

# An appetite to lead on climate and trade

## World stage

**James Lamont**  
says some experts  
question closer  
alliance with China

India's place in the world is a subject that can raise hackles. Shashi Tharoor, minister of state for external affairs, knows that all too well.

The former United Nations official was pilloried this month for being "anti-Nehruvian" because of the way he summarised a lecture by visiting UK political scientist Lord Bhiku Parekh.

In his summary, Mr Tharoor had said a foreign policy that drew on his country's sense of civilisation, and the contribution of Mahatma Gandhi and Jawaharlal Nehru, India's first prime minister, had "enhanced India's standing in the world but also earned us the negative reputation of running a moralistic commentary on world affairs". Western diplomats call it "sniping from the sidelines".

As the economy strengthens, policymakers and academics identify a new role for their country in a more globalised world.

A seat at the G20 group of leading nations and the pursuit of a bigger role at the UN has encouraged a move away from the "moralistic commentary" of the old days and the showing of greater leadership in global issues.

Trade and climate change are where the country has most clearly demonstrated an appetite to play a leading role over the past year.

India was in some quarters blamed for being partly responsible for the collapse of the World Trade Organisation's Doha Round talks last year. The breakdown was over a disagreement between the US and India about what would happen if India faced a massive influx of imports and was allowed to raise tariffs.

It has since tried to repair the damage. Anand Sharma, Kamal Nath's successor in the trade ministry, won applause from the global community, including Pascal Lamy, the director general of the WTO, for trying to close what are still wide gaps.

"The significance of these discussions in India cannot be underestimated," says Baroness Catherine Ashton, European Union High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy and former EU trade commissioner, of talks hosted in New Delhi in September.

"For India to do this was a risk. You see the discussions were not guaranteed to go well. Yet minister Sharma and the prime minister [Manmohan Singh] were willing to bring everyone together and say India is fully engaged and wants to move forward."

The country did not earn warm words from European partners when it doggedly opposed legally binding carbon emissions in the UN climate change talks in Copenhagen.

But in Jairam Ramesh, the strident environment minister, they found someone with whom they could negotiate.

After the Copenhagen negotiations, in which India allied with China to confront the developed world, Mr Ramesh said the country had to drop its traditional "nay-sayer" approach and be seen as part of global solutions.

"One lesson India must learn from Copenhagen is that we must negotiate from a position of strength and not defensively. [We must present] what we are going to do rather than what [we] cannot do".

He was energised by the 75 minutes of negotiation between the Basic group - Brazil, South Africa, India and China - and US President Barack Obama - that produced the Accord.

Although many see Copenhagen as a failure, he describes it as a "watershed" event, in which China emerged as a well-prepared counter-balance to

the US.

Encouraged by "pragmatism", he views possibilities for the Basic grouping in negotiating trade pacts and reforming the world's financial architecture.

Some commentators consider India could go one better and cement a stronger partnership with the US, with whom it shares liberal democratic traditions.

Jagdish Bhagwati, professor of economics and law at Columbia University in the US, has urged the country to engage with the US more creatively in both trade and climate negotiations.

He has appealed to New Delhi to be more sensitive to the severe domestic constraints that Mr Obama faces and warned against too close alliance with China. He suggests seeking compensation for the damage of global warming by understanding better the rights and penalties the US legal system accords.

"Obama is constrained, but he will not be constrained forever. We should have held his hand, given him some ideas", says Prof Bhagwati of the climate change talks.

He also points out India's need to build its credibility by addressing the plight of its millions of poor people with an inclusive economic growth strategy.

He is not alone in questioning the durability of common cause with China - so does Mr Singh. The prime minister detects China's greater "assertiveness" away from the negotiating table and on India's border. Others in his government voice fears about China arming arch-rival Pakistan.

Their comments serve as a reminder that India's place in the world is seldom a comfortable one.

**'We must negotiate from a position of strength and not defensively'**

**Jairam Ramesh,**  
**Environment Minister**

