

UNDERSTANDING THE COPENHAGEN CLIMATE DEAL: THE FIX IS IN

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For those reading the tea leaves to understand the actions of various countries preparing for the international climate negotiations later this year in Copenhagen, the broad outlines of the ultimate deal are starting to come into view. The picture being revealed is not a pretty one for anyone actually interested in reducing future emissions to very low levels.

To understand the international climate debate, it is necessary to understand the underlying dynamics that shape the behavior of governments around the world. It is crucial to understand that many elected officials and governments now in power achieved their position, at least in part, through very ambitious promises to take aggressive action to reduce future emissions of carbon dioxide from burning fossil fuels.

For example, in the United Kingdom, both the governing Labor party and the (perhaps soon-to-be-governing) Conservatives strongly supported legislation that passed last December promising to reduce emissions to at least 34% below 1990 levels by 2022. Similarly grandiose promises on climate policy have been a mainstay of governments across Europe for over a decade. In Australia, the Labor government of Kevin Rudd made climate policy a defining position in the campaign that swept him into office in 2007; his stand culminated in a standing ovation from representatives of governments around the world when he appeared at the international climate negotiations in Bali that December, promising that Australia would lead on climate. In the coming months, the Australian legislature faces the prospect of a rare "double dissolution" forced election if the Senate refuses for a second time to approve Rudd's emissions-trading legislation that promises to cut emissions to as much as 25% below 1990 levels by 2020.

Japan's remarkable election brought the Democratic Party of Japan into power. Prime Minister Hatoyama has asserted that his government will dramatically strengthen the emissions-reduction targets of the previous government, to an incredible 25% reduction by 2020. And of course US President Barack Obama promised in his inauguration speech that his administration would mark the time when the "rise of the oceans began to slow," by making climate policy a top priority after years of neglect by the Bush Administration. The US legislation that passed the House of Representatives last June promised to reduce US emissions 17% from 2005 levels by 2020, and is now being considered in the Senate.

The problem with all these promises to achieve deep and rapid cuts in emissions is that no one knows how these cuts are going to happen, and most simply cannot happen as promised. So these countries have turned to designing very complex policies full of accounting tricks, political pork, and policy misdirection. Not surprisingly, these sorts of policies have run

into considerable opposition among policy makers and the public, have been hijacked by political interests, and appear to fall well short of what has been promised. In Germany, Chancellor Angela Merkel has sought to weaken the effects of European climate policies on the German automobile industry; and in France, President Nicolas Sarkozy saw his proposal for a new carbon tax strongly criticized as unfair and regressive by his former (and perhaps future) presidential rival and Socialist Party figure, Ségolène Royal. Australian Prime Minister Rudd and US President Obama face the threat of outright revolt by conservative minority parties looking to secure political advantage by opposing proposed emissions-trading programs.

Even with all the policy complexity and political noise, it has not been difficult for anyone paying attention to realize that climate policies are in deep trouble. So what has been the primary response of governments? The tried-and-true strategy is to identify an enemy and focus attention on anything but the failing climate policies. In this case, the enemies identified by the rich, Western countries are India and China, with their huge populations, rapid economic growth, and increasing carbon footprints to match. Repeating a refrain heard in 1997 during negotiations that resulted in the largely ineffectual Kyoto Protocol, we again hear that without action from India and China, the climate policies of the developed countries will all be for naught.

In recent months, China and India have responded to this finger-pointing by presenting projections of their future emissions that show, rather incredibly, that both China and India have already transformed their economies to support rapid economic growth with very low carbon dioxide emission. Adopting binding emissions targets, they argue, will be unnecessary. Those hoping to see action in Copenhagen have welcomed these fantastic claims to argue that China, in particular, is becoming a leader in responding to climate change as a prod to the United States in particular. Chief UN climate negotiator Yvo de Boer said of China's claims, "This suite of policies will take China to be the world leader on addressing climate change. It will be quite ironic to hear that tomorrow, expressed in a country (the United States) that is firmly convinced that China is doing nothing to address climate change." India's Environment Minister Jairam Ramesh recently commented with apparent envy and skepticism on China's public-relations success: "China has raced way ahead of us, both in terms of emissions and in conveying the impression they are doing a lot on climate change."

Following China's lead, India has sought to change the way it is perceived in the international debate. India now says that it has already transformed its economy to one that is rapidly decarbonizing - it promises upwards of 8% annual growth in its GDP with an emissions growth of only about 2% per year for the next two decades, without the need for any new policies including those focused on emissions reductions. China has taken a very similar approach. China's carbon dioxide emissions increased by 12.2% per year from 2000 to 2007 but it now says that, based on its policies in place today, it expects its greenhouse gas emissions to increase only 2.5% per year until 2030, while maintaining a GDP growth of 9% per year. These numbers imply decarbonization of the Indian and Chinese economies at a rate of about 6% per year, which is far-fetched even under scenarios with aggressive new policies (which are not these scenarios), and preposterous under scenarios of business as usual. The fastest decarbonization rate of any large economy I know of occurred in the early 1980s, when Japan's economy achieved a decarbonization rate of about 4.4% per year due to aggressive energy efficiency policies as well as major changes in the Japanese economy. Even then, the rapid decarbonization of the Japanese economy slowed considerably by the mid-1980s, and has averaged about 1% per year since then.

India's Ramesh is so confident in the hand that his government has played that he has dared the developed countries to "call India's bluff." He knows full well that the developed countries cannot acknowledge the fictional nature of the Indian and Chinese emissions policies, because it would be only a short step from making such a claim to a broader recognition that climate policies of the developed world are built on similar foundations of sand. Ramesh is so confident that he has already declared the troubled bill now in the US Senate to be insufficient, even if it is somehow passed into law. "The bill . . . talks about a 20% cut on 2005 levels, which is really only a measly 5% reduction on 1990 levels." Such tough talk seems to make developed countries step back. Consider David Miliband, minister for Climate Change in the UK, who asserted that the Indian proposals might just get them off the hook of signing binding commitments at Copenhagen, because they have now demonstrated that they "took climate change seriously." Don't expect any governments in other developed countries to call Minister Ramesh's bluff either.

So where does this leave international climate policy? The good news for international negotiators and politicians who have promised action is that the stage is set for a global agreement of some sort but, we are told, perhaps not with I's dotted and t's crossed. This means that government claims to be taking action can be backed up with evidence of some sort of an agreement at Copenhagen, while at the same time ineffectual domestic actions can be sustained. If the negotiators are really clever, they will find a way to package the ineffectual domestic policies as a sort of patched-together global agreement.

However, for those who care about emissions reductions, especially leading environmental groups and activists in the science community, the joke will be on them - they will get just about everything they campaigned for, except any prospect for actual reductions in future emissions. Meanwhile, India and China will be able to continue their current round of securing oil, gas, and coal from sources around the world to fuel their booming economic growth. Similarly, as we march toward Copenhagen, the Obama Administration has quietly set forth plans to build a pipeline from Canada to exploit carbon-intensive oil locked in tar sands. The United Kingdom and other EU countries are considering building new coal and gas plants to meet growing needs for power. As long as leaders of the climate movement continue to pretend that progress is being made, the climate policy charade will go on for a while longer, while business proceeds as usual.

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