Woody Allen once famously said that 80 percent of life is just showing up. A similar calculus might be applied to the global climate negotiations, the annual confab that brings together activists, politicians, and other interested parties to discuss how the world might deal with the threat of climate change.

The outcome at this year’s conference in Cancun was similar to each of the previous 15 conferences - an agreement of some sort was reached, which some applauded and others criticized. Either way, we have been told that the real global agreement lies just one year in the future. This year's "next year" is in Durban, South Africa. Yet a close look at what happened at Cancun, even more than the fractious Copenhagen conference the year before, provides the best evidence yet as to why a binding global agreement to reduce emissions remains a year away, and always will.

International climate negotiations have become cluttered with many issues and agendas, but at their core is the 1992 Framework Convention on Climate Change, which is focused on stabilizing concentrations of carbon dioxide and other greenhouse gases resulting from human activity, mainly the burning of fossil fuels.

In 1997 the Kyoto Protocol was negotiated under the Climate Convention, and it has served as the touchstone for all negotiations since. It also set the terms for the present stalemate, one that could only be broken by scrapping the Kyoto Protocol and revisiting the Climate Convention itself, neither of which seems likely to occur anytime soon.

To understand why this is the case, one must understand the international political dynamics created by the Kyoto Protocol. A central feature of Kyoto was to divide the world's countries into two categories, often characterized by the misleading labels of "developed" and "developing." The former countries were expected to commit to binding pledges to reduce emissions by a certain amount by 2012, and the latter were freed from any such responsibilities.

In the years that followed its introduction in 1997, countries of the first type dutifully ratified the Kyoto Protocol, with one notable exception: the United States. In 2001, George W. Bush poured salt into the open wound caused by US nonparticipation. But the decision had been reached several years before Bush was elected, when the US Senate voted unanimously that it would reject the treaty were it brought before them.

Europe was once Kyoto's greatest champion, implementing a wide range of policies focused on emissions reductions, most notably its Emissions Trading Scheme and Clean Development Mechanism. But it has become apparent that such...
policies, while arguably achieving many things, did virtually nothing to accelerate the pre-existing rate of decarbonization of the European economy. In the meantime, the expansion of renewable technologies has been fraught with challenges, security of supply has taken on greater importance in several countries (particularly those dependent on gas from the east), parts of Europe have in fact been recarbonizing in recent years, fault lines have developed between east and west on EU energy and climate policies, and financial crises have limited enthusiasm for higher-priced energy. These and other factors have meant that the justifications for Kyoto in Europe changed from a focus on actual emissions reductions to seeing the Protocol as a necessary first step toward a much broader global agreement that would, in fact, be effective in ways that Kyoto is not.

Europe's dampened enthusiasm for a go-it-alone approach to Kyoto was clearly reflected in its pre-Cancun decisions to defer a debate on increasing its 2020 emissions reduction commitment from 20 percent to 30 percent (reflecting total emissions equal to two weeks of China's 2010 emissions - itself an indication of Europe's diminished role), and to adopt a stance that any follow-on to Kyoto should require that the countries with no binding commitments in the 1997 agreement take on such commitments in a Kyoto 2.

At the same time that Europe was preparing its pre-Cancun negotiating position, the so-called BASIC countries (Brazil, South Africa, India, and China) and their allies were preparing their own unified stance, which called for a commitment to extending Kyoto but resistance to any overture that they take on binding emissions reductions targets.

The differing positions of Europe and the BASIC countries alone would have been enough to lead to a stalemate in Cancun, but it was Japan that made the obvious inescapable. Japan proclaimed, at the start of the Cancun meeting, that it was in no way prepared to sign on to any agreement for a follow-on to Kyoto that did not have the participation of the United States and the so-called developing countries. Japan's unexpected hard line caught many by surprise and attracted much scorn toward Japan among activists and other supporters of the Climate Convention.

The reason for Japan's stance is not difficult to fathom. Following the historic election of August, 2009, the new government, in what was undoubtedly a moment of populist exuberance, promised to increase Japan's emissions reduction commitment from a 15 percent reduction by 2020 (from 2005 levels) to 37 percent. Such a reduction, which would likely turn into Japan's international commitment under a Kyoto 2, is simply not practically achievable. Professor Tetsuo Yuhara of the University of Tokyo estimated that among the actions required to meet the target would be 600,000 new solar installations each year, 15 new nuclear power plants, electric vehicles comprising 90 percent of all new purchases, and a carbon price of $80 per tonne (1tonne = 1.1 tons, US). With one of the most carbon-efficient major economies on the planet, an emissions reduction of 37 percent by 2020 are not remotely possible in Japan, under even very modest economic growth.

So, rather than participating in a continued charade, Japan simply said that the Kyoto emperor has no clothes. At Cancun, Russia and Canada soon followed in Japan's footsteps, and eschewed participation in a second Kyoto commitment period. When India's environment minister went a bit rogue in the other direction by suggesting that India would be open to binding emissions reduction commitments, he was quickly brought back in line by his prime minister, who explained that India was not about to make any such commitments. In short, the fault lines created by Kyoto are as
deep and unbridgeable as ever, and all but certain to persist indefinitely.

Japan's brave refusal to play along in the emissions reduction charade reflects a broader truth - targets and timetables for emissions reductions do not in fact reduce emissions; technology reduces emissions. Furthermore, targets and timetables for emissions reductions do not make technologies magically appear. Incentives and investments in innovation are what lead to technological advances. Any hopes that political promises in a grand international treaty focused on targets and timetables would stimulate such advances by compelling domestic political actions around the world have been repeatedly dashed.

It is telling that the most important decision reached at Cancun was that the international process of negotiating should continue, with hopes that Durban, 2011, will be where countries around the world once and for all seal the deal.

The more likely outcome is that in 2011 the international negotiations will see the US, Canada, Russia, Japan, and even the EU continue to maintain that developing countries will have to take on binding commitments to emissions reductions, and the BASIC countries will stand firm in their position that such binding commitments are simply not going to happen. The 2011 climate confab will end either in recrimination, like Copenhagen, or in a largely meaningless agreement, like Cancun, with a promise that 2012 is when the action will really take place.

The most significant actions that will lead to accelerated decarbonization of the global economy will necessarily take place outside of the international negotiating process under the Climate Convention. At this point, the challenge of reforming the Climate Convention may be a larger task than actually reducing emissions. Fortunately, enough leadership is being shown, with the Japanese government a prominent example, that one can indeed have some optimism that effective action can take place. But full recognition that the locus of action lies outside the UN process is likely to take still more time to be fully appreciated.

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