

G8 summit: Climate compromise masks mounting conflicts

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The 3,500 reporters and photographers who travelled to the G8 summit in Heiligendamm, Germany, have accomplished their assigned mission. The world has been inundated with reports of progress and idyllic photos: Bush, Merkel and Putin sitting relaxed and chatting in beach chairs; Sarkozy and Blair talking over a glass of beer; a harmonious walk on the beach of the picturesque resort by all of the world leaders.

In Germany, the daily newspapers are carrying triumphant headlines: “G8 Summit Agrees on Climate Goals,” “G8 Decides Billion-Euro Program for AIDS Assistance,” etc. The public relations department of the German Chancellery has been hard at work. If one believed the headlines and official propaganda, one would have little inkling that the world’s main power brokers are divided amongst themselves and have no real concern for the concerns of ordinary people.

On a closer look, however, the alleged breakthrough on the climate question, which German Chancellor Angela Merkel made the primary topic of the summit, proves to be nothing other than a hollow compromise. The G8 have agreed to aim for a “substantial reduction” of greenhouse gas emissions. Concrete goals, however, have not been determined—not to speak of binding obligations.

The halving of emissions by 2050, which scientists regard as necessary to limit earth warming to 2 degrees centigrade, is only to be “seriously considered”—a formula that imposes no obligations on anyone.

The US has also agreed—at least this is the interpretation of the Europeans—to a common campaign against climate change within the framework of the United Nations, a position that Washington had rejected up to now.

In contrast to the German media, the international press was largely sceptical over the climate-protection agreement.

The French *La Tribune* wrote there could be “no talk of a triumph.” The “minor linguistic concession” made by the American president will not make “the terrestrial atmosphere healthier in the coming years,” it continued. “This required more than a fraction of a sentence which

everyone can interpret as he likes the next day.”

The Italian *La Repubblica* also sees “no success in the indefinite obligation to undertake measures more or less in the future.” It goes on to say: “The elephant roared and gave birth to a mouse.... [D]eclarations of intent are not sufficient; the problem is much too urgent.”

Environmental organisations and Merkel’s coalition partner, the Social Democratic Party (SPD), also reacted critically to the agreement. The SPD environmental expert Hermann Scheer even declared that the agreement was an obstacle to climate protection. “The global search for consensus prevents rapid action for climate protection, because minimal compromises then become the accepted standard,” he told the *Berliner Zeitung*.

The token nature of the climate deal agreed on in Heiligendamm does not mean, however, that the debate over the issue was of no importance. It served as a means for pursuing other goals.

Particularly in Europe, the conservative parties have suddenly discovered the environment question and seek to use it to woo layers of the electorate that formerly oriented to the left. This applies not only to Merkel, but also to the Gaullist Union for a Popular Movement (UMP) of French President Nicolas Sarkozy. In the current parliamentary election campaign, his deputy prime minister and secretary for the environment, Alain Juppé, has demonstrably ridden a bicycle to election meetings, inviting the press to take photographs.

This political tack coincides with a shift in the attitude of major sections of the corporate elite towards environmental policy. Formerly, big business instinctively reacted against any form of environmental protection as an attack on their profits. But now, alternative energies, fuel-efficient autos, thermal insulation and other forms of energy conservation have become a lucrative and growing market.

The climate question has also served as a proxy for differences that led to open confrontations prior to the summit. They have now been translated into the more subtle language of diplomacy.

Thus, the *Süddeutsche Zeitung* regards one of the most important successes of the summit to be the fact that the four European participants had stood as a bloc against the US. The newspaper's July 8 editorial states: "Half of the G8 countries—the four European states—remained together to the end; they stayed together in a bloc. Under pressure from Angela Merkel, they stuck to their positions. It was the others who moved. In the end, they had no other choice."

The word "bloc" is crucial, because the real issue centres on the building of great-power blocs. The German political elite, in particular, has long maintained that it can advance against the US on an international level only if it succeeds in imposing a common line on Europe.

Now, for the first time in recent history, it was possible on the basis of the climate question to develop a united front between Germany, France, England and Italy and force the American president to make concessions—even though they were largely of a verbal nature. This is considered to be a precedent for dealing with other controversial topics, particularly in the field of foreign policy.

Russian President Vladimir Putin also used the summit for a diplomatic manoeuvre. Prior to the summit, he had vehemently protested against the planned stationing of a US missile defence system in Poland and the Czech Republic, even threatening to aim Russian missiles at Europe and risk a new cold war. But he surprised the summit with a proposal to station a joint US-Russian missile defence system in Azerbaijan.

The proposal has little chance of realisation and has already been rejected by American defence experts. In the US, Putin's proposal has been interpreted in some quarters as a retreat, because up to now the Russian president has categorically rejected any sort of missile defence system.

From Putin's standpoint, however, the initiative is aimed at gaining time and winning support in Europe, where he has been rather isolated in recent months. He stressed that if his proposal were carried out, it would protect all of Europe, and that hostile missiles intercepted by the system would crash into the sea, rather than in the middle of the European continent.

Moreover, by embracing the idea of a missile defence system in principle, and proposing that it be based in Central Asia and be developed as a joint US-Russian project, he was, in effect, calling Washington's bluff. The US has insisted that its plan, which calls for 10 interceptor missiles in Poland and a radar station in the Czech Republic, is not aimed at Russia, but rather at "rogue states" such as Iran. This, as is well known by all, is a subterfuge. The essential purpose of the US plan is to contain Russia and tip the military balance of nuclear forces against it.

With his counter-plan, which, at least on the surface,

appears to have logic on its side—assuming that Iran is really the threat to be contained—Putin wants to put Bush on the defensive and expose the real aims of the American plan. His proposal evidently caught the US delegation off-guard. Indeed, Bush skipped the next morning's session of the summit, claiming a sudden illness.

Behind the harmonious front at Heiligendamm—some critics are already referring to the "Scheinheiligendamm" summit, (i.e., the summit of hypocrisy)—the conflicts and tensions that dominated the run-up to the meeting are deepening. The more controversial and divisive issues—the Iraq war, the attitude to Iran, the Middle East conflict—were completely excluded from the main discussion and merely mentioned in passing.

On the most pressing economic question on the agenda—state supervision of hedge funds—the world leaders failed to come to an agreement. The US and Britain blocked any agreement, refusing even to consider a voluntary code of conduct for hedge funds. These highly speculative funds, which have the potential of unleashing financial chaos across the globe, will continue to manipulate billions, free of any sort of regulatory control.

The summit in Heiligendamm has done nothing to assuage the fundamental conflicts between the great powers. The growing tensions between the US, Europe and Russia that formed the background to the summit will inevitably intensify. They have their origin in the fundamental incompatibility of the national state system with modern global production. The rapid rise of new economic giants in the form of China and India only serves to increase the competition for raw materials, cheap labour and markets.

Russia is no longer prepared to accept the aggressive intervention of the US and NATO in eastern Europe and the former republics of the Soviet Union. This is what lies behind the bitter exchanges over the US anti-missile system. For their part, European countries are not prepared to concede to American domination of the Middle and Far East. This is the driving force behind the attempts to develop a common European foreign policy and military strike force.

In the long run, these conflicts cannot be resolved through peaceful means. Only the reorganisation of the global economy on a socialist basis can prevent the eruption of a new epoch of world war.



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