

The political climate at Copenhagen *

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Rarely do world leaders turn their attention to collective long-term goals; even rarer do they gather to discuss an issue that is seemingly non-political in nature. That the debate on climate change due to greenhouse gas emissions has reached a stage where this is now a reality, is indeed reason enough for erstwhile perennial sceptics to sit up and take notice.

With much controversy, interest and activism surrounding the debate on climate change, it promises to become a major issue for the next decade. If there is an issue that given its inherent global nature can replace terrorism as the primary media commodity and perhaps also begin to shape policy matters, it is climate change. Unsurprisingly then, the United Nations Climate Change Conference - the Copenhagen Summit - became the focus of global attention between the 7th and 18th of December 2009. This included the 15th Conference of the Parties to the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change and has become recognized as Conference of the Parties - 15 or COP-15 accordingly.

While there are few left who reject the entire idea of climate change as an exaggerated concern of scientists, it has been much harder for environmentalists and politicians to turn theory into policy. And considering that advocates are calling for an unprecedented global policy, hurdles are not likely to be easily overcome. Economic and trade concerns, fear of loss of profits and competitive edge, financing technology for reduced emissions in industries, ethical notions of aid and most importantly mistrust on the political stage, are all constraints that prevent environmental policies from being implemented. In this brief analysis of the Copenhagen Conference, it is the politics of climate change that fall under the microscope to examine how the unavoidable politicisation of an issue is causing delays in implementing policies.

Background to Copenhagen

Succeeding recent preliminary conferences at Bali and New York where a roadmap of sorts had been put forward, the diversity of issues to be discussed in Copenhagen expected to make it a watershed for collective action. These included concerns of who would need to make cuts in

* *This paper takes into account the relevant developments till April 26, 2010 – Editor.*

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greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions, funding of mitigation and adaptation policies as well as innovative mechanisms such as carbon trading.¹

Any generalized discussion of climate change, and consequently COP-15, divides countries simplistically, if also somewhat realistically, into separate groups based on interests, demands, political power and reservations. Countries like China, Brazil and India lead one such large group of developing countries. Rising industrial powers, these have become massive emitters that have much to lose if binding treaties that signal emission cuts are signed, since periods of adaptation will push many millions below the poverty line. Advocating lower targets, these countries provide leadership for the developing world and are regarded to be major players on the negotiating table, though often at odds with developed countries that are pushing for binding treaties and high targets.

Another group is composed of small island states that have even more drastic worries; some such as the Maldives have fears – not completely unfounded - that their existence is under pressure due to the effects of climate change through no fault of their own since their emissions are negligible at best. These are the countries that are looking towards large-scale changes and global commitment to reducing temperature rise to a maximum of 1.5 degrees Celsius.

There are also countries such as Pakistan that are themselves not guilty of massive GHG emissions, but will potentially suffer from some of the worst consequences of climate change economically. These are the countries that have yet to raise public awareness and bring in expertise in order to broker deals that would make it easier to finance technologies and environmentally stable solutions for sustainable development while taking advantage of the climate funds being generated as a result of collective advocacy.

The developed world, including the US and advanced European countries, makes up the most powerful group. Being historical emitters, much of the blame of actual climate change is placed on them. And being industrialized nations with enhanced technologies, finances and skills to mitigate and adapt to climate change, they are expected to play leading roles on both ethical and political grounds by enabling the developing world to move towards stricter emission standards without compromising economic progress.

Since the conference at Copenhagen included delegates from 193 countries including 119 heads of state in addition to other stakeholders, expectations were quite high.² Any potential failure to come up with a

binding international treaty was being termed 'catastrophic' and this was a view echoed by world leaders, scientists and especially by environmentalists.³

The more realistic observers who believed that Copenhagen should seek a nation-based, bilateral incentive provision rather than an international treaty through multilateral financing remained a minority. This, they argue, would be easier since not only would it allow setting better targets nationally, but also enable efficient monitoring and most importantly financing deals through less complicated bilateral mechanisms with the developed world.⁴ This would make not just the financing easier, but allow contextualised policies for individual countries each with their own needs; in effect empowering the developing nations.

However, key debates in Copenhagen and expectations from the majority perceived anything less than a binding treaty on the global stage ratified by the UN to be an underachievement at best. It has been evident since though, that policies on more regional and bilateral levels due to mutual concerns, as well as policies on national levels to counter energy deficiencies, have taken precedence since the methodology of Copenhagen has failed to live up to its unusually high expectations.

Copenhagen Conference for Climate Change: COP-15

Optimism at the Copenhagen Summit started to wane as the two-week-long conference progressed and it became clear that an agreement, leave alone a binding treaty, was unlikely. Much like the politics of our age, this was a conference marred by mistrust and power dynamics that define relationships between the proverbial north and south. And much like the politics of our age, it left major decisions to the next round of talks, delaying the inevitable as much as possible.

So inextricably linked are economics and politics that China was in a unique position of being not just the leader of the developing countries and a major player on the negotiating table, but also the largest emitter of GHG and quite clearly a country that had its own selfish, if also legitimate, interests to maintain. COP-15 was also special since it had guaranteed an active involvement of the United States for the first time since climate change had become a matter of global concern. President Obama himself was present to lead from the front in a realization of what had been one of his popular campaign promises. Indeed, US leadership has always been considered vital if climate change has to be adequately addressed and this ended a long wait for environmental activists who had for so long desired to see the US being the most active player in this 'project'.

However as reports kept pouring out that the developed world was exploiting its position on the negotiating table, there were also insiders who blamed China for 'wrecking' the possibility of a deal.⁵ With the conference in danger of becoming nothing more than a diplomatic tussle between industrialized countries led by the US, and industrializing nations led by China, hopes for a treaty diminished as talks extended beyond the scheduled end. Yet, as the prolonged summit was drawn into its last hours, behind-the-doors negotiations between the US, Brazil, China, South Africa and India were held as a final effort to push for a concrete agreement. This led to the Copenhagen Accord.

The Copenhagen Accord

More of an understanding outlining broad ambitions rather than a treaty, the Copenhagen Accord while addressing basic issues, ignores large-scale financial responsibilities in the developing world, legal processes, policy matters and binding agreements. Playing safe and appeasing all stakeholders in the political arena, the Accord becomes a compromise that aims to bide its time before the next round of talks on climate change when perhaps circumstances will allow for more constructive agreements. The

COP-15 then, which had started amongst such fanfare, ended with much criticism and derision.

The Copenhagen Accord is a short non-binding agreement that broadly covers the following points:⁶

1. Strong political will to 'urgently combat climate change' and the need for an international programme to limit increase in global temperature to below 2 degrees Celsius.
2. Cutting GHG emissions as per the documentation of Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC). According to the IPCC Fourth Assessment Report, peaking of global and national emissions needs to occur as soon as possible.
3. Recognition of specific problems of developing countries and island states as well as the need for international cooperation and the enhanced role of the developed world in adaptation processes to be implemented in these countries.
4. A four-pronged strategy of mitigation, action, evaluation and monitoring to comprehensively define the process of climate change. Some level of international monitoring will need to be established while retaining national sovereignty.
5. Recognition of the potential of forests in sustainable development and the dangers from large-scale deforestation.
6. The need for incentives and innovations
7. The need for funding to be scaled up; collective commitment of the developed countries will be prioritised for financing the most vulnerable countries. An initial commitment of USD 30 billion for the period 2010-2012 for adaptation and mitigation, and a further USD 100 billion annually from a variety of sources by the year 2020 is also part of the accord.
8. The creation of a panel to assess potential sources of revenue.
9. The establishment of a Copenhagen Green Climate Fund "as an operating entity of the financial mechanism of the Convention" to support various projects and activities in the developing world.
10. Calling for an assessment of this accord in 2015 for further consideration into long-term goals, including in relation to a temperature rise of 1.5 degrees Celsius.

Reactions

Reactions from various stakeholders make a fascinating study of international relations and the role that non-state actors have acquired within the global policy-making arena. Copenhagen had been built as the

platform for a successful global social policy, but in the end it was the politics of climate change that prevailed.

President Obama of the US for instance, claimed that while this was 'not a perfect text' it had brought about the momentum that should be sustained over time. Gordon Brown, the UK Prime Minister, echoed these sentiments but expressed the need to move towards a legally binding outcome.

It was the role of the EU countries that disappointed most activists since European nations have traditionally been staunch advocates of a binding treaty and their commitment had previously never been questioned. However, their reaction to the Accord was one of subdued acceptance. European Commission president, Jose Manuel Barroso, expressed his disappointment that EU attempts of long-term targets for reducing emissions by 50% by 2050 had been blocked, noting that the accord "falls far short of our expectations."⁷ NGO representatives on the other hand expressed utter mortification; as Oxfam Chief Executive complained, "World leaders in Copenhagen seem to have forgotten that they were not negotiating numbers, they were negotiating lives."⁸

Xie Zhenhua, who had led the Chinese delegation, appeared satisfied that negotiations had been positive for all sides. He did however give critics more reason to question China's commitment to collective action for reversing climate change by insisting that "for the Chinese, this was our sovereignty and our national interest."⁹

Others called it a 'suicide pact'¹⁰ and Mohamed Nasheed, the President of Maldives, perhaps summed up the feelings of most vulnerable countries with the following words: "Anything above 1.5 degrees, the Maldives and many small islands and low-lying islands would vanish. It is for this reason that we tried very hard during the course of the last two days to have 1.5 degrees in the document. I am sorry that this was blatantly obstructed by big-emitting countries."¹¹

Conclusion

It had been taken for granted that absolute commitments regarding emission control were essential for a successful policy for climate change. There are those however who, more cognizant of the realities of politics and balance of power, have been arguing for nation-based policies through bilateral relationships. Yet the more popular opinion remains that a multilateral, UN-based binding treaty is necessary for climate change to be tackled. Accordingly, the Copenhagen Accord is largely seen as a

compromise¹² and hope is now placed on Mexico, the venue for the next climate conference in 2010.

Many reasons have been given for the failures at Copenhagen. Richard Black points to the reluctance of some key countries, a US political system which requires Congress support, bad timing of the conference, weaknesses of the host government, media attention and EU politics of compliance with the US as some of the key reasons why Copenhagen failed to deliver.¹³

Furthermore, given the sheer numbers and varied interests of stakeholders present, the summit was bound to be chaotic especially since there was no spirit of collective ownership. Rather, there was a clear political divide that prevented the process that had been worked out in Bali in 2007 from being followed.¹⁴ Others preferred to focus on China's negative approach as the prime factor behind a failed deal. This finger-pointing has persisted as there remains a vacuum primarily due to political imbalances, contrasting interests and enormous financial issues involved.

Yet, some independent observers have lauded the achievements at Copenhagen, preferring to see it as a step in the right direction. Tom Brookes and Tim Nuthall from the European Climate Foundation, while acknowledging that many important decisions were delayed, note that there is cause to remain optimistic. Indeed, Copenhagen attracted massive interest and reflected a world with a less polarized balance of power; public awareness reached unprecedented levels and 'green growth' has clearly become the prevailing economic model of our time.¹⁵

The Copenhagen Summit then was as much about climate change as it was about international relations. It was as much about saving the world as it was about economic negotiations. In being so, COP-15 becomes a striking metaphor for global politics, the north-south divide and the complicated power dynamics that guide these relationships. The year 2010 has seen even more interest in the issue – perhaps that itself can be assessed as the success of Copenhagen. It has seen participant countries ratifying the Copenhagen Accord and has proceeded to national, regional, bilateral and cross-continental activism and discussions on climate change.

With Brazil, South Africa, India and China, also known as the BASIC countries stepping up their efforts stressing combined action¹⁶ and the upcoming South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) summit in Bhutan promising to be a platform for member states to unite under a similar banner along with numerous bilateral and unilateral

environmental actions, it is not unlikely that soon climate change will stop being referred to as a non-traditional security threat. However, it remains to be seen whether politics of climate change continue to mar cooperation – this is one issue where delayed action may mean more than just a missed opportunity; it may indeed end up causing unprecedented devastation for billions. And it is with this mindset that the next climate conference Mexico in 2010 should be approached.

Notes & References

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