Clearing up Copenhagen’s confusion

The “Copenhagen Accord” that emerged from December’s global climate meetings in Denmark received rather mixed reviews, and China shouldered much of the blame for the supposed failure to reach a more detailed and ambitious agreement. Accurately assessing the merit of the agreement, and whether China played a constructive or obstructive role, was difficult because of the volume of political rhetoric and blame shifting that occurred during and immediately after the talks. (Simply keeping track of the day-to-day movements of negotiations among dozens of countries, at an event attended by 45,000 people, was an almost impossible task.) Now that the dust has settled, it is clear that the Copenhagen talks did produce important gains in both process and substance, and that China will continue to move ahead on policies to curb energy use and carbon emissions, because such policies serve the nation’s broader developmental goals. But the public-relations black eye that China suffered shows that Beijing still has a big task ahead of it in adapting its diplomatic methods and tactics to its newly enlarged place in the global decision-making arena.

1- What the Copenhagen Accord says

It is true that the Copenhagen Accord fell short of the binding international agreement that most hoped would arise from the Action Plan adopted by the 2007 Bali climate summit (although in fact that plan did not call for a binding agreement – just an “agreed outcome and decision”). But climate negotiators made plain for several months before Copenhagen that only a political pact was achievable, and that much detail would have to be filled in later. The Copenhagen Accord was a crucial political breakthrough: it marked the first time that major world leaders directly negotiated and came to an agreement on this issue. The significance of this political understanding should not be underestimated.

But the Accord went beyond a general agreement in principle and included several substantive results:

- a commitment to keep global temperature increase within 2 degrees Celsius (though without specifying what this would mean in terms of emissions);
- a mechanism for all countries – in particular the major nations that either were not party to the Kyoto Protocol (the United States) or had no mitigation obligations under Kyoto (major developing countries) – to make commitments to curb or reduce emissions;
- a framework for monitoring and review of compliance with those commitments; and

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Copenhagen produced an important political pact, strong emissions reporting requirements, and big new funding pledges...

.. but stronger emissions targets, binding language, and a clear carbon market structure remain to be achieved

China’s new carbon emissions target is a significant advance over its earlier energy-efficiency and renewables goals

- significant new financing commitments. Developed countries pledged US$30 bn in the years 2010-2012, and pledged to mobilize an additional US$100 bn per year by 2020 to help cover developing countries’ costs in implementing climate policies.

Moreover, several big countries made large and unprecedented emissions commitments before the Copenhagen meeting started. The United States for the first time publicly pledged to reduce its annual greenhouse gas emissions, and major developing countries including China, Brazil, Indonesia and India made strong commitments to reduce the rate of growth in their emissions. It is therefore inaccurate to say that the Copenhagen process as a whole failed to produce specific emissions targets from key players.

That said, the Accord leaves plenty of unfinished business. The key outstanding issues are:

- The emissions targets set so far by the US, Europe, Japan and the major developing countries do not add up to the total amount of reductions most scientists believe are necessary to keep global warming within 2 degrees Celsius.

- The Accord requires countries to make emissions commitments by January 31, but we do not yet know how far these will go. Developed countries must submit quantified emissions targets; most likely these will be directly connected to their pre-Copenhagen statements. Developing countries have a somewhat looser requirement to submit “mitigation actions.” We don’t know if these will be the same as their prior announcements of emissions growth rate reductions, or more targeted programs.

- The Accord is not a binding agreement. Many issues – such as international support for efforts in developing countries to curb emissions, adapt to climate change impacts, and prevent deforestation – will require binding language to become operational.

- The lack of a binding treaty also makes it hard to govern a global carbon market. The Accord makes it unclear whether we are moving towards a structured global carbon market, or if carbon markets will be administered on a national or regional (eg European Union) basis.

2- Where does China stand?

China committed to two important policy changes in the weeks surrounding the conference. The first is widely known: before Copenhagen opened, China committed to a 40-45% reduction in carbon intensity (carbon emissions per unit GDP) between 2005 and 2020. This pledge builds on the target in the 11th Five Year Plan (2006-2010) to reduce energy intensity per unit GDP by 20%, and on the renewable energy law which aims to increase renewables to 15% of the nation’s energy mix by 2020.

The explicit carbon pledge entails a suite of policy actions far more sweeping than required by the earlier energy-efficiency and renewables targets. China will have to build systems to track carbon dioxide emissions (rather than just energy content); expand existing policies such as those compelling industrial energy efficiency; impose efficiency or emissions targets on additional sectors such as buildings and transportation; and resolve implementation programs in existing programs. One example of the latter is an amendment to the renewable energy law, passed after Copenhagen meetings, that mandates power grids to buy all electricity generated from wind and solar projects.
China also agreed to more robust emissions reporting. Critics of China’s carbon commitment miss the mark...

...and Todd Stern’s 97% formula lets developed countries off the hook too easily.

The second new commitment, which has received far less attention, was China’s agreement at Copenhagen to publish more information and data about its progress on curbing emissions. The Accord requires that all countries publish their climate change mitigation activities “with provisions for international consultations and analysis.” It also requires countries to publish information on their climate change programs, including greenhouse gas inventories, every two years. This will be a challenge for many developing countries, including China, which have not found it easy to assemble this data and report it regularly. China has published only one official greenhouse gas inventory, and began work on the second over two years ago. Producing this data more frequently will require great logistical effort both in China and in other developing countries. But the payoff will be greatly improved international understanding of what developing countries are doing to mitigate climate change, and improvements in developing countries’ ability to manage their own processes.

3- Let’s ‘do the math’

Much of the debate about the success or failure of Copenhagen, and whether China was helpful or hurtful, revolved around numbers. Three statistics caused particular conflict: China’s own carbon intensity target; US negotiator Todd Stern’s claim that developing countries account for 97% of new carbon emissions; and Europe’s proposal for a 50% reduction in global carbon emissions, and an 80% reduction in developed country emissions, by 2050.

Before the conference, the biggest question was whether China’s target of reducing carbon intensity per unit GDP by 40-45% between 2005 and 2020 was really a big deal. Critics said the target simply continues China’s historic trend of gradually reduced carbon intensity, and noted that even if it were met, China’s absolute emissions could double in the 15-year period, thanks to fast GDP growth. However, the expert group that has studied China’s energy structure the most systematically and for the longest time – the China Energy Group at Lawrence Berkeley National Laboratory – believes the goal is a strong one that will require substantial new action. “Achieving the goal,” the group wrote in a statement, “will require that China enhances and expands programs and investments in energy-efficient and low-carbon technologies and measures at the national, provincial, and local levels.”

Once the conference got underway, US negotiator Todd Stern attracted international press attention by asserting that 97% of additional carbon emissions in future will come from developing countries, and urging his audience to “do the math.” His implication was that simple arithmetic demonstrated that developing countries should bear the major burden for reducing emissions. The number sounds compelling, until we “do the math.” Stern’s calculation takes each country’s current emissions as a baseline, and considers only emissions above that baseline. This conveniently ignores that almost 50% of current emissions come from the developed world, which accounts for less than 20% of the world’s population. Since virtually all developed countries have committed to absolute reductions in carbon emissions, Stern’s arithmetic declares that virtually none of developed countries’ future emissions count as “additional” emissions. This is technically true – but also irrelevant. All emissions affect the global environment equally – regardless of whether they are current or “additional.” So the focus should be on total emissions, not “additional” emissions above some arbitrary baseline. Many in developing countries as well as in the climate justice...
United States commitments to emissions reductions fall far short of the minimum suggested by scientific consensus

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movement argue that since the problem is a global one, the whole world’s population should share the burden of controlling carbon emissions.

Just how that burden should be divvied up is a matter of debate. At Copenhagen, China reiterated its position that developed countries should reduce their emissions by 40% relative to 1990 – the high end of the 25-40% range that the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) calculates is needed to ensure the global temperature rise is held to within 2 degrees. My colleagues at the World Resources Institute (WRI) estimate the developed country pledges at Copenhagen would reduce those countries’ emissions by 13-19% below 1990 levels – well below the IPCC minimum. Among major countries the US is the furthest from the IPCC minimum. Chinese officials calculated that Obama’s pre-Copenhagen commitment of a 17% reduction from 2005 levels works out to a reduction of just 1% from 1990 levels by 2020. Stern responded that the true figure was 6% – higher than the Chinese figure but still well short of the IPCC minimum. Neither government specified which gases or sectors they counted. My WRI colleagues estimate that, excluding reforestation and changes in land use patterns, Obama’s pledge amounts to a 3% reduction from 1990 levels by 2020.

This leads to the third numerical dispute, around the European proposal that the Accord enshrine two hard targets: a 50% reduction in global emissions in 2050, from the 1990 level; and an 80% reduction in emissions by the developed countries during the same period. Since these targets place a much heavier burden of reduction on developed countries, why did China object so strenuously to this formula? Again we need to do the math. In 1990 global emissions of CO₂ were approximately 21m metric tons. Thus a global reduction of 50% would give the world a total allowance of 10.5m metric tons in 2050. In 1990, developed countries emitted 15m metric tons of CO₂, so an 80% reduction would give them an allowance of 3m metric tons in 2050, or almost 30% of total emissions. Fair? Not necessarily. Today the developed world comprises less than one-fifth of the world’s population, and by 2050 that share is projected to fall to one-eighth.

Thus the 50/80 proposal means that, on a per capita basis, developed countries would still be allowed to emit more than double the amount of CO₂ permitted to developing countries in 2050. Developing countries have opposed this formula for years, because it locks them permanently into lower per capita emissions. China, however, has always based its own opposition to this formula not on per capita emissions calculations but on a claim about historic responsibility derived from the 1992 climate change treaty: that because most of the CO₂ now in the atmosphere was put there by developed countries, developed countries should bear the burden of reduction.

China’s reluctance to focus on per capita emissions is understandable: its own are rising rapidly. In 1990, China ranked 101st in the world in CO₂ emissions; today it ranks 66th. (By contrast India moved from 117th in 1990 to 121st today.) The International Energy Agency projects that China’s per capita emissions will exceed the global average by 2020.

4- A new world order?

The most dramatic image to come out of Copenhagen was the picture of who was in the room when the deal was cut. The New York Times front page photograph of Barack Obama with the leaders of China, India, Brazil and South Africa (the self-labeled BASIC countries) crystallized a shift in the dynamics of global decision making. As recently as July 2009, these latter four
Europe’s failure to get into the final room reflects its inability to pick a single spokesman.

China faces a problem in international diplomacy because its leaders are bureaucrats, not politicians.

China looked good coming in, and bad coming out.

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countries (along with Mexico) were relegated to the second tier in the “G-8 plus five,” where they were the “plus” not the “G.” The G-8 then officially disbanded when the September 2009 G-20 summit in Pittsburgh agreed that all 20 countries would act as the world’s core coordination team. Twenty, however, is too large a number for effective negotiation. In practice a smaller group will be required, and the parties in the deal-room at Copenhagen are likely to be core members of that smaller group.

The odd one out was Europe, which contributed half the members of the old G-8 but was absent from the final table at Copenhagen. In reality, Europe was deeply involved in the negotiations that led to the Accord – there were many rooms, so it was often hard to say who was “in the room” – but the final impression that Europe was left on the sidelines is significant.

This sequence suggests several conclusions about global power relations. First, contrary to the claim that Obama allowed himself to be bullied by the Chinese, at the end of the day it was Obama who made the deal happen. Next, while the Europeans played a large role in crafting the accord, their failure to be included in the final picture symbolizes an erosion of influence due to Europe’s constitutional inability to settle on a single representative to articulate a unified position. Finally, for all the hype about the rise of the developing country powers such as Brazil, India and China – and make no mistake, that rise is real – these countries do not trust each other very much and have great difficulty in establishing common ground. Because of their diversity of interests, they cannot pick a single representative; but they are all important enough to be included at the decision-making table. That these countries were unable to make progress until Obama came in to negotiate directly bespeaks the continuing importance of the American role in global decision-making.

Copenhagen also exposed some severe challenges for China’s diplomacy. As Ken Lieberthal of the Brookings Institution pointed out, the climate summit pushed China into a far more visible position than it is used to, and forced it to negotiate rapidly and to move beyond prepared positions in a way that it had never done before, causing visible discomfort in the delegation. A crucial point is that the leaders of the US, the EU and the other BASIC countries are politicians, whereas Chinese leaders are bureaucrats. Leaders brought up in the rough and tumble of electoral politics are used to facing harsh public criticism and cutting deals on the fly; Chinese leaders inhabit a more formal bureaucratic culture where public criticism is unknown and decisions are made by a slow consensus-driven process. As China becomes part of the central global political group, demands will increase for it to develop a more flexible, more political and less bureaucratic approach to international negotiations.

5- Losing the PR war

A final issue is why China looked so good coming into the meeting and so bad coming out of it. In the six months before the summit, China’s public relations strategy looked deft. Its aggressive demands for strong commitments by developed countries alternated with announcements of the Chinese government’s energy-efficiency policies and Chinese companies’ investments in clean energy technology. Commentators led by the New York Times’ Thomas Friedman repeatedly asserted that China “got it” and the United States risked being left behind.
Yet by the time Todd Stern arrived in Copenhagen, the news cycle turned against China. The international press quickly picked up on Stern’s 97% sound-bite. The Chinese delegation reacted with an indignation that began to look ham-handed. Instead of picking apart the logic of Stern’s comments, Chinese negotiators fell back on ad hominem attacks, suggesting the US negotiator “lacked common sense,” and that Western countries that had not reduced their own emissions “had no right” to speak about other countries. Over the following two weeks the atmospheres failed to improve, and even though summit produced an agreement, the Economist called the Chinese “churlish,” the Guardian alleged that China had “wrecked” the accord, and much of the media laid Copenhagen’s “failure” at China’s door.

What went wrong with China’s public diplomacy? The problem was not a lack of effort. China’s delegation was enormous – as many as 150 members, according to some reports. The delegation included the usual negotiators and experts from the National Development and Reform Commission (NDRC) and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, a few other ministers and their academic advisors, and a fairly large public affairs team that for the first time ran a pavilion with regular talks and press conferences.

But China’s media strategy was a last-minute, first-time effort. The young people manning the pavilion were eager to please, taking name cards and sending out notices, but they also hadn’t thought about how to handle the press. Press conferences were open to all regardless of press credentials, with no effort made to identify and cultivate the top journalists. NDRC Director General Su Wei’s first press conference was mobbed, and a number of leading international journalists couldn’t get in. As a result most of the international audience never came back to the pavilion, which was at the very far reaches of the conference center. The Chinese delegation did hold a few press conferences in the main press center, but these tended to get caught up in debates about detail, and China was unable to present the big-picture story about its energy and environment strategy.

Part of the problem was inflexibility. China came to Copenhagen with a predetermined message about its domestic policy, and this message didn’t change. But international negotiations are fast-moving, and the media is hungry for new stories – in particular stories on the negotiations themselves, rather than the parties’ opening positions. The Chinese found themselves unable to move fast enough to craft subtle messages and crisp sound-bites for the 24-hour news cycle. China’s “green development” strategy came off sounding like yesterday’s news, and its comments on the negotiations were purely defensive.

Yet we should recognize that China’s PR failings were just that – failures of public relations, not failures of commitment. China signed the Accord, and did so because it believes that improving energy efficiency and reducing carbon emissions – and developing the new technologies required to meet those goals – are in China’s national developmental interest. Immediately after the climate summit ended, China beefed up its renewable energy law, and this year will see the setting of new and possibly more ambitious energy efficiency and renewables targets for the 12th five year plan (2011-2015). Much work still needs to be done to transform Copenhagen’s political agreement into an effective global carbon-reduction regime. In that process, China looks to be a willing but tough-minded partner.