



Capping Carbon in Copenhagen: Responsible U.S. Engagement

Introduction

"The scientific community has reached a strong consensus regarding the science of global climate change. The world is undoubtedly warming, and the warming is largely the result of emissions of carbon dioxide and other greenhouse gases from human activities" The Pew Center on Global Climate Change.

In December 2009, nations will gather in Copenhagen, Denmark for the 15th Conference of the Parties [COP-15] of the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change [UNFCCC]. The overall goal as stated by the UNFCCC is, "to establish an ambitious global climate agreement for the period from 2012." The Framework Convention on Climate Change consists of 192 countries, including the United States and China. All parties meet once a year in a Conference of Parties. Since the first commitment period of the Kyoto Protocol will end in 2012, a new Climate Change agreement will need to have been negotiated immediately. Therefore, the goal of the Copenhagen conference is to establish an new agreement to stabilize greenhouse gases in the atmosphere in order to prevent dangerous climate changes in the future. The Obama Administration clearly stated that the United States is willing to do its part to combat the problem of climate change. President Obama stated,

As the world's largest per capita emitter, most vibrant economy, and technological leader, the United States must assert leadership to fight global warming both at home and abroad. By adopting an aggressive cap on domestic emissions, the U.S. can begin to confront the problem while recapturing the moral authority to lead the world toward an effective and equitable solution. While the United States must lead, we must ensure that China, India, Brazil and all our major trading partners also move quickly to confront this shared global challenge.

Convincing U.S. officials to work productively with progressive goals in the negotiations is the critical first step toward building bipartisan support within the U.S. for eventual ratification of the agreement. Ideally, the Copenhagen Protocol will function effectively, be ratified by the United States, and will be designed to ensure nations comply with their commitments.

The Climate as a Global Responsibility

Over the past century, the United States and other wealthy countries have emitted a disproportionate amount of the greenhouse gases that cause global warming. By contrast, developing countries face enormous burdens to adapt to the impacts, despite being the least historically responsible for climate change. The United States should act immediately to reduce its emissions in order to limit those impacts. Yet, even with significant emissions reductions, the impact on impoverished countries will be severe, and the United States must stand on principle to assist those countries and communities that are most vulnerable and least able to adapt to the consequences of climate change. Climate change is also likely to destabilize countries and it puts the world at risk of entering wars over resources.

A balanced agreement between developed and developing countries is more important than ever. The Copenhagen Protocol must contain terms that vary by country but still contain the same great goal. In

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2007, China overtook the United States as the world's largest emitter of greenhouse gases. Political advisor, and climate expert, Simon Tay said in reference to Asia:

"No matter how deep the cuts are in the developed world, no matter how much they try to mitigate climate change, every good thing that is done there could easily be offset, and more, by rapid unsustainable growth in Asia."

Disagreements between rich and poor countries contributed to the stalling of the Kyoto Protocol of 1997. In Copenhagen, it is in the best interest of wealthier, developed nations to work with rapidly growing nations with emerging economies, to promote sustainable growth. Climate experts fear that poor countries will do nothing to limit their emissions unless wealthy countries pay for the development of clean technology and hold back their own emissions.

Developing countries will need to adapt water systems and agricultural techniques, reduce vulnerability to extreme weather events, cope with new and exacerbated disease vectors, and address increased migration and conflict. Studies by the World Bank assess a more complete range of additional impact costs and estimate costs of adaptation in developing countries to be at least \$50 billion a year.

Climate Change as an Opportunity for Strengthening the U.S.-China Relationship

A positive diplomatic relationship between the U.S. and China will help the Copenhagen Protocol work efficiently and deliver improved results. During Secretary of State Clinton's February, 2009 trip to China, the Conference was discussed. The Chinese stated,

Strengthening cooperation on climate change is in the interest of the two countries and conducive to our two nations contributing to international climate change cooperation. We would like to work with the US to make concrete progress on this issue.

A common understanding between the two countries to work together in Copenhagen increases the chances of pragmatic and effective worldwide climate goals being reached. The Chinese benefit from American consumerism and the U.S. can assist China by providing "green technology", promoting sustainable growth, renewable energy, low-carbon technology, and low-emissions coal technologies. Despite the economic downturn in both countries, China and the U.S. are eager to focus on climate change.

Conclusion

President Obama recognizes the challenge of the changing climate and the potential for the United States to lead the world through this struggle. A high level U.S. delegation must engage the U.S. in the preparatory process prior to Copenhagen. Members of Congress must consistently participate in the delegation. The U.S. should pass early legislation to address U.S. climate change as a prerequisite for U.S. global leadership in Copenhagen. Otherwise, climate change will continue to negatively impact the world's ecosystem unless nations commit to a worldwide solution.

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