Diplomacy’s Meltdown
When it comes to climate change, developing nations aren’t the laggards

Bad news on climate diplomacy continues to pile up. A spate of studies has shown over the past year that even if countries honored the pledges they made in the Copenhagen Accord in December 2009, warming would still blow past the agreed limit of two degrees. Most other elements of the accord, which was designed to keep momentum until a formal climate treaty could be reached, are under shadow as well. Plans by rich nations to add $100 billion of new money in the next decade to help developing countries cut emissions are evaporating. And diplomatic talks on a formal treaty are moving backward.

Why is diplomacy stalled? The conventional wisdom holds that developing countries are the main villains. Few will agree to sign binding and verifiable commitments to control emissions. The reality, however, is different. China, India, Brazil and other developing countries are actually the leaders in the effort to curb emissions. But most of what they are doing is not visible, because it is rooted in local concerns, such as urban air pollution, rather than fear of global warming.

China, the world’s biggest emitter, is making the world’s biggest effort to check growth in its pollution. Last year marks the end of a five-year massive program to boost the country’s energy efficiency, and plans are in place for another major push over the next five years. China is building more nuclear plants (zero-emissions) and ultrasupercritical coal plants, which are much more efficient than conventional plants and thus less polluting, than the rest of the world combined. China is much more in the news for its big push on renewable power, but its investment in advanced coal and nuclear power will have a much bigger impact on warming emissions. Across the Chinese economy, efficiency has become a watchword. It even factors into how the Chinese Communist Party promotes its officials.

India is in the midst of a similar push. Most new coal-fired power plants are more efficient than the older technologies that used to be standard equipment. A program to build commercial nuclear power is gathering steam, thanks in part to a deal brokered by the U.S. to give India access to Western technology and fuel. India, China and many other countries are poised to rely more heavily on natural gas, which has less than half the warming emissions of coal. And India is embarking on one of the world’s most ambitious solar energy programs.

Developing nations are also making progress on curbing deforestation, which accounts for perhaps one seventh of all greenhouse gas emissions. Brazil, owner of the planet’s largest tropical forests, has radically improved enforcement of its forest laws—contribute to the lowest rate of deforestation in that country in two decades. Indonesia is crafting policies—in part with external help from Norway and other wealthy countries—to cut its total emissions, mainly by slowing deforestation.

The sum of these efforts in developing countries will reduce growth in warming emissions by billions of metric tons of warming gases per year over the coming decade. That dwarfs the total cuts by Western nations to comply with the Kyoto Protocol, which amounted to, at most, a few hundred million tons. Developing countries have most of the leverage for further cuts. They now account for half the emissions of warming gases—and rising.

Developing countries have resisted enshrining their programs into binding international law because most of these initiatives are rooted in national goals, such as controlling local pollution and increasing the value of forests, which makes them skittish about foreign commitment and monitoring. Breaking the gridlock on global warming, which will make it easier for these countries to do even more in the future, will require less intrusive approaches, such as flexible commitments and peer review.

The initiatives under way in developing countries will not be enough, of course. Strict treaties with deep cuts in emissions, monitoring and penalties will be required for all nations. But that is a long way off, and the current track is making it harder to build the credibility and trust that will be needed. The rich countries focus on bold goals—such as stopping warming at two degrees or giving way $100 billion in financial support—with no relation to what they can really implement. That makes developing countries unsure which commitments are genuine. Smaller initiatives aligned with what countries can really honor would be a smarter way forward.