

# BEYOND THE ANNUAL CLIMATE CONFAB

*bridges vol. 28, December 2010 / Pielke's Perspective*

By Roger A. Pielke, Jr.



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.

\*\*\*

*Roger Pielke, Jr. is the former director of the Center for Science and Technology Policy Research at the University of Colorado (2001-2007). He has been on the faculty of the University of Colorado since 2001 and is a professor in the Environmental Studies Program and a fellow of the Cooperative Institute for Research in the Environmental Sciences (CIRES).*