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A country stuck in the in-between

S'pore caught between developed and less developed economies

By Rachel Chang

LIKE it or not, Singapore has been portrayed by climate change critics as rich and polluting, but sitting on its hands.

By gross domestic product (GDP) per capita, it ranks among the top five in the world, making it richer than developed countries such as Japan and the United States.

By emissions per capita, Singapore's 9.8 tonnes is on a par with that of developed countries, like Japan's 9.68 tonnes.

But it has no obligations under international treaties on climate change.

It is not an Annex I country under the Kyoto Protocol, which lists industrialised, developed nations which have to commit to reducing their emissions of greenhouse gases.

Some Annex 1 countries also have to commit to transferring wealth to less developed countries in the Group of 77 (G-77) to help them become more energy efficient.

Singapore has developed only in the last 50 years, and so has no 'historical' responsibility for the state of the Earth. But neither can it claim to be a developing country that needs wealth transfers, like many in the region.

It is stuck in the in-between in more ways than one. Along with a few other places like South Korea and Taiwan, Singapore occupies the middle ground between the developed and less developed economies.

In the fierce negotiations leading up to the Copenhagen climate change conference next week, it is caught in a tug-of-war between the various camps.

Some Annex 1 countries like Japan and Australia want Singapore to take on First World obligations, according to Minister Mentor Lee Kuan Yew.

If a rich Asian country like Singapore will not commit, they argue, how can they expect the poor behemoths like China and India to do so?

Both have emissions per capita figures that are much less than Singapore's: China's is five tonnes and India's is 1.18 tonnes.

According to Dr Tilak K. Doshi, the visiting principal fellow at the Energy Studies Institute, although some in this middle group like Singapore, Taiwan and Qatar are not large emitters, people say they should at least agree to some cuts.

'They are capable of doing so, they have the financial and technical means of doing so, so to be fair they should be expected to do something,' he says.

The Singapore Government has made clear its resistance to joining the Annex 1 group of countries, but it has committed to making cuts.

It was announced on Wednesday that the Government will commit to a 16 per cent cut of its Business-as-Usual (BAU) figure - but only if a legally binding global deal is struck at Copenhagen.

The BAU figure is what carbon emissions would be if the country continues to grow without curbing emissions.

This figure is smaller than the ones brandished by other countries. South Korea, a country in that 'middle group' as well, has declared voluntary cuts of 30 per cent below its BAU figure by 2020.

'No ordinary country'

THE Government's line has always been that when it comes to climate change, Singapore is 'no ordinary country', as Mr Lee puts it.

Although it is a little red dot, the city-state's size looms large.

South Korea, for instance, aims to build 10 more domestic nuclear reactors by 2030, on top of the eight now planned, with six under construction.

But safety concerns mean nuclear reactors need to be ringed by a large buffer zone, for which Singapore has no land.

The only option then for Singapore is to enter into a joint project with a neighbouring country, say experts.

But this would put Singapore in an overwhelmingly dependent position. If it seemed hard to negotiate over water supplies, imagine if the object of cooperation is nuclear.

With no spare land, and winds and waters too weak to harness, Singapore is what the jargon terms 'alternative-energy disadvantaged.'

Then, there is the fact that Singapore is a country in a city. Its emissions are actually similar to that of other densely populated cities such as London and New York.

But these cities are fed by power generators located outside their boundaries in other parts of the country. In contrast, power generators are elbow-to-elbow with Singapore's city centre, and account for a big portion of emissions here.

In short: Singapore may be a country, but it is not like other countries.

'There should be a handicap system, like in golf,' says Dr Doshi. 'And we have to be given a handicap.'

Starting from higher base

THE Government is sensitive to charges that it should do more because, it says, it often goes unemphasised how much Singapore has already done.

Singapore has developed over the last five decades in a consistently environmentally conscious way (see report: '**CLEAN & GREEN' SINCE 1963**').

Since it is starting from a higher base, say the authorities, it is harder to cut emissions further.

In fact, the standards that have been applied to industries tie its hands in other ways as well.

In a cap-and-trade system, factories that are heavy emitters must buy carbon permits from those that are not. The added costs persuade companies to invest in pollution control and energy efficient measures.

According to Professor Euston Quah, head of economics at Nanyang Technological University, the pace of development in Singapore has meant that factories here are uniformly advanced in these mechanisms: 'There's less opportunity to trade.'

An Asean-wide cap-and-trade system would make more sense. But like a nuclear power plant shared with a neighbour, the political framework to pursue such cooperation is still a pipe dream.

Doing what it says

THESE daunting challenges, however, do not mean that it is in Singapore's interest to shirk from international negotiations.

As a low-lying island, climate change is an existential threat to the country. If sea levels rise by 2m, the city-state will be swallowed whole.

As Senior Minister S. Jayakumar said in response to climate change scepticism: 'I don't think we've the luxury of waiting for the day, I don't know when it will come, where it will be put beyond doubt which school of thought is right.'

The 16 per cent cut proposed by Singapore will come from a combination of fiscal and regulatory measures, say the authorities.

Experts point out that, as challenged as Singapore may be, where there is a will, there is a way.

Dr Joachim Luther of the Solar Energy Research Institute of Singapore says that solar energy can be imported from neighbouring countries if the Government is willing to invest in building the cables needed, which will cost billions.

With the greenery in Singapore, harvesting biowaste to be turned into biodiesel could be a feasible source of alternative energy.

When it comes to global standards on emissions, the Government is anxious to have a level playing field in the sectors most integral to Singapore's economy.

For example, emissions from civil aviation and shipping industries are not counted against Singapore because these planes and freight ships service the world, says Dr Doshi.

Similarly, if regulations are to be levied on an industry like petrochemicals, these must be applied globally. If standards are country-specific, with developing countries exempt, then petrochemical companies will just migrate to the countries where they can escape regulations.

Uniform global rules are of course resisted by developing countries, which say this will impede their development.

This is why some countries want Singapore to be included in the Annex 1 group. If standards on oil refineries are imposed on Australia (as an Annex 1 country), for example, and not on Singapore, then Australia will lose out.

Ultimately, Singapore accounts for little in the global scheme of things - 0.2 per cent of global carbon emissions, to be exact. Even so, there are perhaps two things in particular it can contribute to the global dealings.

The first is in setting an example in the region of how it is possible to develop economically without devastating the environment, and to help neighbouring countries to do so whether through technology and wealth transfers, or otherwise.

The second is to bring its targets into reality. Whatever the shortcomings of the Government's position, one thing is assured: Unlike many other countries, it will do what it says.

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