

“The New Geopolitics of Climate Change after Copenhagen”

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A month after the event, the world is slowly coming to terms with the disappointing outcome of the Copenhagen climate conference. Billed as the most important international gathering in recent environmental diplomacy, the 15th Conference of the Parties (COP-15) to the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) ended with what many observers derided as a whimsical compromise agreement. Not only does the outcome lack the force of a legally binding text – in fact, hopes for a formal treaty with specific emission reduction targets had been abandoned in the run-up to Copenhagen. But it also failed to win the approval of the closing plenary. Faced with a declaration that was drafted by a select group of heads of states, delegates from a handful of developing countries balked at the idea of signing on to deal that they considered disappointing and undemocratic. In the end, COP-15 merely “noted” the Copenhagen Accord in its concluding resolution.

Analysts may still be trying to make sense of the intense two-week negotiation session in Copenhagen, but negotiators are already shifting their focus to the next staging post on the long road towards a comprehensive climate regime. Bonn will be the venue for the next climate meeting to be held in June/July, halfway between Copenhagen and the next Conference of Parties (COP-16) in Mexico starting 29 November 2010. Copenhagen may not have produced a formal commitment to seek to negotiate a binding climate treaty, but diplomats are already busy rescuing from the Copenhagen wreckage those elements that may form the basis for a more comprehensive and inclusive agreement in 6 or 12 months time.

While UN diplomacy continues on its well-trodden path, this is time to stand back and reflect on the bigger picture and identify the deeper changes in international politics that Copenhagen has brought to the surface. The emerging picture is one of a seismic geopolitical shift that has engulfed the climate change agenda, and that

challenges long-held assumptions in international environmental politics: about the balance of power in climate politics; the nature of global environmental leadership; and the best way forward in creating an international climate regime. This brief analysis provides a guide to the new geopolitical reality of climate change.¹

New Powers on the Block

The Copenhagen conference confirmed what many analysts of international affairs had long identified, namely a slow but persistent shift in the global balance of power – economic, military and political – away from the West and towards the emerging economies of the developing world. The foundations of this shift lie in the dramatic economic growth experienced by China, India and Brazil, which together with Russia make up the so-called BRIC countries. Over the last ten years, China has become the world's third largest economy, Brazil has risen to eighth place, and India has joined the top twelve (all in nominal dollar terms). The concept of the BRICs, first introduced by Goldman Sachs analysts in 2001, has become a form of shorthand for the growing political aspirations of the most dynamic emerging economies.

Other global policy areas such as trade demonstrate what became evident in Copenhagen: with greater economic wealth comes political assertiveness. India has resisted demands for greater trade concessions in the ongoing WTO Doha Round just as it rejected a commitment to limit its future greenhouse gas emissions at the Copenhagen conference. China, equally concerned about its rapidly growing energy needs and the economic threat of a carbon-constrained future, also objected to any binding climate commitments with numerical targets. Having kept a low profile in climate politics during the 1990s, both India and China are now willing to assert their position and use their growing veto power, now that their future emission trends are of critical importance to any climate regime.

Analyses of the failure to reach a more meaningful deal in Copenhagen have highlighted the central role that the Chinese delegation played throughout the conference, and particularly in the final round of top-level talks. The bilateral relationship between the US and China proved to be the critical one, with US

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President Obama seeking to extract concessions from the Chinese to agree to a monitoring and verification system of carbon reduction promises even if these are not enshrined in a legally binding treaty. The US delegation needed this concession in order to remove one of the most important hurdles to the adoption of a domestic carbon cap-and-trade bill on Capitol Hill. In this way, China's climate stance was intimately linked to US policy. The bilateral relationship between the world's two largest emitters thus became the central axis of the climate negotiations.

Challenges to European environmental leadership

One of the first casualties of this shift in the geopolitical order was the European Union (EU) and its ambition to play a global leadership role. As is widely recognized, the Kyoto Protocol would not have come into force had the EU not provided leadership in the 1997 negotiations and pushed Russia to ratify the treaty, which allowed Kyoto to enter into force in 2005. Europe's emissions trading system also provides a model for international emissions trading under the climate treaty, and remains the world's biggest experiment in reducing greenhouse gas emissions through a flexible market-based instrument. The EU expected to play a leading role again in Copenhagen, having committed to some of the most demanding emission reduction targets and offering substantial financial aid to developing countries. By leading the debate on international climate policy and providing blueprints for cutting carbon through regulation and technological innovation, the EU had amassed "soft power" that it hoped would allow it to shape the outcome of Copenhagen.

Yet as soon as the gavel came down at the closing COP-15 plenary in the early hours of Saturday 19th December, consternation set in amidst concerns that the EU had been shunted to the sidelines of international climate diplomacy. The EU had not been invited to a final meeting of heads of state, at which the details of the Copenhagen Accord were agreed. Obama and Chinese premier Wen Jiabao, together with the leaders of India, Brazil and South Africa, thrashed out the final compromise. Neither the EU nor Japan was involved at this crucial stage.

The Copenhagen result calls into question the view that the EU's soft or normative power can be a driving force in climate diplomacy. Leading by example has its merits but will no longer suffice to manage a global bargaining process that involves increased economic stakes and distributional conflicts. Linkages between

climate stability and other sensitive international issues, from energy security to economic competitiveness, trade policy and North-South burden-sharing, will define the future international politics of climate, and it is here that the EU will need to develop a sharper profile, with harder power sources at its disposal.

A new political structure for international climate politics

The shortcomings of UN negotiations were all too visible in Copenhagen. Two years had been spent in preparing for the conference, a process that had started with the adoption of the Bali Road Map in 2007. At COP-15, negotiators from over 190 countries spent a further intensive two weeks negotiating over heavily bracketed texts, only to see a smaller group of heads of state take over and draft a compromise agreement that was not based on the official negotiation texts prepared in the preceding COP working groups. In the end, the COP plenary, the official UN forum with decision-making authority, failed to adopt the leaders' Copenhagen accord but merely took note of it.

The negotiations at Copenhagen were painstakingly slow and cumbersome, complicated not least by the need to agree a package deal that includes *all* elements of the climate regime (emission reductions, timetables, financing, etc.) and that is acceptable to *all* countries. As the UN climate convention approaches universal acceptance with a total of 194 ratifications as of today, it may produce a high degree of participation and legitimacy but ends up delivering a diminishing rate of return in terms of effective bargaining. That UN-style decision-making based on the consensus principle has hit the buffers. This was evident to all observers as heads of states wrestled the initiative from their official negotiators and created a more fluid yet manageable framework for striking bargains in the final two days of Copenhagen.

Dispensing with the UN system's principles of universal participation and consensus, the new bargaining structure that emerged in the final two days of the climate summit is reflective of the new geopolitical realities of climate change. Despite its shortcomings, it points to a new form of multi-track diplomacy that seeks to engage key players in pluri-lateral bargains with variable geographical parameters. This new multilateralism, what Richard Haass has referred to as "messy multilateralism" (*Financial Times*, 6 January 2010), has already emerged in trade policy and will have to play a bigger role in international climate politics.

Despite its disappointing results, Copenhagen could thus point the way into a different future of climate policy, one that is able to cope with the underlying shifts that have transformed the landscape of international relations. A multi-track system of climate diplomacy is likely to emerge, with the discussions on emission reductions, forest policies and North-South financing being conducted in separate, functionally defined contexts, yet held together by the UN's framework convention. This could see the major greenhouse gas emitters agreeing a formula for reducing total emissions (in industrialised economies) and reducing the growth in emissions (in emerging economies), while the full UN-process deals with questions of funding mitigation and adaptation in poorer countries and establishing a monitoring system for reduction commitments. The G-20 might thus find its climate equivalent in a loose group of the 20 biggest polluters (what environmentalists would probably dub the "P-20") – the core of the post-Kyoto and post-Copenhagen climate architecture.

By most standards, the results of Copenhagen were disappointing. Yet, by moving the talks into a new direction and focusing on the critical bargains that have to be struck between the key powers of climate diplomacy, the conference may have paved the way for a new international political framework. The arrival of a more fluid and layered multilateral setting will be a bitter pill to swallow for those who have invested all their energies in the established UN process. But the global challenge of tackling climate change may make this unpalatable medicine a necessary one.

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