He Protests Too Much
India is already going green.

By David G. Victor | NEWSWEEK

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Hillary Clinton's meeting with Jairam Ramesh was an awkward moment in an otherwise smooth visit to India last month. The Indian environment minister lectured Clinton that India would not commit to cuts in its emissions of the gases that cause global warming. India has other priorities, he said, such as getting electricity to 400 million poor people in the hinterlands.

The scolding followed a familiar script, in which India rebuffs any rich nation that tries to impose limits on its economic growth. But Ramesh was battling a straw man. The U.S. is urging India to follow a less emissions-intensive pattern of growth, not to make painful cuts. Ramesh made India look much more recalcitrant, and less green, than it really is.

India has embarked on an agenda of reforms—partly with help from the United States, but mainly for its own internal reasons—that is already putting it on a path to lower emissions. The government is implementing big programs on energy efficiency, and Clinton met with Ramesh at one of the visible signs of that program's success: a new energy-efficient office building. Some Indian states are already world leaders in renewable-energy technologies such as wind power.

Even in coal, where India's emissions are growing most rapidly, the country is making progress. New rules mean that about one fifth of India’s new coal plants will be among the efficient (so-called supercritical) plants that are standard fare in much of the rest of the world. Shortages in coal, which supplies about three quarters of India’s electricity, are forcing India to accelerate this trend to higher efficiency. Clinton's visit, like those of several high-ranking U.S. officials over the last decade, included offers of joint research and development that could accelerate India's move to higher-efficiency coal combustion. The details, however, are still too vague, and, in general, Western governments are spending too much time pushing exotic new technologies and not enough on practical steps to speed the spread of technologies that are already available. Western pressure groups that abhor coal in any form also often stand in the way of helping the world use its coal most efficiently.

The Clinton visit also underscored that the Obama administration is supporting another big step in a green direction: the Bush-era U.S.-India nuclear deal. India’s
hard line against the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty had made it illegal for treaty members to sell nuclear technology to India, denying a powerful source of clean energy to one of the world's largest emerging economies. Fear of global warming forced the world to rethink. During Clinton's visit, New Delhi announced plans to invest up to $10 billion in new reactors, which would make this the largest U.S. overseas sales of nuclear technology ever. India is lining up similar deals with Russia and France. A few years ago I led a team that estimated that the emissions savings from India's building more nuclear plants instead of coal are likely to exceed all the emissions cuts the Western countries adopted under the Kyoto Protocol.

That's just the beginning. India's courts are resolving a pricing dispute that will lead to new power plants fired with natural gas, which burns much cleaner than coal. One of India's leading firms, Reliance Industries, has found huge offshore fields of natural gas, which, with attractive pricing, would be competitive with coal.

The next frontier is soot. Millions of poor Indian households use crude stoves to burn wood, dung, and other "biomass" for heat and cooking. The stoves produce soot that, because it is dark, absorbs energy from the sun and causes warming, and also melts nearby glaciers, such as those in the Himalayas. India has tried for decades to give poor households better stoves—which would cut down on soot and the diseases it causes—without much success. Outsiders can help with money and technology, and many are lining up already.

These efforts align India's interests (such as using less coal, which saves money and also helps tame local pollution) with the world's interest in slowing global warming. But they aren't the last word. India must eventually spend its own money to help avoid the worst of climate warming. In this respect, Ramesh's script is wrong: India is not a poor country. It is two countries: one connected to the world and getting rich, and one that is economically backward and poor. The rich India has worldly obligations that flow from its worldly connections, and is wrong to hide behind poor India. Aside from the bluster of its diplomats, India is a relatively easy diplomatic case; China, also wary about committing to emissions cuts, produces six times more carbon dioxide. And if India and China don't seem as serious, it will be politically difficult to muster the votes needed for bigger emissions controls in the United States.

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