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In Copenhagen

ANDERSON'S NOTEBOOK: What Can We Make of the Copenhagen Accord?

WASHINGTON, D.C.—Perhaps the outcome was metaphorically clear long before the final tumultuous hours of the Copenhagen conference.

A week ago, a crowd three times the capacity of the conference site, all on approved attendance lists, began to press for entry. The chaotic scenes were viewed worldwide. In retrospect, perhaps it was no more possible to draft a truly global climate agreement capacious enough for the aspirations of 193 disparate nations than to shoehorn the entire COP-15 community into Copenhagen's Bella Center.

The twenty-year-old, United Nations-mediated Framework Convention on Climate Change process is inclusive; you have to say that much for it. But like other U.N. and World Trade Organization efforts, it foundered on its inclusivity.

A group of about 30 developed and large developing nations rammed through the short Accord that saved the Copenhagen conference from complete failure. This coalition, representing the 15 percent of attending nations that are responsible for almost all human-induced warming, had to carry the ball—and will have to in the future, perhaps as they did late Friday night outside the U.N. framework when they agreed to the Copenhagen Accord.

The irony is that if this occurs, the low-lying island states, the poorest nations with fewest resources to cope with impending climate change, and the giant emerging economies in the tropics with large forest carbon "sinks," all will fare as well or better than they did in the inclusive U.N. process.

The three-page (five if you include the currently blank Appendix of countries' 2020 emissions reduction targets), last-minute Copenhagen Accord included no agreement to limit global temperature increase to 2 de-

grees C (much less 1.5 degrees C), no deadline for concluding a legally binding agreement, no clear greenhouse gas emissions reduction targets, no universal requirement for monitoring and verifying emissions reductions performance, no emissions peaking deadlines, no limits on bunker fuel use . . . the list goes on. And over the past two days, it has been repeated (by BNA) and in the world media, engendering a sense that Copenhagen fell dismally short on its key goals.

Hopeful Signs for the Future. Yet while these shortfalls cannot be denied, the conference still achieved what it set out to do in other important respects—and produced, in addition, some serendipitous outcomes that bode well for climate progress in the near future.

Take the way the Copenhagen Accord was created, for example. In the end about 30 major nations worked out the deal. But they were catalyzed to act by an unusual and volatile combination of five collaborating countries.

I wrote in my first entry (Monday, Dec. 14) about how China had begun to negotiate seriously. It is extraordinary that the core playmakers that made any agreement at all possible at Copenhagen were the United States and China, with Brazil, India, and South Africa in the mix. Could anyone have seen this coming? I think not.

Another 20 or more countries worked on the accord as well, but the playmakers were this unlikely admixture of the largest two emitters, emerging mega- and tropical-forested economies, and (without naming names) former "bad boys" of earlier attempts to initiate a global climate solution.

Throughout the conference, China was alternately tough, dogmatic, flexible, proud, and humorous. It fought off almost all attempts to "internationalize" climate accountability. According to reliable accounts, it showed no sympathy behind closed doors for the goal of 1.5 degrees C total warming sought by the developing nations (especially the Africa Group) it publicly courted. But China did propose an intensity-based reduction of greenhouse gas emissions and, in the end, agreed to a more transparent international review of its

progress than I thought possible as recently as one week ago.

As a result it is harder now for Senators opposed to climate legislation to cite the intransigence of China and other large developing nations to support their arguments. China, India, Brazil, and other large developing nations have a long way to go, but so does the United States, and the domestic debate can now focus more clearly on defining the U.S. role.

Deal May Benefit Obama. Looked at in a certain light, President Obama benefits, on the one hand, from his highly visible role in saving any deal at all at Copenhagen, and, on the other, from the failure of the ambitious agreement envisioned two years ago that would have put him on the defensive, trying to explain why he could not promise more from the United States because he could not preempt Congress in setting national climate policy.

The Accord acknowledges climate as “one of the greatest challenges of our time” and agrees that “deep cuts . . . with a view to reduce global emissions by 50 percent in 2050 below 1990 levels” are necessary. But it also places heavy emphasis on self-determination and sovereignty, national rather than international responsibility, and mitigation measures that are appropriate to the varying circumstances of each of the world’s nations.

In this spirit, the President can turn to Congress now and ask that we first tend to climate housekeeping here at home before re-entering the international arena and demanding more of others.

A small serendipity that should not go unnoticed: during the 2008 presidential campaign, voters mulled over the prospect of a Democratic ticket with both Barack Obama and Hillary Clinton on it. The *New York Times* has reported that in the stressful last few hours, when the Accord seemed destined to fail, the President and his Secretary of State dramatically “barged into” a secret meeting of China, Brazil, and India and demanded that no such meetings take place. I found it interesting to imagine the dialogue between these two former political adversaries as they formed a working combo determined to get from Copenhagen what they came for.

An Accord ‘Noted.’ Five countries, assisted by about two-dozen more, cobbled the poorly worded, brief Accord together and presented it in the nick of time to the plenary session of the conference. The delegates chose, however, merely to “note” its existence and even that small recognition was a near thing.

The risk to the entire Copenhagen process had existed from the start, as I discussed in my first entry last Monday. The Group of 77 developing countries, which actually numbers almost twice that, criticized the Accord’s proponents for negotiating in secret, failing to set aggressive binding goals for emissions controls adequate to lower average temperature increases to 2 C or the better 1.5 C, and for not strengthening the Kyoto Protocol for developed nations.

A good deal of speculation has already occurred over the status of the parties’ decision merely to “note” the Accord. U.N. Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon let it be known that his view is that “take note of” and “accept” are nearly identical in legal terms. But perhaps the best way to view the Accord is that it is fortunate that its status is vague and has no stated authorship or a formal

process for endorsement or accession. It can be viewed as a kind of open invitation to move beyond “noting” its existence to endorsement as the days and weeks pass, however a nation may choose to express its approval.

No climate summit with aspirations as grand as Copenhagen’s will likely ever occur again. But the open-ended nature of the Accord, the feeling of unfinished business among a wide swath of climate blocs, and the ready availability of forums in which the unfinished Copenhagen agenda can be pursued, all suggest it is not over yet for the U.N. process.

A U.N. climate meeting might occur in Bonn, Germany (where the UNFCCC is based) perhaps as early as March or April 2010, but certainly in early June, and perhaps back in the Bella Center in Copenhagen.

The next COP, the 16th Conference of the Parties, will occur in mid-November of next year in Mexico City and the next in South Africa in 2011. The Accord asks for a review in far-off 2015, but somehow I doubt that this review will be as telling as commitments and events in the intervening years.

Country Emissions Targets to Come in January. The very first, and in some ways the most telling, action to follow up on the Accord will take place right away, in January: countries must set out in an Appendix the range of emission reductions targets they will undertake up to 2020.

For the United States, for example, this means President Obama’s 17 percent greenhouse gas emissions reduction target and presumably the very large financial commitments the United States has made to help fund adaptation, green tech transfer, and capacity-building in the poorest of developing countries.

India, whose pivotal role in ensuring the success of the Accord is just becoming clearer, affords another example. Presumably India will list its energy intensity goal and significant commitments to solar energy, energy efficiency, and forest protection.

Financing Stands as Accord’s Greatest Achievement. To this point I have not mentioned what certainly must stand as the greatest achievement of the Accord reached in Copenhagen: financing to help the poorest nations respond to the effects of climate change-induced droughts, floods, famine, crop losses, and especially deforestation and forest degradation.

Despite the acrimony of the last hours of the conference, the Accord does include an apparatus for addressing the effects of climate change in the poorest nations: a Copenhagen Green Climate Fund to help gather and administer the fast-start \$30 billion of aid in the period to 2012, building to \$100 billion a year by 2020; a High-level Panel to encourage and collect on promises of these funds from developed nations; and a Technology Mechanism to accelerate tech transfer.

Think of the Accord’s financial assistance mechanisms as the working toolbox of a humanitarian commitment that is arguably the one singular, definite achievement of Copenhagen. Coupled with it is also a commitment to assist with technology transfer and building adequate institutional capacity so that nations can develop “de-carbonized” sustainable economies while simultaneously adapting to potential climate-induced alterations in their natural environments. There is an obvious analogy to the U.S. stimulus program, but funded by a wide array of developed nations

with both public and private sectors mobilized to combat these daunting challenges.

There are many details to be worked out, certainly. The Accord could only assert that the sponsors would get the money, somehow: it will “come from a wide variety of sources, public and private, bilateral and multi-lateral, including alternative sources of finance.”

Work on REDD Stands Out. Among these measures, one set in particular occupies a special place because of the extensive work already done to realize its goal: protecting the climate by reducing the effects of deforestation and degradation (REDD) in heavily forested developing nations such as Brazil and Indonesia and pursuing forest conservation (the “REDD-plus” mentioned in the Accord).

The United States, Norway, France, Japan, Australia, and the United Kingdom already have made large financial commitments at the prodding of a well-organized NGO effort. A strong motivation of developed-nation contributors to REDD is to encourage least-cost carbon reductions globally by permitting the purchase of forest carbon sequestration to offset industrial emissions, the much-discussed “offsets strategy” often included in cap-and-trade proposals.

Yet offsets were not mentioned by name in the Accord. It merely endorsed use of “various” cost-reducing approaches without specifying any by name, “including opportunities to use markets.”

No Fast-Action Agenda for Non-Carbon Emissions. It seems almost unpardonable to save to the very last the troublesome fact that Copenhagen did nothing concrete

to address the scientific challenge and may have taken a step backward from addressing the warnings of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change.

This means that the group of thirty nations, or the U.N. process, or perhaps the 17-nation Major Economies Forum must face the scientific facts of climate risk and catastrophic “tipping points” or the elaborate international political effort will have been for naught.

Last Tuesday I addressed a way, a Fast Action Agenda, to buy time for politics to work.

A Fast Action Agenda is one more thing the Copenhagen Accord failed to include. An effort to address the forgotten 50 percent of climate forcing not due entirely to carbon dioxide emissions could buy up to a decade for the domestic laws such as cap-and-trade to begin to work.

To make this happen, though, the Montreal and Kyoto Protocols would need to be built into the new plans that follow on the Accord.

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