

Covid-19 And Climate Change: Asia's Policy Choices In The Age Of 'Crisis'

BY TILAK DOSHI

The Asian continent spans a vast geographical area. The novel coronavirus emerged in the eastern part – Wuhan, China – and quickly spread to other countries within a couple of months after first reported cases in December.¹ In Asia's western reaches lie the Maldives, long the posterchild of the international climate change establishment which claims, among other things, that the low-lying tourist islands will be submerged as sea-levels rapidly rise with global warming.²

Asian governments now face stark trade-offs, as the needs of an immediate, potentially catastrophic health crisis (and its devastating economic fallout) compete with the policy requirements of what the climate industrial complex deems as an equally threatening existential threat of "climate crisis".³ As Asian policymakers grapple with immediate measures to handle the epidemic with unprecedented lockdowns of entire cities, provinces or even nationwide, they are no doubt keenly observing how their counterparts in the US and Europe are meeting this common challenge. Few if any of the developments in the West will inspire confidence.

The U.S. Congress passed a \$2.2 trillion coronavirus relief package which was signed by President Trump last Friday. But this was only after a week of partisan delay caused by the Democrats' insistence on provisions that had little to do with handling the pandemic. Speaker of the House Nancy Pelosi failed in her bid to incorporate climate change provisions in the stimulus bill. In an expansive wish list, the bill included new tax credits for solar and wind energy and emissions standards for airlines by 2025 as part of the party's Green New Deal ambitions.⁴

To be fair, Ms Pelosi is not alone in the cynical attempt to "never let a good crisis go to waste". Across the pond, European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen doubled down on the EU's climate commitment with a €1 trillion Green Deal.⁵ She presented the European Climate Law on March 4th, when the Wuhan virus was fast metastasizing into a global pandemic. The law, which would legally bind EU members to net zero carbon dioxide emissions by 2050, was presented by Ms. von Leyen while flanked by none other than teenage Green icon Greta Thunberg. In an odd twist of logic, Frans Timmermans, leading the Commission's work on the European Green Deal, said that the focus on the coronavirus pandemic "showed the need for climate laws".⁶ In the revolutionary language of the EC's Green Deal, all policy matters including coronavirus-related public health and economic stimulus legislation would have to be in line with net zero emissions by mid-century.

International bureaucrats have echoed these calls for stiffening the resolve to pursue climate legislation

in the face of the mounting Covid-19 crisis. Fatih Birol, head of the International Energy Agency and a prominent climate policy advocate, advised world leaders and heads of financial institutions to exploit the "historic opportunity" presented by the pandemic and "use the current situation to step up our ambition to tackle climate change."⁷ Christiana Figueres, former head of UN Framework Convention on Climate Change and architect of the Paris Agreement, tweeted "Well put @IEABirol...We have a massive crisis = opportunity on our hands. We cannot afford to waste it. Recovery must be green."⁸

Not surprisingly, these incessant calls for governments to finance ever-greater ambitions in emission reductions while the coronavirus pandemic imposes immediate hardships on afflicted countries have led to strong objections. One EU diplomat put it baldly: "We simply don't have the money to do everything." Another said that "Maybe it will be less on Green Deal but more on trying to restart the economies...We cannot just continue with the plans and programmes we had so far. They were developed for a world without coronavirus."⁹

Poland's government, never a fan of the EU's Green ambitions, stated that the country — heavily dependent on coal-fired power generation — would not be able to achieve the EU's climate change goals because of the impact of the coronavirus epidemic on its economy.¹⁰ Holland, a richer European economy at the forefront of the EU's climate ambitions, cited the toll of the virus pandemic in announcing that no new measures will be taken to reduce emissions.¹¹ Bavaria's Chief Minister called on the federal government to provide relief from the deepening pandemic crisis by suspending carbon taxes and renewable energy subsidies which have made electricity rates in Germany among the world's highest.¹²

For policymakers around the world, the Covid-19 pandemic has provided a reality check, a painful reminder of what a real existential crisis looks and feels like. Inevitably, the global focus on the Covid-19 pandemic has come at the expense of attention paid to hypothetical model-based notions of a future "climate emergency". Perhaps the most consequential price

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See references at end of text.

to be paid on the trade-off between the two policy objectives will be in Asia, the world's most populous continent.

Japan, the world's third largest economy and one of its richest, is the first major signatory of the Paris Agreement to submit updated plans on cutting emissions in preparation for the now-postponed November 2020 Glasgow meeting. It was widely criticised by climate campaigners for failing to intensify emission targets as called for by the 'spirit' of the Paris Agreement.¹³ Many an Asian policymaker will see Japan's refusal to submit tighter emissions reduction targets in view of the Covid-19 pandemic as pragmatic and necessary.

China, the world's second largest economy and its biggest emitter of greenhouse gases, plans a fiscal stimulus worth hundreds of billions of dollars to restore economic growth.¹⁴ Given the country's economic structure as the 'workshop of the world', this implies the resuscitation of carbon-intensive activity, ranging from coal to oil, natural gas, petrochemicals, plastics, and refineries — and reviving jobs for the multitudes who work in automobiles, aviation, shipping, utilities, construction, agriculture, manufacturing and utilities. Hence it is no surprise that China plans to postpone automobile emission standards and "save the industry" post-Covid-19.¹⁵

In the emerging countries of Asia, among the impoverished masses without access to reliable and affordable electricity systems needed to power modern medical care, the lethality of the Covid-19 pandemic can only be imagined at this stage. Vast swaths of Asia lack clean water, sanitation systems, and refrigeration for vaccines, let alone respirators and personal protective equipment for front line medical workers. These cannot be provided at scale by solar or windmill farms. The strictures against fossil fuels, as part of the

liturgy of climate change belief, are egregious to the extreme when the real and immediate challenge of coping with Covid-19 faces each and every Asian today.

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