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Michael Richardson
‘CLEAN' PARTNERS BIG ON PLANS BUT SHORT ON DETAILS

The new partnership between the United States and five Asian and Pacific nations to promote clean development has been widely criticised by environmentalists for allegedly undermining the Kyoto Protocol, which makes cuts in carbon dioxide emissions and other global warming gases compulsory for many developed economies.

The pact - announced late last month by the US, Australia, China, India, Japan and South Korea - has also been lambasted for being long on vision and short on detail about how the harmful effects of burning ever more coal, oil, natural gas and other fossil fuels can be reduced without sharply slowing economic growth.

Of the six nations, only Japan is committed to the Kyoto Protocol target of limiting greenhouse emissions by 5.2 per cent below 1990 levels by 2012. The US and Australia refused to sign, partly because major carbon emitters such as China, India and South Korea were not classed as developed economies and therefore did not have to implement cuts.

It seems that the six countries in the new pact are starting to shape such a deal even before formal discussions on a post-Kyoto regime take place in Montreal in November.

US President George W. Bush says the six (together accounting for about half the world's economic output, population, energy use and greenhouse gas emissions) have formed a results-oriented partnership that will allow them to "develop and accelerate deployment of cleaner, more efficient energy technologies to meet national pollution reduction, energy security and climate change concerns in ways that reduce poverty and promote economic development".

This looks like a tall order.

Does the cost-efficient technology needed to bring about these results exist or can it be developed and applied in the near future? How much will the technology cost those who don't have it? Who will pay and will it be transferred from one pact country to another, especially if it is proprietary and confers competitive advantage for a national company, industry or economy?

Answers to some of these questions and other details will be fleshed out as officials of the six governments in the partnership prepare for the first meeting of their foreign, environment and energy ministers in Adelaide in November.

A plan of action is expected to emerge from this meeting.

The partners have said that they expect to make progress in areas such as energy efficiency (where Japan is a world leader), methane capture and use, rural and village energy systems, clean coal, nuclear power, advanced transport, liquefied natural gas, geothermal power, improved construction and operation of buildings and homes, bioenergy, and renewable energy including hydro, wind and solar.

The key to success will be building on mutual interest.

For example, can the US, China and India (which are among the world's biggest consumers of domestically mined coal for power and industrial generation) find common cause in sharing technology that would turn one of dirtiest fuels into an energy source that emits much less carbon dioxide, dust, sulphur dioxide and nitrogen oxide pollution into the atmosphere?

Technology is already in use for turning coal into gas or liquid fuels and for tapping methane found in many underground coal mines.

The US and Australia are leaders in cleaner-coal systems. ChevronTexaco of the US is the largest foreign investor in China's efforts to harness coalbed methane to fuel plans generating electricity.

The US energy major is active in several Chinese provinces. Far East Energy and ConocoPhillips of the US received Chinese approval last year to start exploratory drilling for coalbed methane in Shaanxi.

There is also scope for closer collaboration as both China and the US accelerate efforts to extract liquid fuels from coal.

The aim is to find a commercially viable domestic source of these fuels that would enable each country to substitute some of its oil demand for transport, and thus ease dependence on imported energy.

* Michael Richardson, a former Asia editor of the International Herald Tribune, is a visiting senior research fellow at the Institute of South East Asian Studies in Singapore.