climate crisis was taking place due to the stock of greenhouse gases, mainly carbon, which had accumulated in the earth's atmosphere since the dawn of the industrial age in the 18th century. Current emissions added incrementally to that stock but the main responsibility for the accumu-

lated emissions in the atmosphere fell on the industrialised countries. They were committed to reducing their emissions in absolute terms. These reductions were negotiated through the Kyoto Protocol to the UNFCCC and were subject to a strict compliance procedure, with significant penalties if they were not delivered. Western countries led by the United States (US) went about systematically eviscerating the UNFCCC and gutting the Kyoto Protocol. The shredding of these legal instruments which began in Copenhagen, was completed at the COP21 at Paris in 2015, where we ended up with a universal pledge and review system and, most importantly, jettisoning the principle of historical responsibility. In signing the Paris Agreement, India gave up its most important negotiating lever, that of holding the developed countries to their legal undertakings under the UNFCCC. The Paris Agreement superseded the UNFCCC and the international architecture that had governed the climate change domain since Rio was changed forever.

I was India's chief negotiator on the climate crisis up until the Copenhagen summit. In the run-up to Copenhagen, a view started circulating in government that India should take a more accommodating stance, that "it should be part of the solution" rather than be seen as a perennial naysayer; that if India was seeking "a seat at the high table", it should not always be seen as championing the interests of developing countries. That India derived its strength precisely because

it was seen as articulating and defending the interests of developing countries, was neglected in our deliberations. We lost credibility with our core constituency and our hopes of getting Western support in terms of finance and technology were belied. Since Paris, Indian negotiators have been valiantly trying to regain some lost ground, bringing back the notion of equity and climate justice. But the Baku outcome suggests that with regard to the climate crisis, India will be on its own, that its expectations of significant infusions of capital and technology to support its energy transition are indeed "optical illusions".

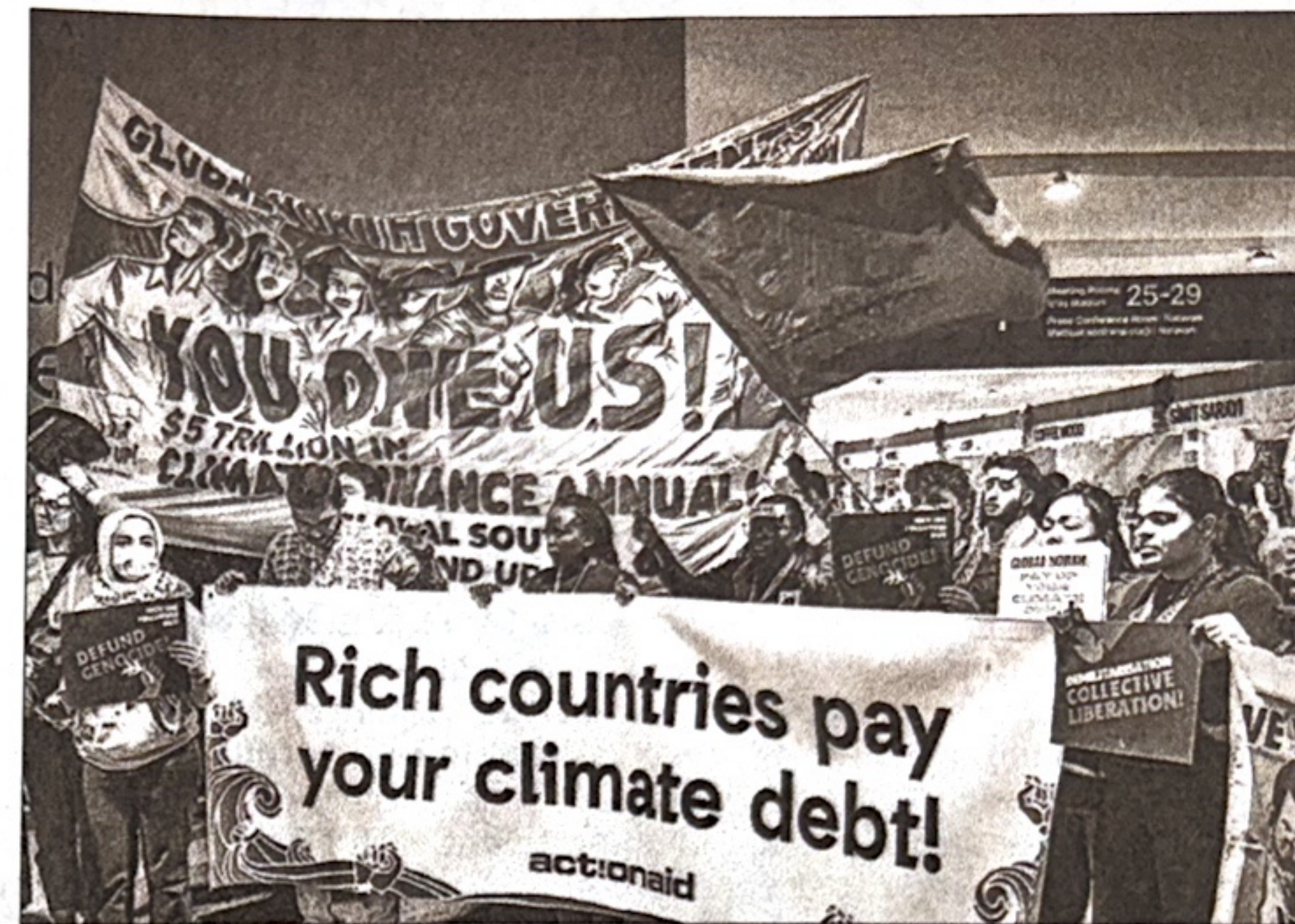
We must rethink our domestic and international climate strategy.

On climate, India is a sui generis case, and this complicates the formulation of an effective negotiating strategy. Its overriding challenge is energy poverty, with per capita primary energy consumption being one-third of the

world average. In terms of kilowatt equivalent, in 2021-22, India had a per capita figure of 7,143 kw, compared to 31,051 kw for China and 78,754 kw for the US. Being the world's most populous country, it is no surprise that even with such low energy availability, India in macro-terms is the world's third-largest source of greenhouse gas emissions, though still far behind the US and China. These emissions will inevitably rise as the economy continues to register 6-7% Gross Domestic Product (GDP) growth. In the US, emissions are on the decline, while China's are plateauing and will begin to decline sooner rather than



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later. Inevitably, India will be in the crosshairs as the only large emerging economy with rising emissions. There will be pressures to retire coal-based thermal power which will remain the mainstay of our energy system for the foreseeable future.

The good news is that achieving energy security for India requires an accelerated transition from fossil-fuel-driven economic growth to one progressively more reliant on renewable sources of energy such as solar energy and cleaner sources of energy such as nuclear energy. Currently, we are heavily dependent on imports of oil (90%) and gas (47%), and even high-quality coal (35%). These are subject to supply and price volatility and affected by geopolitical disruptions. It is in our interest to progressively reduce our import dependence and accelerate the adoption of renewable and cleaner sources of energy. India's great advantage is the scale of its economy and bright prospects for its growth. With the right mix of policies, this can be leveraged to attract both capital and technology.

India has taken a clear-cut and even defiant stand at Baku, and this is

welcome. This was applauded by the large constituency of developing country delegates. We need to regain our leadership of this constituency which alone can give us bargaining strength. In the run-up to Copenhagen, I travelled to several developing countries to build a consensus on our negotiating posture. At that time, the BASIC countries (Brazil, South Africa, India, and China) still functioned as a coherent and influential group. It was our flirtation with the West that eroded our standing in our natural constituency. Since the Paris Agreement, which was the result of a cynical deal between the US and China at the cost of other developing countries, the BASIC is no longer an effective forum. China was remarkably muted at Baku not wanting to draw attention to its position as the world's largest emitter. There is space for India's leadership in the Global South but that will require a sustained and concerted diplomatic offensive.

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