India's Environment Minister Jairam Ramesh announced Monday that New Delhi will take the lead on establishing a global carbon budget at the Cancun climate talks. I think that this is good news, but probably not for the reasons we might initially suspect.

We might think that it's good news because it shows that India is taking the climate problem seriously. But look at what Ramesh is saying about a global carbon budget:

> India cannot and will not accept any agreement which does not have its fundamental principle of "equity and equitable access to Global Atmospheric Space," he said at the two-day conference on 'Global Carbon budgets and equity in climate change,' at the Tata Institute of Social Sciences.
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> "In the next six months in the run-up to Cancun, India will take the leadership role on the issue of a global carbon budget," Mr. Ramesh said.
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> Our strategy must also be based on both per capita emission principle along with per capita income, which are "constituent elements of equity strategy," he stressed.
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> "We have strong support from China, Brazil, South Africa and when I reach Rome today, I will be talking to German and French leaders too to gain more support on equity and equitable access to global atmospheric space," he said.

Sigh. My first thought was that this is just repeating the old slogans from beforehand. Developed countries say that the developing countries need to accept caps; the developing countries say that the developed countries need to pay for it because climate change is their fault; everyone screams at each other; nothing gets done.

In fact a "global carbon budget" is actually a terrible way to go about this, because it requires getting into this sort of climate food-fight. Why keep hitting our heads against the wall? It makes more sense to abandon the approach and start talking about specific measures, like energy policy, maybe tax reform, infrastructure policy, and particularly energy efficiency, instead of doing this.

Then I realized what I think think is going on. Prime Minister Singh and Environment Minister Ramesh understand the urgency of climate change. The current government has instituted a series of policies to try to bend the Indian emissions curve and develop clean infrastructure. If, in that context, they engage in a lot of rhetoric about equity, and make strong stands at international fora saying that they will never, ever go along with an international treaty with binding emissions caps — which will never happen anyway — then that's just what happens in a democracy. This winter, delegates will go to Cancun and scream at each other, and the real work will get at home.

In the same way that we have a right to expect other countries to understand the pathologies of US domestic politics, e.g. the Republican Party, they have a right to expect us to understand their domestic politics (which have their own pathologies). It's all a big kabuki dance, but that's what democracy is about.