

I think it's terrific that the Coen Brothers are making [funny, effective ads](#) against relying on "clean coal" as part of the US energy program. But I worry that the clean energy community is really missing the boat here.

Clean coal research and development is absolutely crucial in fighting climate change not for us, but for India and China. India has the fourth largest reserves of coal in the world — most of it very dirty, with high ash content. It currently imports 70% of its oil, which will rise to 90% by 2020 (this according to Edward Luce's fabulous book [In Spite of the Gods.](#)). China, meanwhile, is both the world's largest producer and the largest consumer of coal power.

I want them to switch to solar and wind as much as anyone else. But I have yet to see any credible estimates that India or China can grow in the way that they want to — and justifiably expect to — purely through renewables. It's going to be hard enough for the United States to do so, and we still rely heavily on oil.

It is thus in the US interest to push for clean coal development not for us, but for India and China. Without it, they will either continue to burn dirty coal, or start competing with the west for oil supplies. Isn't the latter good? Don't we want the price of oil to go up? Yes, but through a carbon tax, not through giving more money to the Saudis or the Iranians (and then borrowing from the Chinese to pay for it).

It is reasonable — and necessary — for the United States to get rid of dirty coal plants. But we can't expect two poor countries to bear the cost of getting rid of dirty coal for a global public good like climate change mitigation. That means the United States needs to invest in carbon sequestration technology — and in a big way. It doesn't mean that we should build more coal-fired plants, but as the MIT [Future of Coal study](#) noted, the federal government does need to substantially increase its R & D, and coordinate these efforts far better than it has done in the past.

India's Prime Minister Manmohan Singh has noted that "the quest for energy security is second only in our scheme of things to our quest for food security." New Delhi (and presumably Beijing) will not stop burning coal just because we want them to do so. We need to help. Rejecting a sensible investment strategy here is going in exactly the wrong direction.

Cross-posted at the Reality-Based Community: www.samefacts.com