

Copenhagen climate summit ends in bitter disagreements

Patrick Martin
19 December 2009

The United Nations-sponsored global climate summit in Copenhagen staggered toward a finish Friday night, with representatives of the major world powers hoping to salvage a brief statement of principles, without a single binding commitment, before bringing the two-week conference to an end.

US President Barack Obama told a midnight press conference that a “meaningful and unprecedented breakthrough” had been reached in last-minute talks between the US, China, India, Brazil and South Africa, but he announced he was leaving before final agreement on a text, citing a winter storm bearing down on Washington, DC.

Obama admitted that there was a “fundamental deadlock in perspectives” between the major industrialized countries such as the US, Japan and Western Europe, and the poorer countries of Asia, Africa and Latin America. But he claimed that the conference “will help us begin to meet our responsibilities to leave our children and grandchildren a cleaner planet.”

The agreement between the US, China, Brazil, India and South Africa is limited to lip service to the goal of reducing emissions of greenhouse gases by 2050. It reportedly drops any reference to a 2010 deadline for a legally binding climate accord, which had been the centerpiece of earlier drafts, in favor of a pledge to continue discussions when the conference reconvenes in Mexico City next year, and to make progress by 2016.

While a draft communiqué reportedly proposes several numerical goals, such as an 80 percent reduction in emissions by 2050, compared to a baseline of 1990, these are merely aspirational, with no actual targets for specific countries or groups of countries, and no concrete mechanisms for either verification or enforcement. The target of limiting the rise in world temperatures to 2 degrees Centigrade has been widely condemned by environmental activists and scientists, because it means the effective desertification of much of Africa. Even this “limit” is expressed only as a wish, an acknowledgement of the

scientific consensus, and not translated into specific policies to achieve that goal.

While claiming progress, Obama emphasized, in a bow to his right-wing critics at home, that the United States “will not be legally bound by anything that took place here today.” And he admitted that whatever resolution was ultimately adopted by the conference delegates would not be a sufficient response to the crisis of global warming.

Extraordinarily, not a single European country or the European Union itself was represented in the private talks, although Denmark, the host country, is an EU member, and EU officials played a prominent role in the public functions of the conference. Given the enormous role of the EU countries in world economic activity, and the emission of greenhouse gases, their exclusion demonstrates that the agreement Obama hailed is virtually meaningless.

The Copenhagen conference had already begun to break up before the closed-door five-party meeting concluded. Russian President Dmitri Medvedev had already left to return home, and Japanese Prime Minister Yukio Hatoyama was on his way to the airport.

The hectic meetings and maneuvers of the conference’s final day demonstrated two incontrovertible facts of 21st century world politics: the intensifying struggle among all the world’s capitalist states, whose conflicting economic interests make any unified response to the threat of global warming impossible; and the declining power of American imperialism in particular, which was unable to impose its will at Copenhagen.

It was not for lack of trying. After Secretary of State Hillary Clinton dangled a \$100 billion bribe in front of the poor countries, seeking to woo them away from their alliance with China, India, Brazil and other rapidly developing powers, Obama followed up on Friday morning with a speech that showed the “bad cop” side of American bullying.

He spoke for barely ten minutes, in a hectoring tone and evincing obvious frustration with China, India and many of the 130 poor countries united in the so-called G-77, who

were insisting that the industrialized countries take full responsibility for the pollution crisis by agreeing to binding emissions cuts at home and providing financial aid for the conversion of Third World industries to more energy-efficient technology.

One press account described him as adopting “the tone of an impatient professor whose students had blown a term paper deadline.” The British newspaper *Guardian* wrote: “A visibly angry Obama told world leaders that it was past time for them to come to an agreement... But Obama did not offer any new pledges of action—either in increased emissions cuts or clarity on America’s contributions to a climate fund for poor countries.”

Obama’s speech angered many of the delegates, who gave it a decidedly cool reception.

Both before and after Obama’s speech, the conference featured an exchange of snubs and hostile comments between the US and China. Soon after he arrived aboard Air Force One, according to the *New York Times*, “Obama went into an unscheduled meeting with a high-level group of leaders representing some 20 countries and organizations. Wen Jiabao, the prime minister of China, elected not to attend that meeting, instead sending the vice foreign minister, He Yafei, a snub that left both American and European officials seething.”

Chinese officials were outraged in turn over the tone and content of Obama’s speech. Telling the conference that the time had come to “act” and not just “talk,” he essentially laid down the US position, including the controversial demand that China and other countries agree to the monitoring of their carbon reduction commitments, and demanded that the conference adopt it.

He ridiculed the opposition of China—although he did not name the country—to any form of international verification of its compliance with emission-reduction goals. China regards such US proposals as tantamount to demanding a reduction in the country’s rate of economic growth, which Beijing regards as a threat to domestic stability.

When Wen Jiabao took the podium to deliver a speech on behalf of the Chinese delegation, he denounced the industrialized countries for failing to live up to the promises made at the 1997 Kyoto conference, whose official protocol was drafted by the Clinton administration but never submitted to Congress for ratification. “It is important to honor the commitments already made and take real action,” he said, in a speech characterized as “defiant” in press accounts.

A final incident reportedly took place Friday evening, when Chinese, Indian and Brazilian leaders were in a private meeting and Obama barged in, declaring that he didn’t want them negotiating in secret. The South African representative

also joined these talks, which led to the agreement on a draft “accord” to be submitted to the whole conference for ratification.

Environmental groups condemned Obama’s speech. Global warming activist Bill McKibben of 350.org called it a “take it or leave it” ultimatum. Friends of the Earth issued a statement saying, “Obama has deeply disappointed not only those listening to his speech at the UN talks, he has disappointed the whole world.”

A spokesman for the World Development Movement said, “He showed no awareness of the inequality and injustice of climate change. If America has really made its choice, it is a choice that condemns hundreds of millions of people to climate change disaster.”

In a column in the *Guardian* Friday, environmentalist George Monbiot made an apt comparison in describing the mercenary approach of the representatives of the major industrialized powers. Referring to the late 19th century colonial carve-up of Africa, he wrote: “This is a scramble for the atmosphere comparable in style and intent to the scramble for Africa. At no point has the injustice at the heart of multilateralism been addressed or even acknowledged: the interests of states and the interests of the world’s people are not the same. Often they are diametrically opposed. In this case, most rich and rapidly developing states have sought through these talks to seize as great a chunk of the atmosphere for themselves as they can—to grab bigger rights to pollute than their competitors.”

It is profoundly true that “the interests of states and the interests of the world’s people” are opposed. The nation-state system cannot, however, be separated from capitalism, which developed alongside and is wedded to the nation-state system.

The danger of irreparable environmental damage to the earth and its people can be combated only through a struggle to put an end to both capitalism and the nation-system, and establish a democratic and scientifically planned—that is, socialist—world economy.



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