



Copenhagen Accord faces first test

Success of non-binding agreement remains to be seen

The global agreement on climate change reached in Copenhagen in December 2009 faces its first test at the end of January when individual countries submit schedules for reducing their carbon emissions over the next ten years. Their commitment to do so was part of the Copenhagen Accord to which heads of government signed up following two frenetic weeks of bargaining. The accord fell far short of the goal set two years earlier in Bali, Indonesia, to produce a legally binding global treaty to replace the Kyoto Protocol to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC), which expires in 2012.

By November it had become clear that negotiations would fail to reach this goal. This was confirmed at a meeting of world leaders on the sidelines of the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation summit on 15 November in Singapore. Instead, they would seek a 'political agreement' that would provide an outline for a future treaty on climate change. This was to be the Copenhagen Accord, struck on 18 December. However, it met last-minute opposition from a few countries, and the formal decision of the 15th Conference of the Parties (COP) to the UNFCCC was simply to 'take note' of the leaders' accord.

The accord promises global action to reduce greenhouse-gas emissions so as to ensure that global temperatures do not rise more than 2°C above nineteenth-century pre-industrial levels. But instead of imposing collectively negotiated targets for emissions reductions – as would be the case in a formal treaty – the accord calls on individual developed nations to submit their own reductions schedules for the next ten years by 31 January 2010. For the first time, developing countries will also submit commitments to manage their emissions, in a way that is 'nationally appropriate' and in the context of 'sustainable development'. All countries will report on the progress they have made towards these targets every two years.

New coalitions

Although it had been clear that no new treaty would emerge, the weeks leading up to Copenhagen had seen the building of considerable international momentum on combating climate change. China, Russia, Brazil, India, the United States, South Africa and South Korea each committed to unprecedented targets for reducing carbon emissions by 2020. ([See chart](#)). Nevertheless, the conference was marked by sharp disagreements, late nights, procedural roadblocks and – towards the end – high-stakes negotiations among leaders.

From the outset, the process was undermined by the split between the developed and developing worlds that had existed in climate negotiations since before the Kyoto Protocol was signed in 1997. The root of this split was the principle of 'common but differentiated responsibilities' enshrined in the Kyoto Protocol, under which 41 developed countries (termed Annex I parties) were deemed responsible for cutting their emissions while the developing world was not asked to make any commitments at all.

The G77, a negotiating alliance of some 130 developing nations, has been the defender of 'common but differentiated responsibilities' in all UNFCCC negotiations. G77 negotiators maintained their position at Copenhagen, protesting during the early days of the conference that Kyoto's principles were being abandoned, and even withdrawing briefly from the talks. But given that three of the world's seven largest emitters of greenhouse gases are fast-growing developing nations (China, Brazil and India), it was argued by industrialised countries that allowing developing nations to emit freely would be unfair and

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environmentally dangerous: heavy, energy-intensive industries, such as chemicals, aluminium or steel production, would be incentivised by price differentials to switch production away from more carbon-efficient nations.

As the Copenhagen conference progressed, however, negotiating groups of developing countries formed around common priorities. The Association of Small Island States (AOSIS) demanded ambitious, binding and universal cuts in emissions. The 49 nations defined by the UN as the Least Developed Countries (LDC) joined in these demands, but also placed strong emphasis on increased financing and aid to assist the poorest nations in adapting to climate change. These two groups ultimately agreed with a coalition of developed countries on a package that would bring \$100 billion per year by 2020 in financing to assist nations in adapting to and mitigating climate change, on condition that a clause be inserted in the accord that commitments to mitigate emissions by non-Annex I countries would be independently verified.

By the end of the conference, however, it was clear that the strongest and most important group to emerge from the G77 was 'BASIC' – comprised of Brazil, South Africa, India and China. Put together, they account for approximately 40% of the world's population and about 10% of global economic output, as well as over 25% (and rising) of carbon emissions. While these countries have rapidly growing economies, their average per-capita income remains low and governments are keen not to place limits on growth.

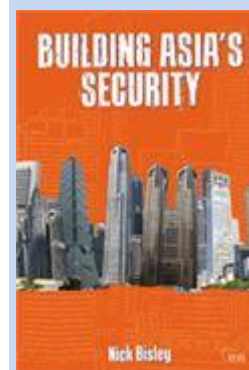
Dramatic finale

On 18 December, in a dramatic final act to the negotiations, the Copenhagen Accord was drafted in a meeting between the US delegation – including President Barack Obama and Secretary of State Hillary Clinton – and the four BASIC delegations. The BASIC group, and China in particular, opposed the introduction of an international system for verifying efforts to mitigate the impact of climate change.

According to press reports, Obama was scheduled to meet bilaterally with Chinese Premier Wen Jiabao. But when the American delegation arrived for the meeting, they were surprised to see all four BASIC delegations, including Wen, South African President Jacob Zuma, Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh and Brazilian President Luiz Inacio 'Lula' da Silva. In the ensuing discussion, disagreement centred on whether the BASIC group would allow emissions reports to be independently verified. The group – particularly China – contended that this was a violation of national sovereignty. The US saw verification as a necessary precondition for any agreement. The tension was resolved when Obama suggested to Wen that the accord call for 'international consultations and analysis' as opposed to 'international measurement, reporting and verification'. With that compromise language inserted into the text, agreement was reached.

This accord was then brought to a wider representative group of 28 nations selected as 'friends of the chair' by Danish Prime Minister Lars Lokke Rasmussen, the conference president. Though many were dissatisfied with its limited scope, all agreed to move forward with it. Rasmussen then presented the accord to the full UNFCCC for consideration in the early hours of Saturday 19 December. Following a tense debate, the 193 nations represented failed to reach a consensus. Five countries remained opposed: Bolivia, Cuba, Nicaragua, Venezuela and Sudan, whose negotiator had likened the agreement to the Holocaust. They protested at what the Venezuelan negotiator called an undemocratic 'coup d'état against the authority of the United Nations'. Calls to support the accord came from countries that will be hardest hit by climate change, including Bangladesh, the Maldives and Papua New Guinea, as well as from the African Union. But the five maintained that the accord had been forced through by a small group of wealthy nations and would undermine the UN. This opposition prevented the Copenhagen Accord from being formally adopted as a decision of the COP. Instead, after personal intervention from UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon, the conference concluded with a formal finding that the COP 'takes note' of the Copenhagen Accord. The effect of this was to give the agreement the full weight of a UN decision, but applying only to countries that signed up to it.

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New commitments

While the accord is not a binding treaty, it does mandate meaningful steps to combat climate change. Once signatories have submitted commitments to reduce emissions, progress towards fulfilling them will be independently listed and scrutinised by means of mandatory reports, to be filed every two years with the UN. For the first time, an international agreement on climate-change mitigation will be measurable, reportable and verifiable. Also for the first time – in a clear break from the Kyoto Protocol – developing countries will be responsible for limiting their greenhouse-gas emissions, although the principle of ‘common but differentiated responsibilities’ still stands because their commitments will be voluntary and ‘nationally appropriate’. In accordance with the same principle, the accord includes an unprecedented financing commitment from developed countries to assist the poorest countries to respond to the impact of climate change. New financing flows will begin quickly, with \$10 billion per year over the next three years, going up to \$100bn a year – from both government and private sources – by 2020. A large portion of this financing will be routed through a new body called the Copenhagen Green Climate Fund.

End of the UN process?

Though the failure to reach a legally binding treaty caused consternation among activists, it is arguable that a political agreement with verification arrangements could be more effective. There have been no sanctions on countries that have failed to meet Kyoto Protocol commitments. Countries that tend to be wary of international infringements on their sovereignty – especially China, India and the US – may be more likely to set themselves ambitious targets if they do not feel coerced by an international institution.

In Copenhagen, the familiar rift between rich and poor countries was overcome by the forging of new coalitions and the determination of a small group of world leaders, despite the efforts of a small coalition of anti-Western countries to jeopardise the final agreement. However, the experience is unlikely to be repeated in the same way: a gathering of 193 nations arguing over historical grievances and procedural issues seems futile when a meeting of only 17 would account for 80% of global emissions. After Copenhagen, either the UNFCCC negotiating process will have to be reformed, or future negotiations will take place outside the UN. In fact, the most effective climate negotiations of 2009 took place in smaller, more targeted meetings like the G8, the G20 and the Major Economies Forum on Energy and Climate.

The UN still has a key role to play in providing the institutional framework for mitigating climate change. The UNFCCC Secretariat in Bonn has the expertise to set up and administer the necessary international programmes to mitigate climate change in the coming decades, including the Green Climate Fund. It will also have the important responsibility of monitoring, reporting and verifying the actions of countries. The Copenhagen Accord should not be judged by the events in two weeks in December. Its success will be judged by national responses over the next decade. The submissions of national emissions-reductions schedules due by 31 January will provide an early indicator. The G8’s agreement in L’Aquila, Italy, in July 2009 provides a useful benchmark: it called for a 50% reduction in greenhouse-gas emissions by 2050, including a cut of 80% by developed countries. If the targets submitted this month establish this kind of trajectory, the Copenhagen Accord could be a success.

The world's largest emitters of greenhouse gases and their current emissions-reduction targets				
Country	Annual emissions in 2005 (MtCO ₂ equivalent)	Share of global emissions in 2005	Announced emissions-reduction targets for 2020	Emissions anticipated in 2020 (MtCO ₂ equivalent)
China	7,219.20	16.91%	40–45% reduction in carbon intensity* below 2005 levels; will result in a 10% reduction below BAU**	11,200
United States	6,963.80	16.32%	17% below 2005 levels (3% below 1990)	5,900
European Union	5,047.70	11.83%	20–30% below 1990 levels, depending on international action	3,900–4,500
Russia	1,960.00	4.59%	25% below 1990 levels	1,875
India	1,852.90	4.34%	20–25% reduction in carbon intensity below 2005 levels; will result in a reduction at least 7% below BAU	3,600
Japan	1,342.70	3.15%	25% below 1990 levels	855
Brazil	1,014.10	2.38%	36–39% reduction below BAU, contingent on international financing for reduced deforestation	1,550–2,050
Canada	731.60	1.71%	20% below 2006 levels	440
Mexico	629.90	1.48%	20% below BAU by 2020	700
Indonesia	594.40	1.39%	26% below BAU, rising to 41% with international financing and support	775–1,190
Iran	566.30	1.33%	No pledge	Unknown
South Korea	548.70	1.29%	4% below 2005 levels	525
Australia	548.60	1.29%	5–25% below 2000 levels, depending on international action	370–470
Ukraine	484.70	1.14%	20% below 1990 levels	575
South Africa	422.80	0.99%	20% below BAU	875
All other nations***	11,468.10	26.87%	Mixed	12,275
International aviation and maritime activity	1,285.00	3.01%		1,300
Global total	42,680.50	100.00%		46,700–48,330

Key: Annex I countries

* Carbon intensity is measured as the amount of carbon released, per unit of GDP. In practice, it allows for a great deal of growth in actual emissions.

** For non-Annex I (developing) countries, targets are typically given in the context of a 'business as usual' trajectory, i.e. the path that emissions would be on without any further policy action.

*** These are all non-Annex I (developing) countries, except for Turkey, Norway, Iceland, Belarus and Switzerland.

Sources: World Resources Institute, Grantham Research Institute on Climate Change and Environment, United Nations Environment Programme

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