

## The Climate Change and Interdependence

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The final version of the report '*Climate Change 2007: Impacts, Adaptation and Vulnerability*' released in Brussels by the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) presents a "nightmare vision" of the planet's future. As an outcome, the Panel urges industrialised countries to launch an energy revolution to create a carbon-free economy, to reduce greenhouse gas emissions, and keep global warming below the critical level identified by the IPCC. It also warns the world leaders that without drastic reduction of greenhouse gases, the resulting global warming would decimate flora and fauna, and imperil the lives of hundreds of millions of people. It particularly mentions "*parts of Asia would be endangered by the melting of glaciers in mountainous regions such as the Himalayas.*" The U.S. and Chinese representatives managed to tone down the draft report and got some specific forecasts for their countries removed. They are the world's largest producers of greenhouse gases caused by the burning of fossil fuels and are responsible for more than 45 percent of the planet's greenhouse gas emissions. The Chinese ogre, devouring the planet's raw materials is not bound by the Kyoto agreement to cut emissions; it is a so-called developing country (though city like Shanghai are more 'developed' than most of the European cities).

It is not that China is not aware of the seriousness of the situation. A telling incident occurred a few days after President Hu Jintao's State visit to India in November 2006. Wang Shucheng, China's Minister for

Water Resources made a statement which went totally unnoticed in India. The top water official dismissed Beijing's plans to divert the Brahmaputra that flows from Tibet into India to quench China's needs. The proposal has been a source of tension between the two Asian giant nations. Wang declared that the proposal was "unnecessary, unfeasible and unscientific," and had no government backing. He added: "There is no need for such dramatic and unscientific projects." The most interesting part of the declaration was that for the first time, a Chinese official admitted that the proposal to divert the Brahmaputra River existed. He stated: *"it has been promoted by a group of retired officials, and earlier this year it received a burst of publicity in a book entitled Tibet's Water Will Save China?"*

Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesman Liu Jianchao also commented: *"There may be some retired officials that support the plan, but they're not the experts advising the government."*

If one looks closer at the water situation in the Himalayan region, Beijing has perhaps not much alternative but to abandon the pharaonic project to irrigate the Gobi deserts with the Brahmaputra waters; a recent report by the Chinese government speaks of the worsening 'due in large part to global warming' of the environmental condition of the Tibetan Plateau, considered as the world barometer for the planet's health.

The survey was conducted by the Remote Sensing Department of the China Aero Geophysical Survey. It shows that the plateau has shrinking glaciers, a rising snow line, dwindling wetlands, and greater desertification compared to 30 years ago.

Tibet, the highest and youngest plateau in the world, often dubbed as 'the third pole', is the source of most of the large Asian rivers such as the Yangtze, Yellow River or Mekong. The sub-continent itself depends

on the waters of the Sutlej, the Indus and the Brahmaputra to nourish its fast growing population.

The survey has come to the conclusion that even if the world's global climate does not continue to get warmer, the Tibetan plateau's glacial areas will shrink to 72 per cent of the current area by 2050 and 50 per cent by 2090.

Tibet's largest lake, the Kokonor, in Qinghai province also suffers from global warming and desertification. Scientists say that it may vanish in two centuries though Beijing has pledged \$870 million to stop it shrinking. Xinhua News Agency recently admitted that desertification was due to overgrazing around the lake, located at the crossroads of several bird migration routes across Asia. It is also said that overfishing has reduced the catch of the scaleless naked carp in the lake to just 10% of what it was just 40 years ago.

Whatever might be today the official Chinese position at the IPCC, Beijing is well aware of alarming the situation. It is why China has to admit that it would be 'unscientific' to think in terms of diverting the waters of the Brahmaputra towards northern China. In 50 years, there will probably be no water to divert.

Though the melting of the glaciers temporarily provides more water resources for the Tibetan plateau and the down-stream areas, Fang Hongbin, a senior engineer at the Remote Sensing Department recognizes that *"with the constant decrease of glaciers and the raising of the snow line, the total water reserve of the plateau keeps declining."*

In India, since the Nehru days, the policy of the Government in Delhi has politically and strategically tried to wish away Tibet, but unfortunately (or fortunately) it is too big a piece of territory to disappear from India's radar screens. It represents some 25% of the

land mass of the People's Republic of China and a formidable geographic buffer between India and China; it can not be forgotten by India.

Whether tomorrow will see a water war over the Himalayan rivers or whether the rise of China will remain peaceful, the climatic changes on the Tibetan plateau raise the scariest strategic and environmental challenges for India and the subcontinent in the years to come.

Recently, a former Indian diplomat casually told me: "environment is a matter for rich countries only to deal with". Even admitting that India can still be classified in the 'poor country' category, the consequences of global warming are the headache of all on this planet.

In this context, I often think of the concept of Universal Responsibility expounded by the Dalai Lama. To take an example in South Asia, why could not India and Pakistan use contentious issues dividing them, such as their rivers, to institutionalize new areas of cooperation? Is it unimaginable to have one day a High Authority which will look after the sharing of the waters of the subcontinent? Is it not absurd to have to ask a Swiss expert to settle the height of the Baglihar dam in Kashmir on behalf of India and Pakistan?

One of the problems is that the public in South Asia is not today interested by the problems of environment; cricket or the weddings of Ash or Elisabeth Hurley are more important.

In Asia, India and China are doing extremely well economically; they are coming closer to set up a strategic triangle with Russia, but what about environment? Here, Tibet is the key.

After the talks of China's and India's Foreign Ministers in February, Nirupama Rao, the Indian Ambassador to China said that Delhi was ready with its list of experts to operationalise the transborder rivers mechanism agreed upon during President Hu's visit.

Is it not too little too late? The Tibetan glaciers are fast melting. As for South Asia, India and Pakistan are not able to even do business together, the integration of their environmental policies may take of few more decades, except if a natural disaster strikes before. The question is: why do men have to always wait for disasters to act? In any case, Tibet has undoubtedly a crucial role to play for the future of the region and the planet at large. It is certainly one issue on which the Dalai Lama should insist upon during future negotiations with Beijing; Dharamsala needs to be involved in preserving whatever can be preserved from the Roof of the World's fragile and endangered environment.

In the current process, human beings will hopefully quickly learn about interdependence and the fact that the Tibet issue is one of the keys to the planet's future.

Astronaut Donald Williams (not related to Sunita) wrote something that all political leaders should ponder upon: "For those who have seen the Earth from space, and for the hundreds and perhaps thousands more who will, the experience most certainly changes your perspective. The things that we share in our world are far more valuable than those which divide us."