

Coal Makes India The Super Polluter

WASHINGTON – In case you were wondering, we are not making much progress in our planetary war against global warming. There is cause for serious alarm. However, despite the exaggerated media focus on Washington, the real problem is not President Donald Trump and his denial of the dangers of global warming, illustrated for instance by exiting the Paris Accord, and by his “promises” to support US coal miners in order to make coal great again.

America failing to lead

Sure, the fact that America, the world’s number two country (behind China) when it comes to emissions, is failing to lead is not helpful, to say the least. That said, while America’s position on this global threat is very disappointing, America is not the main problem.

The problem is India

The monstrous size problem is India. The Subcontinent’s economy, (with a population now in excess of 1.2 billion people), is growing, and with growth comes a voracious appetite for energy, specifically for thermal coal, the kind of cheap coal used for electric power generation. A recent long survey in The Economist paints a rather horrible picture. 3/4 of India’s electricity is generated by coal, and coal consumption is actually growing.

Too much coal

Sure, India has also launched a large number of important renewable energy projects. But compared with the amount of electric power generated by coal they are not very significant.

And cutting down on coal used for power plants is almost impossible, for economic and political reasons. Coal mining is concentrated in the rather poor East of the country. Which is to say that this industry provides badly needed jobs and income to many low income Indians. By the same token, coal transportation is a major source of revenue for Indian freight railways. And coal is relatively cheap. Hard to see how India's policy-makers can cut down its use without causing major upheavals.

Dependence here to stay

If you take all is this together, unless the cost of renewable energy goes down more rapidly, it is easy to realize that India's heavy dependence on coal is not going to go away any time soon. And this means that India will continue to lead on global greenhouse gas emissions, because of its super sized fleet of coal-fired plants.

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