

Wikileaks and climate diplomacy

Written by Rodger A Payne

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RODGER A PAYNE, DEC 9 2010

The Guardian website has a portal that allows users to search the Wikileaks database for particular US embassy cables regarding issue areas or specific countries. A search for “climate change” turns up 14 cables — and 4 recent *Guardian* stories about those particular cables.

I read a good sample of the cables and stories and found that they reveal strategies and outcomes that virtually any professor of international relations would expect. The US pushed the Copenhagen accord (abandoning Kyoto/UNFCCC baselines and mandatory emissions reductions) and worked hard to get other countries to agree — or at least mute their criticisms. Given the nearly 1% annual increase in US emissions since the 1990 Kyoto baseline, this is hardly surprising. The US spent more than a decade in opposition to the treaty politically and didn't take any meaningful measures to reduce emissions. Emissions in 2007 were about 20% higher than they were in 1990, though the 2008 recession reduced emissions significantly.

Likewise, IR scholars would not be surprised to learn that a small state like the Maldives is working behind the scenes to garner tens of millions of dollars of assistance to fund projects that would help mitigate the damage from climate change. The US is apparently tempting countries like the Maldives with cash carrots in exchange for their support on Copenhagen.

Predictably, the US (and its allies) worked to “block the election of a well-qualified Iranian climate scientist to a senior post in the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change.”

Here's another non-shocker: Saudi Arabia fears that a successful climate agreement would undermine its revenue stream — and hopes to get abatement credit for carbon capture and storage (CSS).

As is well-known, the United Arab Emirates (UAE) is dealing with the problem in part by serving as the host state for IRENA, the new International Renewable Energy Agency. The Wikileaks cables reveal the politics behind US support for this decision:

The UAE has serious resources to put into the international search for alternative energy sources, and as such, UAE interest in these issues should be seen as an opportunity for the USG [United States government]. Moreover, the UAE is clearly signaling that it wants United States to support its IRENA bid, given UAE support for many of our political, security and financial priorities and the Administration's focus on environmental issues.

The cable continues:

The UAE has been one of our most helpful security partners in the Middle East. UAE troops are in the fight in Afghanistan (in greater numbers and more dangerous places than many NATO Allies); the UAE has cancelled Saddam era debt in Iraq and opened an Embassy; it is perhaps the only Arab country to have fully paid up its dues to the Palestinian Authority; and it has taken a leading role in the Friends of Pakistan initiative. While the UAE has not expressed any direct linkage between any of these initiatives and IRENA, it has clearly signaled that, having been helpful to the USG on a number of issues important to us, it expects the USG to be helpful on an issue of importance to the UAE.

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Wikileaks documents simply demonstrate something IR scholars tell their students all the time. States pursue their own interests and use the power resources at their disposal to achieve those interests when they can. Great powers get what they want much of the time, while smaller and less powerful states have to suffer what they must.

About the author:

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