

Scaling back coal-based power plants: A step in the right direction

But what about Rampal?



BADRUL IMAM

THE government's plan, as reported in the media, to reduce the number of coal-based power plants and thus the amount of power to be generated using coal, brings relief to the concerns of environmentalists, scientists and the general public who have been campaigning against major coal use due to the danger it poses to the environment and human health. Be it for the failure to collect funds for the projects or for environmental concerns, the plan, if agreed upon, will take Bangladesh closer to the sensible world, whose policies tend to downsize and eventually discontinue coal as a major source of primary energy. There is no official statement yet and the decision is pending for a nod from the highest authority of the Government. Media sources, however, report that the government may scale down the number of large coal-based power plants to only five and scrap the other 13 in the pipeline.

Coal is a dirty fuel and has been pointedly shown by climate scientists around the world to be the prime polluter of the atmosphere, resulting in heating up the world with severe negative consequences. Most nations around the world are pledge bound to take action and move towards zero emission policies following the Paris Climate Agreement, whereby the use of primary sources of pollution like coal will be gradually phased out in specific timeframes.

Bangladesh has for a long time been a gas-based mono-energy country, and the energy demand was primarily met by local gas supplies. But the depletion of gas reserves and the declining volume of gas production prompted the government to diversify energy sources, thus planning an energy mix with major coal, liquefied natural gas (LNG), nuclear power and import of power.

The foreign consultant engaged to prepare a Power Sector Master Plan (PSMP) for Bangladesh, in its report submitted in 2010, suggested an energy mix with 50 percent coal dependency for power generation. This plan was revised in 2016 and the suggested use of coal in the master plan was revised to 35 percent



COLLAGE: SUSHMITA S PREETHA

of total power generation. This translates into generation of 10,500 MW of power in 2030 and 20,000 MW in 2041 using coal, when the total power generation capacity is expected to reach 30,000 MW and 57,000 MW respectively. In the above context, the annual consumption of coal for power generation will be about 36 million tons in 2030 and 70 million tons in 2040.

The present consumption of coal for power generation is about 3.5 million tons per year for the two coal-based power plants, one at Barapukuria (440 MW) in Dinajpur and the other is the newly commissioned Payra plant (660 MW) in Patuakhali. This means that if the Power Sector Master Plan 2016 is implemented, the coal consumption for power generation would be 10 times more in 2030 and 20 times more in 2041 than the present consumption level.

The PSMP 2016 formula of generating

35 percent of power by coal prompted the government to move forward with an aggressive plan of building coal-based power plants, both in the public and private sector. As many as 33 coal-based power plant projects were approved and coal-based power was supposed to be the most important contributor of power. The high concentration of coal power plants in small areas led the general public to realise the disastrous consequences of its environmental impacts. For example, several large coal power plants were planned to be built on the small island of Moheshkhali, which means that Bangladesh's most valued tourist area, Cox's Bazar (which is in close proximity) would be turned into a sink for the emissions and would eventually damage and degrade the pristine natural beauty and environment of the area.

The international independent environmental watchdog Centre for Research

on Energy and Clean Air's (CREA) lead analyst Lauri Myllyviro, in a recent webinar presentation, focused on the high concentration of coal-based power plants in Bangladesh. It has been pointed out in the report that the eight coal-fired power projects proposed in Cox's Bazar district (Moheshkhali) constitute the largest proposed coal-fired cluster anywhere in the world. And this is in a location with a very high population density and is close to the tourism capital of Bangladesh. The plants would emit an estimated 1,600 kg of mercury per year into the air, of which one-third would be deposited into land and freshwater ecosystems.

There are two sides to the coal burning problem. One is the emission of carbon dioxide, a major greenhouse gas which, when entering into the global atmosphere, adds to the warming up process of planet earth. The second is the local environmental pollution

due to emissions of many other pollutants including ash, nitrogen oxide, mercury, sulfur, chromium and polluted waste water, among others. Bangladesh's contribution to atmospheric pollution through carbon dioxide is insignificant compared to the major coal polluters of the world, but on the issue of local environmental pollution, there are serious concerns, especially for the one project in Rampal, which is located very close to the Sundarbans.

Rampal has been in the centre of an international campaign, in addition to the national one, with respect to the danger it poses to the UNESCO heritage site, the Sundarbans, the world's largest mangrove forest. The campaigns' points—that the Rampal coal power plant will have negative impacts on the Sundarbans' ecosystem, will harm its environment and eventually result in lasting damage to the forest—has been substantiated by several scientific reports. As many as 11 scientific reports prepared by international scientists dealing with various components of the pollution chain, such as toxic gas, mercury, ash, coal dust, waste water etc, have been made public in addition to submitting these to the authorities. A UNESCO team visiting the Sundarbans pointedly concluded that the Rampal coal power project would harm the Sundarbans.

The present government, to its credit, has been successful in raising the power generation capacity to a new high at a speed never seen before in the country. There has been a positive gap between power generation capacity (20,000 MW-) and power demand (8,000 MW to 13,000 MW), meaning our power generation capacity far outpaces the power demand at present. The government is in a position to comfortably cut back on the power generation master plan by reducing those of coal-based plants. The list of coal-fired power plants the government is supposed to scrap should include the controversial Rampal project. This is the right time to reconsider the Rampal coal power project which, if built, will remain controversial for a long time into the future. With such high levels of successful development achieved, the government can very well do without Rampal.

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Turkish shadow boxing reflects growing rivalry with Iran



JAMES M DORSEY

different responses from Russia and Iran, two countries Turkey views as both partners and rivals.

Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan has been careful not to jeopardise his newly found status as a Russian recognised-player in the southern Caucasus. By contrast, Erdogan seems determined to provoke Iran with statements and postings by his state-run broadcaster that potentially call into question the territorial integrity of the Islamic republic.

In doing so, Erdogan is fuelling Iran's deepest fears. Iran, not without reason, has long believed that the United States and Saudi Arabia are bent on instigating ethnic unrest in a bid to force Tehran to alter policies, if not topple the Iranian regime.

"Turkey's sick president took steps to break up Iran. Erdogan is single-handedly implementing the West's dirty policy in the region," said Mahmoud Ahmadi Bighash, a member of the Iranian parliament's National Security and Foreign Policy Commission. Erdogan adopted his provocative posture as he moved to exploit new geopolitical transportation opportunities created by the Russian-brokered deal that sealed Azerbaijan's

defeat of Armenia in the recent Caucasus war.

The deal opens a corridor that links Azerbaijan with Nakhichevan, an Azeri enclave in Armenia that straddles the border with Turkey. The opening boosts Turkish efforts to expand transportation tie-ups with the Caucasus, Central Asia, and China's infrastructure-driven One Belt One Road Initiative that seeks to bind Eurasia to the People's Republic.

Turkish transportation minister Adil Karaismailoglu was quick to announce that his office was about to complete a study for the construction of a railway through the corridor as part of a USD 5.7 billion project to link Turkish, Azeri and Georgian transportation nodes and ports.

Turkey this month dispatched its first China-bound freight train that travelled on the newly opened rail line from the northeastern Turkish city of Kars to the Azeri capital of Baku via Tbilisi in Georgia and then across Kazakhstan to Xi'an Province. The Caucasus ceasefire deal includes no security provisions for the use of the corridor by Armenia, even though Armenian Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan and Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov have suggested that a railway linking Armenia to Iran was a possibility. Turkey's advantage in Nakhichevan reinforces the significance of last week's opening of a 220-kilometre long railway linking Khaf in northeastern Iran to Herat in western Afghanistan. Iran and Afghanistan are discussing the extension of the rail link to China with Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan.

Erdogan's verbal toying with a break-up of Iran as a nation state, like the railway competition, is one facet of Turkish and Iranian efforts to carve out their individual places in an emerging rebalanced world order. In doing so,

Turkey and Iran are exploiting a vacuum created by reduced US engagement, China's economic-driven approach to geopolitics, and challenges across the former Soviet Union to Russian hegemony in a swath of land that stretches from Afghanistan via the Caucasus and the Eastern Mediterranean into North Africa.

Erdogan's provocative playing with words and images that were certain to raise Iranian eyebrows came as he was taking steps to improve relations with Iran's archrivals, Israel and Saudi Arabia, which were certain to curry favour with incoming US President-elect Joe Biden. The Turkish president appointed Ufuk Ullutas, a 40-year-old Hebrew-speaking member of a think tank who studied the Middle East at Hebrew University in Jerusalem, as his first ambassador to Israel in two years. The appointment was announced as the United States imposed long-anticipated sanctions on its NATO ally over Turkey's procurement and testing of Russia's S-400 air defence system.

Turkey has also diverged from positions shared with Iran by significantly toning down its harsh criticism of the establishment of diplomatic relations between Israel and Arab states.

"Every country has the right to create ties with any country it wants," said Turkish Foreign Minister Mevlut Cavusoglu in response to Morocco becoming the latest Arab country to formally recognise the Jewish state. Earlier, Cavusoglu, in the first face-to-face meeting between senior Saudi and Turkish officials since the October 2018 killing of journalist Jamal Khashoggi, met with his Saudi counterpart, Prince Faisal bin Farhan, on the sidelines of an Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) conference in the African state of Niger.

"A strong Turkey-Saudi partnership benefits

not only our countries but the whole region," Cavusoglu tweeted after the meeting. The meeting came days after Saudi King Salman telephoned Erdogan on the eve of last month's virtual summit, hosted by the kingdom of the Group of 20 (G20), that brings together the world's largest economies.

Erdogan sparked the most recent spat with Iran when he recited a nationalist poem by Azeri poet Bakhtiyar Vahabzadeh during a military parade while on a visit to Azerbaijan. The poem depicts as artificial the border along the Aras River that divides Azerbaijan from ethnic Azeri provinces of Iran. It suggests that Azeris on both sides of the river will one day unite again.

State-run Turkish Radio and Television's Arabic service this week published a map on Instagram depicting Iran's oil-rich province of Khuzestan with its large population of ethnic Arabs as separate from Iran. Iran has blamed Saudi Arabia for intermittent attacks by nationalist groups that it says are backed by the kingdom.

The publication came days after the disclosure that Habib Chaab, a leader of the Arab Struggle Movement for the Liberation of Ahvaz, or ASMLA, had been kidnapped in Istanbul by an Iraqi Kurdish drug baron in cooperation with Iranian intelligence, and transported to Iran. Chaab had been lured to Istanbul in October from his exile in Sweden. Turkish intelligence officers and police have detained 11 men, all Turkish citizens, who have been arraigned on charges that include "using weapons... to deprive an individual of their liberty through deceit," a Turkish official said.

ASMLA aims to gain independence for Iranian Arabs who have long complained of discrimination and neglect. Iran blames

ASMLA for a 2018 attack on a Revolutionary Guard military parade in the Khuzestan capital of Ahwaz that killed 25 people and wounded more than 50 others. Iranian and Turkish officials have largely sought to downplay the significance of the incidents.


"Based on my past knowledge of Erdogan, it is very unlikely that he had any intention of insulting our territorial integrity. He always recites poetry in his speeches," said Iranian President Hassan Rouhani.

Rouhani may have helped to squash for now an escalating spat, but statements by protesters outside the Turkish consulate in Tabriz, the capital of the Iranian province of East Azerbaijan, carried by the semi-official Fars News Agency, left little doubt about what Iran's true sentiments are.


"Those who have greedy eyes on the territories this side of the Aras River had better study history and see that Azerbaijan, specifically the people of Tabriz, have always pioneered in defending Iran. If Iran had not helped you at the night of the coup, you would have had a fate similar to that of former Egyptian President Mohammed Morsi," the protesters said, addressing Erdogan directly. The protesters were referring to the failed military coup against Erdogan in 2016 and the toppling of Morsi in 2013 in a takeover by the Egyptian armed forces.

A podcast version of this story is available on Soundcloud, iTunes, Spotify, Stitcher, TuneIn, Speaker, Pocket Casts, Tumbler, Podbean, Audible, Patreon and Castbox.

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QUOTABLE
Quote



PABLO PICASSO
(25 October 1881 – 8 April 1973)
Spanish painter and sculptor

Art is the lie that enables us to realise the truth.

CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH

ACROSS

1 Party leader

5 "Nuts!"

9 Kick out

11 Indian coin

12 Tolerate

13 Wed in haste

14 Cargo unit

15 Joined a bee

17 Ballooned

19 Place down

20 Flight part

21 Barracks bed

22 Friday's creator

24 Crunch targets

26 Not rented out

29 Had a snack

30 Got wind of

32 Like ready-

to-eat shrimp

34 Ruin

35 Old photo tint

36 Search blindly

38 Foe

39 Franc replacers

40 Diamond cover

41 Citi Field team

DOWN

1 Track trials

2 River bends

3 Harpsichord's cousin

4 TV's Danson

5 Boring

6 Twin of Artemis

7 Do over

8 Poor

10 Caron of "Gigi" part

11 Woodwind

16 Scent

18 Young men

21 Con quarters

23 Nervous

24 Goddess of wisdom

25 Paging device

27 Writer

Leonard

28 Brewing vessel

29 Useful skill

30 Do in

31 Getup

33 Walk unevenly

37 Mai tai base

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YESTERDAY'S ANSWERS

B	O	T	H	E	R	S	A	C	K	
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BEETLE BAILEY

BY MORT WALKER

BABY BLUES

BY KIRKMAN & SCOTT