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## Lessons from Copenhagen: Has the UN played its last card?

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Thursday, 24 December 2009

Welcome to the future. Like the Security Council, at the UN there is now a 'climate council' of two, the US and China with a veto over global action on climate change.

The Copenhagen climate conference outcomes, or lack of them, leave open a range of questions over when and how the world will move forward on climate action. But perhaps the biggest of them is about where any major decisions on tackling global warming in future are now likely to be taken. That is, inside or outside the United Nations. There is the real prospect that agreement on the most meaningful action on mitigation of emissions will occur outside the UN convention on climate change ([UNFCCC](#)), reflecting chief Yvo de Boer's worst fear that the UN body will be akin to "the little orchestra on the Titanic".

The main outcome from the talks is the Copenhagen Accord, a political agreement struck between just four nations, the US, China, India and South Africa, with some degree of involvement from Brazil, Ethiopia and apparently the tacit approval of G20 nations. The accord does offer a step forward compared to where we were before Copenhagen – the biggest emitters did at least make a level of commitment to each other on emissions reduction for the first time and a broad outline for how they would go about it. This doesn't bridge the divide between developed and developing countries, but they have closed the gap to the narrowest it's been.

But the failure of the 193-nation-strong UNFCCC Council of the Parties to adopt that accord – and to 'note' it, or do little more than recognise its existence - is a sign that there is still much to be resolved in how we go forward from here to a wider field of effective global action.

It leaves an awkward question: Did the Copenhagen Accord come about because of the UNFCCC, or in spite of it?

The inconvenient truth may be the latter. There are already predictions that the most substantial international agreement to peak emissions in the next decade or so and head towards a mid-century goal will be struck outside the UN – given how hard it will be to get 193 nations to all sign on to something so complex and laden with competing national self-interest.

The fact that there has been so little progress on reconciling the fundamental treaty question of whether to expand Kyoto or pursue a new more inclusive treaty drawing in the US and the developing world, or some combination of both, says a lot. This lack of fundamental progress goes back a long way, further than Bali two years ago. The 'long-term co-operative action' (LCA) process set up to try and reconcile Kyoto with those nations outside its commitments has been working on the issues going back to at least 2006.

After all that, it's clear the US won't commit to the binds of the Kyoto Protocol or anything similar. And neither will China, it seems, given its tough stand against the type of international monitoring, reporting and verification ([MRV](#)) requirements that underpin Kyoto. We shouldn't be surprised. It's not unlike the history of the UN at all really over the past 65 years. It's proved very difficult to agree collective decisive action to prevent wars or other human and environmental catastrophes in this forum. Of course, in many cases that's because they go before the Security Council where the major powers retain a permanent veto.

There may be no formal veto mechanisms like this at the UNFCCC – but there might as well be. The reality is that at the UN there is now a de facto 'Climate Council' of two – China and the US. By virtue of their economic size, the volume of their emissions and share of global emissions, they have the power of veto over any global climate action. And they have just exercised it at Copenhagen. It's clear no collective action was possible and nothing will be possible without US and China agreeing to it. This means the shape of future collective climate action will largely be laid down by these two nations, with perhaps some influence being exerted by Europe, India, Japan and a few other major emitters.

Some NGOs have said triumphantly in the Copenhagen aftermath that the 'noting' of the accord shows that big nations can't just dictate global agreements without broader support from the wider community of smaller nations. That might be right. But, unfortunately, this won't stop the big nations, they are more likely in future to just go ahead and act without them.

As a result, the future landscape of international climate action now looks more like being a hotchpotch of uneven multilateral and bilateral agreements struck outside the UNFCCC. Where the real meaningful action is agreed between a small number of nations with the majority of the emissions. After all, the US and China account for almost half the world's

emissions and the G20 and 16-nation Major Economies Forum (MEF) for 90 per cent or more. Under this scenario, out the window would go the Kyoto principle of common and differentiated responsibilities.

International trade negotiations have already gone the same way, with a world trade agreement long stalled and bilateral free trade agreements proliferating in recent years. UNFCCC secretariat chief Yvo de Boer some time back raised this possibility as his worst-case scenario in an interview with the Guardian's George Monbiot: "Copenhagen is a very clear deadline that I think we need to meet, and I am afraid that if we don't then the process will begin to slip, and like in the trade negotiations, one deadline after the other will not be met, and we sort of become the little orchestra on the Titanic."

The inequities for people across the developing world in how trade liberalisation is panning out are a sobering omen for the climate change response; US-China technology deals, US-Brazil forest accords, and like the war in Iraq, perhaps more 'coalitions of the willing' with smaller nations told they can take it or leave it.

There are already signs of this beyond the accord we saw at Copenhagen. US climate legislation is at this stage envisaging a two-tier international approach on deforestation. This suggests big bilateral avoided deforestation programmes with Brazil and Indonesia – the US focusing on big payments for preserving their forests in return for billions of offset credits in can count as emissions reductions at home. Smaller forest nations wouldn't be dealt out completely but there would be different rules and likely a more piecemeal or smaller-scale approach.

There may be more of this to come, like technology transfer agreements between the US and China. The UN climate convention may be relegated to a subordinate role supplying the nuts and bolts on international climate programmes that tie in smaller countries for their share of help on things like adaptation, technology transfer and [REDD](#). It is far too soon to tell exactly how things pan out, of course, Copenhagen has been over for only a few days. But a battle is set to play out from here between the forces of broad and narrow international action and we may still not be much the wiser on the at this time in 2010.

Ian Hamilton, Carbon Positive

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