

Interim Deal?

Written by Rodger A Payne

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RODGER A PAYNE, NOV 13 2009

The Copenhagen climate summit is now less than one month away and observers are not optimistic that states will agree to a deal cementing either specific greenhouse gas emission reductions or increased environmental assistance to the developing world so they can meet the standards without threatening growth vital to fighting poverty.

Last month, Danish Prime Minister Lars Loekke Rasmussen, who will be hosting the conference, outlined an interim agreement that states could embrace to prevent the Copenhagen conference from ending in failure. Today, the *Washington Post* provides the sketchy details:

“political commitments” from key nations outlining their targets to reduce their own greenhouse gas emissions as well as the amount of money richer countries will spend to help developing nations adapt to global warming and curb their own emissions. Such an approach could provide the incentive for major developing economies such as China and India — both of whose leaders Obama will meet this month — to sign onto an international climate agreement, according to experts.

It is now clear that the U.S. won't be able to point to successful domestic legislation as evidence of its own commitment to action. The Senate bill promised by John Kerry (D), Lindsay Graham (R) and Joe Lieberman (I) hasn't even been drafted yet. Likewise, though EPA regulations are moving steadily through the regulatory system, David Roberts of *grist* succinctly explains why they should not be viewed as inevitable. At some point, Congress has to provide financing and “there are probably more than 60 senators hostile to EPA regs.”

The U.S. commitment to Copenhagen remains a major question mark despite President Obama's rhetoric over the past 18 months. Given recent political developments, it would appear as if the U.S. is running out of excuses. For example, Washington has long opposed the Kyoto Protocol because developing country economic competitors were exempted from the emissions reductions. As a result, American negotiators have said they require commitments from those states. Well, it now appears that China, India and other major developing states are willing to make those cuts. The BBC quotes South Africa's Alf Wills, who co-ordinates the G77/China bloc:

“China has published a five-year plan, India has published proposals, as has Brazil – and a few weeks ago Indonesia said it would cut the rate of growth of emissions by 40%, doing 26% of that by itself (without outside aid),” he said.

Then again, the U.S. might remain dissatisfied with the details of these plans. China plans primarily to reduce the carbon intensity of its development — it will be more energy efficient and thus reduce emissions over what they would be. India says it will not allow per capita emissions to exceed developed country standards. Given its current relatively low per capita emissions, that is not a significant concession. Of course, India's framing helps clarify the key issue. The average American is responsible for 17 times as much emissions as the average resident of India.

Over the past few months, this blog has been fairly pessimistic describing the run-up to Copenhagen. At this point, it appears as if the most optimistic hope is for a weak interim deal that might be surpassed next year by a stronger agreement.

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