

UN climate change meeting

No agreement between major powers on carbon emissions

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On Tuesday, government leaders representing about 100 nations gathered at the United Nations in New York to discuss global warming. The meeting was billed as an attempt to jump-start negotiations in advance of a December summit in Copenhagen at which a global treaty governing greenhouse gas emissions is to be produced.

Instead, the New York conference only served to highlight the impossibility of realizing even the most limited environmental reforms in a world order dominated by rival capitalist nation states.

Global warming is caused by carbon dioxide emissions created in the burning of fossil fuels. Carbon and other “greenhouse gases” trap heat in the atmosphere, increasing the earth’s temperature beyond normal climatological fluctuations. Among global warming’s observed effects are the melting of the polar ice caps, which threatens coastal populations due to rising sea levels, and an increase in the severity of weather patterns. Its impact on the earth’s species, food production, water supply and human disease will be dramatic.

In light of the gathering threat of environmental catastrophe, the inability of the world heads of state to agree on even modest measures to meet it is all the more glaring. The conference revealed sharp divisions among the world’s three largest greenhouse gas producers, the US, China, and Europe.

China and the US by themselves produce 40 percent of all carbon emissions. The two nations, whose economies are also tightly bound together, have refused to agree to mandates on emission reductions. The speeches of presidents Barack Obama and Hu Jintao, both of whom addressed the UN gathering, were therefore watched with particular interest.

Obama’s remarks were typical of the president. Replete with saccharine rhetorical flourishes like “we are determined to act,” “difficulty is no excuse for complacency,” “seize the opportunity,” “the journey is long,” and so on, the speech had nothing to say about what the US might do to reduce its emissions.

“Yes, the developed nations that caused much of the damage to our climate over the last century still have a responsibility to lead,” Obama said. “And we will continue to do so by investing in renewable energy, promoting greater efficiency, and slashing our emissions to reach the targets we set for 2020 and our long-term goal for 2050.”

In fact, the US has taken no significant measures to reduce its carbon emissions. The US is not a signatory to the Kyoto Protocol of 1997, after Congress, on cue from major corporate polluters, refused to ratify the treaty. The US is the only major country not to pass Kyoto.

Obama did not use his UN speech to call on the the US Senate to produce a greenhouse gas emissions bill in advance of the Copenhagen meeting. To be ratified, any treaty would require a 67-vote Senate majority.

Obama favors a “free market” solution to global warming, or so-called “cap and trade” measures, which would provide rich incentives to corporations to modestly reduce carbon emissions, while turning pollution into a tradeable commodity. Such a bill was passed in the House in June, but has been held up in the Senate until some time next year. (See “US House passes Obama administration’s carbon trading legislation”.)

The only difference that Obama’s speech enunciated from the previous American position was an acceptance that

global warming is, in fact, taking place and that it is caused by human activity. This Obama referred to as an “historic recognition on behalf of the American people and their government [that] we understand the gravity of the climate threat...” George W. Bush, Obama’s obscurantist predecessor in the White House, notoriously declared that “all the science isn’t in yet” on global warming.

Yet, in his speech’s only substantive portion, Obama reiterated the Bush administration position that combating carbon emissions is the responsibility of developing industrial powers like China and India. “Those rapidly-growing developing nations that will produce nearly all the growth in global carbon emissions in the decades ahead must do their part as well,” Obama said.

Given that China and India are rapidly growing economies, it is unsurprising that their carbon emissions are also growing rapidly. But they still lag far behind the US in per capita carbon production. While the US produces about the same amount of carbon as China, it has less than a fourth of China’s population.

There is little doubt that China’s rapid industrial expansion is creating an environmental disaster. Much of China’s energy consumption comes from burning coal, which produces carbon emissions at a higher rate than other fossil fuels.

Hu tacitly rejected the American president’s claim that developing countries must shoulder the burden for reducing carbon emissions. “Developing countries need to strike a balance between economic growth, social development and environmental protection,” Hu said.

Hu indicated that China would continue to increase its carbon emissions, saying only that greenhouse gas output would decrease relative to economic growth. Hu also said that China would begin a large-scale reforestation project, increase its consumption of non-fossil fuels, and develop a “green economy.”

The French president, Nicolas Sarkozy, addressed the meeting on behalf of the European nations, which “have grown increasingly frustrated with Mr. Obama for not investing more political capital in the climate agenda at home,” the British daily Telegraph notes.

Sarkozy used his speech to take a swipe at Obama, telling the gathered heads of state he would not “inflict” a “grandiose speech” on delegates when “concrete proposals”

are required.

Sub-Saharan African and poor island nations, which are already suffering under the effects of global warming and which produce relatively negligible amounts of carbon, are requesting financial reparations from the wealthier nations primarily responsible for global warming.

The French environment minister, Jean-Louis Borloo, went out of his way to reject such a proposal. “They have to show what it will pay for,” he said.

It is clear that if any agreement is produced at December’s Copenhagen gathering, it will be a derisory response to the crisis of global warming.

To date, major industrialized nations have agreed to reduce emissions by 2050. This date is so far in the future, and the promises to reduce emissions so vague, that it is not taken seriously. The United Nations’ Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change has proposed a short-term target of reducing emissions by 25 percent to 40 percent below 1990 levels by 2020. This reduction, which environmental groups say is insufficient to reverse global warming, is likely to be opposed by the US as well as China and India, which reject emission mandates.

There are also unresolved disagreements over what body should oversee compliance with carbon emission standards.

Ban Ki-Moon, the UN secretary general, who called the climate change summit, lamented that “negotiations were moving as fast as a glacier.”

Slower, perhaps, than the world’s glaciers are melting.



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