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Making Sausage

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RODGER A PAYNE, MAY 23 2012

Two years ago, Der Spiegel published an audio recording of secret negotiations involving many of the world's most important leaders meeting together on Friday, December 18, 2009, during the Copenhagen climate summit:

The world's most powerful politicians were gathered in the "Arne Jacobsen" conference room in Copenhagen's Bella Center, negotiating ways to protect the world's climate. US President Barack Obama was perched on the edge of a wooden chair with blue upholstery, talking to German Chancellor Angela Merkel and British Prime Minister Gordon Brown. The blue turban of Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh was bobbing over the tops of a few hastily assembled potted plants. The meeting was soon dubbed the "mini-summit of the 25."

Ethiopian Prime Minister Meles Zenawi was there, representing the African continent, and Mexican President Felipe Calderon was standing nearby. Only one important world leader was missing, an absence that came to symbolize the failure of the climate summit: Chinese Prime Minister Wen Jiabao…

Now, for the first time, SPIEGEL is in a position to reconstruct the decisive hour-and-a-half meeting on that fateful Friday. Audio recordings of historical significance, in the form of two sound files that total 1.2 gigabytes in size and that were created by accident, serve as the basis for the analysis. The Copenhagen protocol shows how the meeting Gordon Brown called "the most important conference since the Second World War" ended in a diplomatic zero.

This video includes many of the most important sound snippets, accompanied by photos of the speakers and some important contextual information.

Der Spiegel's online version of the article includes key quotations from the meeting. Essentially, European leaders like Angela Merkel and Gordon Brown were urging their colleagues to come to an agreement about both near-term and long-term reductions in greenhouse gas emissions. Asian negotiators, including top Chinese diplomat He Yafei, argued against the sizable emissions reductions target under discussion (50%), even though "Norwegian Prime Minister Jens Stoltenberg pointed out that it was the Indians who had proposed the inclusion of concrete emissions reductions for the industrialized nations in the treaty."

European leaders and China's negotiator Yafei had a surprisingly tense back-and-forth exchange that nicely summarize some of the most important international politics undergirding the climate change debate. The western leaders accused the Chinese of seeking double standards, wanting to free ride on environmental commitments made by the affluent states:

The words suddenly burst out of French President Nicolas Sarkozy: "I say this with all due respect and in all friendship." Everyone in the room, which included two dozen heads of state, knew that he meant precisely the opposite of what he was saying. "With all due respect to China," the French president continued, speaking in French.

The West, Sarkozy said, had pledged to reduce greenhouse gas emissions by 80 percent. "And in return, China, which will soon be the biggest economic power in the world, says to the world: Commitments apply to you, but not to us."

Sarkozy, gaining momentum, then said: “This is utterly unacceptable!” And then the French president stoked the diplomatic conflict even further when he said: “This is about the essentials, and one has to react to this hypocrisy!”

Angela Merkel also joined into the fray, by referencing the scientific evidence necessitating that China join a binding agreement for significant emissions reductions:

Merkel took one last stab. The reduction of greenhouse gases by 50 percent, that is, limiting global warming to 2 degrees Celsius, was a reference to what is written in the IPCC (Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change) report. Then she directed a dramatic appeal at the countries seeking to block the treaty: “Let us suppose 100 percent reduction, that is, no CO2 in the developed countries anymore. Even then, with the (target of) two degrees, you have to reduce carbon emissions in the developing countries. That is the truth.”

China’s negotiator, He Yafei was unmoved, and placed the blame for climate change — as well as the responsibility to act — squarely on the shoulders of affluent states:

The Chinese negotiator… took on the French president’s gaffe, and said: “I heard President Sarkozy talk about hypocrisy. I think I’m trying to avoid such words myself. I am trying to go into the arguments and debate about historical responsibility.”

He Yafei decided to give the group a lesson in history: “People tend to forget where it is from. In the past 200 years of industrialization developed countries contributed more than 80 percent of emissions. Whoever created this problem is responsible for the catastrophe we are facing.”

Seeking to break the impasse, U.S. President Barack Obama spoke pragmatically about the need for action from both the advanced economies and the large developing states (India and China).

“From the perspective of the developed countries, in order for us to be able to mobilize the political will within each of our countries to not only engage in substantial mitigation efforts ourselves, which are very difficult, but to also then channel some of the resources from our countries into developing countries, is a very heavy lift,” Obama said. Then, speaking directly to China, he added: “If there is no sense of mutuality in this process, it is going to be difficult for us to ever move forward in a significant way.”

However, Obama also suggested in his remarks that the problem need not be addressed in the current meeting since “We will try to give some opportunities for its resolution outside of this multilateral setting.”

Indeed, not long after this meeting, the US, China, India and other players cut a deal involving near-term (2020) emissions reduction targets that countries would set for themselves. This was described by climate activist Bryony Worthington as a “voluntary ‘pledge and review later’ type agreement with minimum enforcement.” Worthington and many other observers thus considered the summit “a spectacular failure on many levels.”

The final deal was made, as *Der Spiegel* notes, without direct input from the Europeans. In other words, the key decisions were not made at the meeting documented in the audio recording. In fact, the high-level mini-summit adjourned at the request of the Chinese negotiator, and the major developing states met separately:

The Indians had reserved a room one floor down, where Prime Minister Singh met with his counterparts, Brazilian President Lula da Silva and South Africa President Jacob Zuma. Wen Jiabao was also there.

Shortly before 7 p.m., US President Obama burst into the cozy little meeting of rising economic powers.

At that meeting, everything that was important to the Europeans was removed from the draft agreement, particularly the concrete emissions reduction targets. Later on, the Europeans — like the other diplomats from all the other powerless countries, who had been left to wait in the plenary chamber — had no choice but to rubberstamp the meager result.

IR scholars rarely have access to this kind of (nearly) real-time “insider” data, though it is telling that virtually all of the world leaders make claims that we would have expected. In that way, this audio recording is like the Wikileaks documents. The evidence reveals what we think we already know about how the sausage is made.

Note: Thanks to Miranda Schreurs (posting on a mailing list) for pointing me to the audio recording.

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*Read more from **Rodger Payne** in his e-IR blog, Climate Politics, IR and the Environment.*

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