

■ editorial

Copenhagen: back to the future?

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‘Diplomatic disasters don’t come much bigger than this’ was the verdict of one European-based newspaper on the outcome of Copenhagen. What had been billed as the Summit to save the planet became the Summit which just, barely, scraped a deal that many felt did not go much beyond an agreement to keep talking – a deal widely seen as being thrashed out in a single day between five major powers and then presented as a *fait accompli* to the rest of the world. The paradox is that it may be as good as could be reasonably hoped for – and it sets the stage for a very interesting 2010.

First, a word on the blame game. Most of the European media focused on Chinese intransigence and agonized about the EU’s apparent impotence. The US media likewise cast China as the bad guy, but praised Obama as the saviour, extracting an important deal in the face of this. The Japanese media were a mix – aghast at the dilemmas and their limited role, while most of the developing world attacked the industrialized countries for insufficient progress on money and almost none on emission cuts.

Personally, I prefer to focus on my home territory. The EU acceded to an apparently obvious and widespread logic: that the problem can’t be solved without the USA, the USA will never join Kyoto, and thus the world needs to abandon the current main instrument in favour of some new unified structure. Unfortunately there was never any clear articulation of what this might be – nothing about what the world (or the EU) would get in return for abandoning the only existing legally binding structure. The USA did not move an inch from its position – a bottom-up regime defined by domestic, not international, law, and made conditional on the Chinese offer. The resulting proposition was therefore to reduce the legal standing of commitments expected of industrialized countries while raising those placed on developing countries: a combination that is totally unacceptable to the developing world, and understandably so. The EU response to the USA’s restatement of its fundamentals (and the cacophony of condemnation from developing countries) was apparently to reach for the earplugs and hope that the Summit itself would provide a magic answer. The world found itself staring at a chasm defined by the fact that most countries’ vision of an adequate international regime is totally in conflict with what the USA, or China, will accept.

The USA at least displayed a clearer grasp of political reality and planned for it. The pity is that, having created a positive initiative where little existed in the main process, Obama almost blighted it by prematurely proclaiming their success to the media. Heads of State do not like being told on the world’s media that they have reached a deal, particularly when they have spent the previous 24 hours wondering what on earth they came to Copenhagen for. It took agile political footwork by a number of countries, and for Ban Ki-moon to draw upon the political capital he had built up over the year, to get about 180 countries to officially accept that a deal hammered out initially between five of them (albeit with a larger penumbra then engaged) should be officially recognized. The problem with the blame game, as a colleague drily observed, is that there are just too many targets to choose from.

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Thus was borne the Copenhagen Accord – largely derided in Europe but praised by the US Administration. People should pause for thought before they condemn a process that most declared to have as its number-one aim to get the USA ‘back on board’. Whatever Copenhagen has done to the process of negotiation (on which much will be written and debated), my own hunch is that history will judge the Accord more kindly than did most of the media.

The Accord itself contains just 12 paragraphs. In a nutshell, it recognizes the scientific view on 2°C and commits countries to ‘meet objectives consistent with the science and on the basis of equity’. It also includes reference to the need for peaking of global and national emissions. The requirement to make official submissions by 31 January 2010 formally establishes countries’ opening pitches on what they think this means for their emissions and policies up to 2020. We can be assured that the numbers do not stack up to the scientific needs. This in itself could set the stage for an interesting year of negotiations, as the Accord implies a formal need to reconcile the two.

The longest paragraph spells out more fully the processes around developing country contributions. This establishes biannual reporting to include all mitigation actions including those that don’t have international funding – itself a formal burial of the antiquated idea that developing countries would not do anything without finance. Additionally, anyone with experience can read between the lines of struggle on ‘provision for international consultations and analysis under clearly defined guidelines whilst respecting national sovereignty’. Internationally supported measures are further subject to direct monitoring, reporting and verification.

The text contains some useful steps forward on Adaptation and Forestry, although most of the important detail actually remained in the bracketed UNFCCC negotiating texts. But the deal received most plaudits for its progress on finance. Ironically, this risks remaining the most vulnerable part. The prompt start package has some political substance and commitment behind it, but a huge amount still remains to be resolved. For the much larger scale of longer-term finance, the deal defines expectations but fails to clarify who really accepts responsibility for providing the funding at the scale indicated, or almost anything about the actual status and governance of the much-vaunted ‘Green Fund’. Raising and managing US\$100 billion/year by 2020 is not for the fainthearted. Explicit reference to ‘alternative sources of finance’ provides probably the only way to bridge the gap between the collective goals and the political realities of squeezing more, and stable, finance out of industrialized-country taxpayers. The High Level Panel established by the Accord will indeed have to chart a course through ‘interesting times’.

This, coupled with the refusal to include the words ‘legally binding’ or set any official deadline for processes under the Accord other than a review of its implementation in 2015, are – of course – reasons for pessimism. They combine with the destructive campaign around the ‘Climategate’ emails, a serious error uncovered in a text box of the Impacts and Adaptation report of IPCC Working Group II, and the coldest northern winter for many years, to create a potential ‘perfect storm’ of scepticism and disillusion.

So what does all this – and the unconventional manner of adopting the Copenhagen Accord – imply? Well, no-one knows. But the wider sweep of scepticism can be set against the remarkable fact that about 35,000 people cared enough to travel to Copenhagen and register the force of global civil concern about the future of the planet. On the science, the truth will ultimately win through, for most governments at least. The 35,000 will have forged connections and raised a voice that will not be lost on the accompanying 120 Heads of State. The Heads of State attendance was in itself testament to the extent of high-level concern. Copenhagen may have been the death of some hopes, but it was also the crucible of many new developments.

From a research perspective, Copenhagen was also a call to arms for a community which it seems has never paid enough attention to political analysis. My editorial on Bali, ‘The Bali COP: plus ça

change' (*Climate Policy* 8(1), 2008, 3–6), noted that we had launched 'the most complicated and interrelated set of global negotiations in diplomatic history'; and much of that complexity is at the interface of the technical and the political. Yet much of the literature remains full of implicit (or explicit) 'shoulds', not 'coulds' or 'hows' – or even 'why' it is bound to be so extraordinarily difficult to secure meaningful global action, beyond the glib statements about the difficulty of common action. Each major region came to Copenhagen with a view of what 'it' wanted; a few came with a vision of a 'global' solution that reflected its own views, projected globally. Hardly any research emerged to offer objective analysis to governments globally of just how different their perspectives were, and credible options for navigating solutions fashioned around these differences.

What are the implications of the political outcome? Two observations are offered, along with a personal and unconventional view to provoke the community.

First, the positive side of the big lesson of Copenhagen: we learnt about new structures of power and where the bottom lines of China and India lie – and indeed the USA, in the absence of clarity on the outcome of Congressional processes. If Europe or others still cannot handle this reality they really now have only themselves to blame. The USA is not willing to accept a top-down process of multilaterally negotiated legally binding economy-wide constraints. (Why did anyone think that the USA could ever raise the 67 Senate votes required to ratify an international treaty of this nature?) The USA is suspicious of any agreement that does not include concomitant legal commitments for China – which lowers the bar on legal ambition further. These two mega-powers are fundamentally inward-looking; they will work their domestic way to stronger action, and multilateral needs will always play second fiddle to domestic processes.

My own view is that Copenhagen achieved just what was needed: a USA–China reality check so strong that the rest of the world cannot ignore it. Most countries of the world – approaching 200 nations – *do* need a multilateral structure of agreed common rules and commitments. They also need to know that the mega-powers are taking action that represents a reasonable and comparable contribution to solving the global problem. But that does not mean that we all have to be in the same legal (or not) structure. To suggest that the USA and China need to assume commitments on the same legal basis as Norway, Singapore or Burkino Faso is a fundamental fallacy laid bare at Copenhagen.

The other observation is that the Copenhagen Accord embodies the most essential need on which to build solutions that encompass this reality. Above the 12 paragraphs, situated in the header text, it explicitly endorses the continuation of twin-track negotiations under the UNFCCC. The huge negotiating efforts of the previous years have not been cast aside, as most media commentators seemed to believe. On the contrary, they are explicitly endorsed, also by the USA and China, and given more time to complete.

That, in my view, is exactly what was needed: another year for the USA and China, in particular, to progress their domestic processes. A year which they always intimated they really needed – to embody as their contribution under the Bali Action Plan track of negotiations. A year in which to get serious about negotiating the future of the Kyoto Protocol, the reform of its mechanisms, and the adequacy of second period caps including a larger group of countries. The process steered by the Copenhagen Accord can fill the crucial gaps in the Kyoto Protocol; it may not need to replace it. Currently, the EU, Japan and Australia are locked in a sub-game of the 'common action dilemma' – with none willing to step beyond the USA's antipathy to internationally binding commitments without the others. If they can escape this trap, there is every prospect that some others might join them, including manufacturing giants such as South Korea. Emerging commitments under a Kyoto-like structure could then be weighed against the clarifying contributions of the USA and China in particular.



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A combination of ‘pledge and review’ for the mega-powers with a development of the Kyoto Protocol for most others sounds, at first glance, like an ill-conceived combination of the first and second half of the 1990s. Fantasy? Maybe. But perhaps what we have learned from the culmination of the ‘noughties’ is that such a combination actually reflects a deep reality about the structure of climate geopolitics for the 21st century. I look forward to seeing what else researchers conceive – and countries propose – in the cold light of Copenhagen.