

Deadlock on climate change

Gloomy outlook for Copenhagen

ON 7–18 DECEMBER 2009, thousands of people will converge on Denmark for the 15th Conference of the Parties to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC). At the meeting in Copenhagen, representatives from 192 countries face a deadline to reach agreement on a global treaty to reduce greenhouse-gas emissions and replace the Kyoto Protocol, which expires in 2012. The 2009 deadline was set two years ago at the 13th Conference of the Parties in Bali, Indonesia. The Bali Action Plan, which emerged from that conference, initiated a two-year process of negotiations for a 'long-term global goal for emission reductions'. As Copenhagen draws nearer, diplomats and negotiators are struggling to find a consensus on addressing the threats posed by climate change.

From Bonn to L'Aquila

The new treaty is being negotiated throughout 2009 at five meetings of the Ad Hoc Working Group on Long-term Cooperative Action, which includes all 192 parties to the UNFCCC. Bonn, home of its secretariat, hosted the first two negotiating sessions, in April and June. The three remaining sessions are scheduled to be held in Bonn in August, Bangkok in October and Barcelona in November. At the June meeting, the chair of the negotiations, Michael Zammit Cutajar of Malta, submitted a draft text that has become the basis for negotiations. However, there are still many disagreements in each of the four chapters.

The structure of the UNFCCC itself makes agreement very difficult. Since its inception, it has been divided in two: the 41 developed countries (termed Annex I parties), and the developing world. Under a clause of the original treaty creating the UNFCCC, the parties have 'common but differentiated responsibilities'. In practice, this means that Annex I parties are responsible for meeting mandatory emissions limits, while developing countries are not subject to any such limits. The framework is clear that developing countries will act only after those with 'historical responsibility' act. However, economic development since the framework was signed in 1992 has changed the picture considerably. China,



Scenes from the June meeting of the Ad Hoc Working Group on Long-term Cooperative Action in Bonn

for instance, surpassed the United States as the largest total emitter of greenhouse gases this year, yet is not subject to any commitments. Gulf states like Qatar, Kuwait and the United Arab Emirates have far higher greenhouse-gas emissions per capita than any Annex I nation. Due to a designation from almost two decades ago, these countries, as well as Singapore, South Korea and Saudi Arabia are incongruously included in the same category as Mali, Afghanistan and Zimbabwe. The 1992 division of countries into those deemed to be 'developed' or 'developing' has made negotiating an equitable and effective treaty very problematic.

The UNFCCC negotiations are important in closing the current gaps in the discussion text. However, some subjects are too big and difficult for them to address effectively. The main issues – how much to cut emissions, when to require emissions reductions and who will pay for reductions – will not be solved by negotiators in Bonn. These issues will require consultations, discussions and ultimate agreement by heads of government. For that reason, major countries, led by the United States, have embarked on a series of informal, high-level multilateral and bilateral meetings, discussions and forums.

The most recent such discussions took place at the G8 Summit in L'Aquila, Italy, on 8–10 July. There were two meetings with climate-change policy as a central topic: that of the G8 itself, and of the broader Major Economies Forum on Energy and Climate (MEF). The MEF was an initiative of the Barack Obama administration (modelled on a George W. Bush administration proposal) to bring together leaders of the world's 17 largest economies, accounting for approximately 80% of the world's total emissions. Since the MEF included the largest economies from the developing world, a firm statement from both the G8 and MEF that presented a clear global consensus on the form and vision of a treaty would have made a deal in Copenhagen almost inevitable.

In the event, however, the meetings in L'Aquila disappointed those pushing for a global climate deal. The G8 statement called for an ambitious global reduction of 50% in greenhouse-gas emissions by 2050, including a cut of 80% by developed countries. However, the leaders were unable to agree on mid-term targets for reductions by 2020. At the MEF meeting, a draft statement proposed by Mexico and the United States, which described the G8 target of a 50% reduction by 2050 as 'an aspirational goal', was rejected by India and China as moving too close to a cap on emissions. Instead, the MEF's statement called only for negotiating a treaty with a goal of 'substantially reducing global emissions by 2050' and a non-binding commitment that 'the increase in global average temperature above pre-industrial levels ought not to exceed 2°C' without stating how to achieve these goals.

The two differing statements illustrated the problems that could undermine the prospects for an agreement in Copenhagen. Large, developed countries made bold long-term promises about reducing emissions, but would not commit to short-term sacrifices. The lack of short-term plans allowed developing countries, especially China and India, to say that, under the principle of 'common but differentiated responsibilities', they would not act until the developed world acts.

Entrenched positions

An agreement without China and India – not only the world's two most populous nations, but respectively the first- and fifth-largest emitters of greenhouse gases – would be futile. Each has been moving to address climate change domestically by investing in low-carbon and renewable-energy technologies. China, which is quickly becoming a global leader in renewable-energy industries, this year passed the United States as the world's largest market for wind energy, and has announced plans for six new large wind farms, with a capacity of between 10 and 20 gigawatts each. India, though further behind, is also seeking to become a leader

in renewable energy: the government plans to invest heavily in solar power, with a goal of installing 20 gigawatts of solar-generation capacity by 2020 – about 14% of the country's current total generation capacity.

However, these moves towards clean technology have not yet translated into a willingness to be flexible in international negotiations. Developed countries, while not calling for a national cap to be imposed on emissions immediately, have asked for a long-term plan. Both the Indian and Chinese governments have refused to negotiate caps on emissions. Indian Special Envoy for Climate Change Shyam Saran said this would amount to a 'cap on development'. Even India's acceptance of the MEF's non-binding commitment to keep temperature increases below 2°C has been dismissed by influential government members as a potential cap. India's climate policy states only that annual per-capita emissions (now slightly above one tonne per person) will never go above those of the developed world (approximately 20 tonnes per person in the US). China's position is that Annex I countries should reduce their emissions by 40% by 2020, and should offer 1% of their GDP annually as aid to help developing countries address climate change. This unrealistic offer may be an effort to assert leadership among developing nations: China has resisted proposals that would differentiate it from less-advanced developing countries.

New ideas are needed to break the deadlock between developed and developing nations. Mexico proposed an international 'Green Fund' of \$10 billion for clean-technology deployment with assessments to the fund based on the level of current and past emissions as well as a nation's GDP. Another idea is for developed countries to agree on

voluntary – but verifiable – reductions of greenhouse-gas emissions. There is no doubt, however, that firm US domestic actions on climate change would give a strong boost to the stalled negotiations.

Eyes on US Congress

Perhaps no country in the world has seen a more dramatic turnaround in its approach to climate change than the United States. Since coming to office in January, Obama has made progress on the issue a top foreign-policy goal. Chair of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change Rajendra Pachauri said: 'If you didn't have someone like President Obama who repeatedly has been emphasizing his commitment to this issue, I would have had no hope at all.'

This level of priority is mirrored in the domestic push to pass legislation to reduce emissions. On 26 June, the American Clean Energy and Security Act narrowly passed the US House of Representatives by a vote of 219–212. This is the first piece of legislation that would place a mandatory limit on US carbon emissions to pass either house of Congress. The bill requires a 17% reduction of greenhouse-gas emissions by 2020, and an 80% reduction by 2050. These mandatory limits would be met by means of a cap-and-trade system similar to the one that has been in place in the European Union since 2005, as well as new regulations on energy efficiency, new rules for electricity production and new funding for research into clean technologies.

The passage of this legislation through the Senate, however, may be as contentious as reaching agreement on an international treaty. Six committees in the Senate claim jurisdiction over energy and climate change; hearings began in June, and almost 20 will take place on the subject this year.

Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid has committed to bring the bill to the floor of the Senate for a vote in the autumn. Even though the Democrats can now claim a 60–40 majority, it is far from certain that the 60 votes necessary to overcome a filibuster are available. In past votes on climate-related legislation, it was easier to predict votes based on how much coal is burned for electricity in a senator's home state than on party affiliation. Concerns about costs of the legislation for consumers and industry have dominated the debate. The key swing votes will be held by a limited number of more conservative Democrats from the coal-reliant South and Midwest, as well as a few Republicans including former presidential candidate John McCain of Arizona. The vote is likely to be close, and strong pressure from the White House will be necessary to push the legislation through.

A binding, domestic plan for reducing emissions would send a credible signal to other countries that the US was taking action, and would probably help spur international negotiations. Supporters of the bill in Congress have often talked about the moral authority that its passage would give to American negotiators in Copenhagen. However, failure of the legislation in the Senate would make a deal in Copenhagen unlikely.

Limited prospects

While political will to address climate change may have been sapped by the global recession, the need to address it has not diminished: in March, 2,500 scientists attending the Copenhagen Climate Congress noted that recent observations of surface temperatures, sea levels, ice sheets and ocean acidity could only be explained by an accelerating concentration of greenhouse gases in the atmosphere. The scientists said climate change is already beginning to cause drought throughout the tropics, the melting of many non-Arctic glaciers, rising sea levels and more frequent catastrophic storms.

However, it is impossible to predict whether the challenges facing negotiators can be overcome in Copenhagen. The key sticking points are the ability of the developed world to match long-term proposals with realistic plans for achieving them, and the inability – so far – to make developing countries more than just observers to the treaty. At this stage, it may be more realistic for governments to work towards a framework agreement in Copenhagen on a broad set of principles underpinning a future treaty, with the aim of returning at a later time to solidify the details.

For information on the IISS Transatlantic Dialogue on Climate Change and Security, visit: <http://www.iiss.org/programmes/transatlantic-dialogue-on-climate-change-and-security/>

Top global emitters of greenhouse gases, 2005

Country	MtCO ₂	Rank	% of world total	Tonnes CO ₂ per capita	Rank
China	7,219.2	1	19.12%	5.5	72
United States	6,963.8	2	18.44%	23.5	7
European Union	5,047.7	3	13.37%	10.3	39
Russian Federation	1,960.0	4	5.19%	13.7	18
India	1,852.9	5	4.91%	1.7	120
Japan	1,342.7	6	3.56%	10.5	37
Brazil	1,014.1	7	2.69%	5.4	74
Germany	977.4	8	2.59%	11.9	25
Canada	731.6	9	1.94%	22.6	8
United Kingdom	639.8	10	1.69%	10.6	36
Mexico	629.9	11	1.67%	6.1	65
Indonesia	594.4	12	1.57%	2.7	101
Iran	566.3	13	1.50%	8.2	54
Italy	565.7	14	1.50%	9.7	45
France	550.3	15	1.46%	9.0	47
South Korea	548.7	16	1.45%	11.4	31
Australia	548.6	17	1.45%	26.9	5
Ukraine	484.7	18	1.28%	10.3	40
Spain	438.7	19	1.16%	10.1	41
South Africa	422.8	20	1.12%	9.0	48
United Arab Emirates	159.1	36	0.42%	38.8	2
Kuwait	88.7	51	0.23%	35.0	3
Qatar	44.2	75	0.12%	55.5	1

Key: ■ Annex I countries

Source: World Resources Institute

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