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Plastic pollution, a catastrophe in making

A battle between science and geopolitics?

THE world is badly in need of a plastics treaty, but getting the 193 nations to agree on a text has been akin to the mythical Sisyphean task of rolling the rock up the mountain. An exaggeration certainly, but you get the point. It hasn't been that many years since the United Nations got the world to think seriously about the plastics treaty, though the community of scientists had been floating the idea for several years before. The last meeting in Busan, South Korea, ended without any final text, though the UN claims a "chairman's text" was finalised. We are just four months away from the next gathering in Geneva, and already pessimism about the state of the world is burying whatever optimism there was at the end of the Busan gathering. One was the promise by all delegates to continue negotiating a final text. Will this optimism survive the disruptions caused by the recent tariff war? Many analysts won't bank on it, as a robust plastics treaty needs almost all nations to sign on to its terms. Countries are agreed that it is not going to serve the interests of a nation to sign off on a weak treaty text.

That plastic pollution has reached a life-threatening level is clear. Media, too, are waking up to the threat. On Saturday, AFP quoted the findings of researchers from Tsinghua University in China as saying that plastic pollution presented a "pressing global environmental challenge". It is not a surprise if plastic can be found in the remotest oceans and in snow atop the highest mountains. What is worse, microplastics have been detected in blood and breast milk. How did tiny pieces of plastic get into our bloodstream? Think of

fish and plants on which humans and animals feed. If this isn't a call for urgent action, what else will be?

Nature magazine in 2022, when the UN Environment Programme began mobilising itself to get a global plastics treaty inked, called on the international community to be guided by science in getting it done quickly. In the magazine's calculation, 400 million tonnes of plastics are produced each year, and by 2040, the world will see the number double to 800 million tonnes. Worryingly, only nine per cent of all the plastics ever produced have been recycled, the magazine's editorial of Dec 2 argued. If left unchecked, it added, plastic production and disposal would be responsible for 15 per cent of permitted carbon emissions by 2050. Some countries, especially fossil-fuel producers, which the magazine puts at 30, wouldn't want any discussion on curbing plastic production. To them, the plastics treaty should focus on waste flows, meaning disposal of plastics. The Paris Agreement on climate change was up against a similar problem. For two decades, fossil-fuel producers kept any discussion of setting limits to hydrocarbon production off the meetings. Recently, a few countries have begun talking of "unsigning" the Paris Agreement, following the example of the United States. The plastics treaty will likely be similarly threatened. The international community must let science shape the treaty text, not fossil-fuel lobbyists.

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