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Copenhagen and the Consequences

The UN Climate Change Conference (COP15) held in Copenhagen between December 7 and 19, 2009 was the focus of unprecedented international attention. The COP had the objective to reach a legally binding treaty for international climate policy in the period 2013-2020, covering the elements mitigation, adaptation, finance and technology. Moreover, a shared vision for long-term collaborative action beyond 2020 was to be defined.

The Danish strategy had from the outset focused on securing a legally binding agreement as a successor to the Kyoto Protocol by concentrating on the major carbon emitters. The chances of securing such a treaty had suffered a blow when it became clear during the course of the autumn that the US Congress would be unable to pass a bill on domestic climate policy before COP15. The Danish negotiation team then frantically attempted to set up a political agreement which could be converted into a legally binding one once US legislation had been passed, probably in the first half of 2010.

The second pillar of the Danish strategy was to get as many emission reduction pledges from industrialised and advanced developing countries alike. This was successful – in the two weeks immediately preceding COP15, all industrialised countries had announced emission targets that amounted to a reduction of 13-19% from 1990 levels by 2020. While not reaching the corridor of 25-40% which the IPCC thinks is required to remain on a path that could limit global warming to below 2°C, this level was a good basis for negotiations. Even more promising was the level of mitigation targets from Brazil, China, Indonesia and South Africa, who announced reductions of 25-40% from business-as-usual levels. While business-as-usual projections were debatable, with the Chinese target based on emissions intensity and a large part of the other targets heavily dependent on reducing deforestation, the targets clearly marked a significant deviation from business-as-usual.

The key faultlines at the COP focused on the level of emissions commitments for industrialised and advanced developing countries, verification of emissions reductions and policies, as well as financing for mitigation and adaptation in developing countries. While the USA, Russia, Japan and the EU wanted to scrap the two track structure of the Kyoto Protocol and a Convention track, all developing countries strongly favoured continuation of the two track procedure. Throughout the COP, there was no movement of either industrialised or advanced developing countries beyond earlier pledges. A conflict that broke out at the COP itself was the monitoring of the policies and emissions of advanced developing countries. China was unwilling to allow external monitoring of its emissions data. Regarding financing, vague statements (“up to 100 billion”) by the USA and EU were seen as unacceptable by developing countries, particularly as Germany had stated that it wanted climate finance to be treated as official development assistance. Moreover, the administration of the financing was strongly contested, with industrialised countries favouring World Bank/GEF administration over a UN style fund proposed by developing countries. The USA and China clashed visibly. The EU did not manage to play the leading role it had always foreseen for itself.

The Danish strategy to get maximum high-level involvement backfired spectacularly. Firstly, it generated expectations among the lower-level bureaucrats in the first week of the conference that the bigwigs would come to the rescue anyway, resulting in progress at a glacial pace with much time wasted by the suspension of meetings. A leaked draft of a Copenhagen agreement reinforced the feeling that the formal negotiations were pure show and that the real decisions would be made in a small back room. Ministers felt squeezed between the bureaucrats and the heads of state, who did not know the subject well and had little time. The handover of the COP presidency from the experienced environment minister Connie Hedegaard to Prime Minister Rasmussen was symptomatic. Rasmussen turned out to be a burden on the process. He was unable to understand the dangerous dynamics of countries that were left out of the decision-making process.

The main problem with his approach was that decisions were announced in press conferences instead of being proposed to the formal bodies. Otherwise, the “friends of the chair” process that he engaged in was a standard negotiation tactic, with 25 countries and three entities participating. By 11 p.m. on 18 December, these negotiations had led to a three-page document, the Copenhagen Accord; the breakthrough had come out of a negotiation between the heads of state of the USA, China, India, Brazil and South Africa. The Accord has the following elements:

- General recognition of the scientific view that the global temperature increase should be kept below 2°C. However, it includes neither an aggregate emissions target for 2050 nor a date for the peaking of global emissions.
- Developed and developing countries should list their emission reduction targets by the end of January 2010. There is no aggregate emissions target for industrialised countries.
- The status of the Kyoto Protocol’s second commitment period is unclear, as the Accord states that the industrialised country targets “further strengthen the emissions reductions initiated by the Kyoto Protocol”.
- Only those emission reduction policies by developing countries that are subsidised by industrialised countries will be verified internationally. Reporting frequency is every two years.
- A \$30 billion collective financing commitment by developed countries from 2010 to 2012 (Japan: \$11 billion, EU: \$10.6 billion, USA: \$3.6 billion so far), which will be scaled up to \$100 billion annually by 2020. The funding will come from a variety of sources (public, private, bilateral, multilateral, “alternative”) and be “new and additional”. “Alternative” probably refers to the auctioning of emissions allowances proposed by Norway. Developed and developing countries would have the same share of votes in the body governing adaptation finance. A Copenhagen Green Climate Fund will be set up which will administer a significant portion of the overall funding.
- Introduction of a mechanism to prevent deforestation (REDD+) and a “country-driven” technology mechanism, without further specification.
- A weak reference to market mechanisms, without any specifications. There is a vague reference to incentives for countries that currently have low emissions to “continue to develop on a low emission pathway”.
- Review of the target levels in 2015, with an extremely convoluted reference to a possible strengthening of the target to keep temperature increases below 1.5°C.

The conversion of the Copenhagen Accord into a legally binding treaty was to be finalised by the end of 2010. Assuming that the adoption of the Copenhagen Accord by the COP plenary was a mere formality, heads of state departed around midnight on Dec. 18. This allowed an unprecedented revolt on the morning of Dec. 19, as the Copenhagen Accord was opposed by Tuvalu, socialist Latin American states led by Nicaragua and Venezuela, and Sudan in the closing plenary and thus could not be adopted due to the consensus requirement in UNFCCC negotiations. Through the face saving trick of letting the COP “take note of” the Accord, a complete disaster was averted in the last minute.

The Accord can be revived if many countries sign up, and it can be bolstered by concrete UNFCCC decisions. This requires the US Congress to enact the cap and trade bill. A global agreement with a global carbon currency is thus still within reach, but the window of opportunity is closing rapidly. Alternatively, the debate over whether the UN is the right forum for climate negotiations will intensify, and negotiations might shift to the G20. But it is even more likely that several unilateral pledges with distinct offset systems will emerge. Such a fragmented climate policy environment would not be able to address the challenge of accelerating climate change impact, and we might lose a crucial decade in our fight against climate change.

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