

PUTTING THE COPENHAGEN FAILURE TO A GOOD USE

The miracle did not happen. The Bella Centre in Copenhagen may have been lucky when the ten EU applicants finalized their accession talks there in 2002 but it proved less fortunate for the global climate talks which ended in complete failure. Given the scale of the effort involved and the massive presence of top officials and their best experts from around the world, Copenhagen produced remarkable little substance. This is not a good sign for the future of global governance.

To be sure, it is not all gloom and doom. It is true to say that the Copenhagen conference was the first of its kind. Never before had there been such an extensive representation of the international community willing to undertake an effort to save the world from the effects of climate change. It was in the context of Copenhagen that the United States committed itself to a thorough, if insufficient, emission reduction programme. The other top polluter, China, also began to use a different language than only a couple of years ago. Progress is real but it is still profoundly unsatisfactory given the scale of the challenge.

It can be argued that tensions within the international system are now bound to increase given that no agreement proved possible on an issue of existential significance for the global community. What is more, a breakthrough at Copenhagen was meant to kick-start the stalled trade liberalization talks and spark interest in the multilateral framework for other policy areas including energy, none of which is now likely to materialize. At the same time there is growing global interdependence exemplified recently by the rapid spreading of the economic crisis.



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Discussing the procedure of the European group of negotiations and the USA for the World Climate Conference during the final night of the UN Climate Change Summit on 18 December 2009 in Copenhagen, Denmark.

A sense of turbulence was bound to happen anyway given the massive shifts of power taking place at the beginning of this century. The international system is becoming assertively multi-polar with enormous demands being placed by a growing number of actors on the resources of a capable few. Copenhagen demonstrated that international relations are unlikely to be driven by mutual persuasion, however well-intentioned. It was aiming at a situation in which more ambitious declarations on emission reductions would encourage all participants to make an effort, if only a symbolic one. This approach underestimated the potential for free-riding which exists inside the system.

If the current framework of global governance runs into the sand, this means its foundations need to be re-examined. The project of saving the planet from

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the impact of climate change is not over. There is a sufficient consensus, in spite of the cynicism and self-interest which won the upper hand in Copenhagen, that the dangerous rise in global temperatures needs to be moderated. However, it is more likely for this to be based on hard economic facts and an interplay of self-interest rather than a moral argument on the necessary thing to do.

Just as the failure of the Doha round of trade negotiations led to renewed focus on regional and bilateral agreements, similarly progress on climate change may now have to materialize more through unilateral declarations and bilateral or regional commitments. This means global governance in this area will be more fragmented and difficult to manage. The probability of a major conflictual situation along the way will increase exponentially as well. Global governance will be about ensuring that the poor are not left out of the picture completely (hence assistance for climate mitigation and adaptation measures in the volume of 100 bln dollars annually till 2020) and that there are rules of the game for others to follow. The most orderly scenario which is now possible involves a G20 or GX-led process in which the key players determine the pace and the scale of the global mitigation and adaptation activities.

The project of limiting global emissions will not be realized in idyllic mutual understanding with a fair division of responsibility. It will be worked out in fierce international competition. We will now have our feet firmly on the ground. It will not be surprising if the debate is re-launched in Europe over the border tax to create a level-playing field for operators from the countries pursuing ambitious climate policy objectives and all the rest. This would at first sight smack of protectionism although arguments would quickly be made that the purpose is more to prevent artificial subsidies being applied in countries such as China while the proceeds would go to the mitigation and adaptation activities in the least developed countries and the small islands states.

The European Union found itself under friendly fire at the end of the Copenhagen conference as the US carried out last-ditch negotiations with leaders of the

emerging powers but not the EU. Partly, this situation was of the EU's own making. The EU was not sufficiently forthcoming towards the US President when he requested a helping hand earlier in the year. The EU also spoke with many voices at Copenhagen, President Sarkozy being the first to make an appeal for a handful of world leaders to stage real negotiations, an advice which President Obama used a day later. In addition, the EU could have and should have declared an emission reduction target of 30 percent by 2020 prior to Copenhagen and this would have given it a mandate to press on others to undertake similar steps.

Having said that, President Obama did not have to make the EU look irrelevant and it is difficult to believe these were his true intentions. The problem is that the EU and the US have the same project on the cards, that of building the low-carbon economy, where interests are only beginning to clash. For the US, it is tempting to pursue a bilateral relationship in China at the expense of the EU. Not surprisingly, the set of agreements between the US and China concluded during President Obama's visit in November raised the adrenaline levels in Europe. The electric vehicle initiative which envisaged joint standardization produced particularly big anxieties. And President Obama faces a hurdle which cannot be compared to anything the European leaders have in stock for themselves – a not entirely convinced Senate which is still to support climate legislation.

The transatlantic relationship will now become more business-like and devoid of undue affection. The EU will have to understand that the US needs time and that it is changing the argument around domestically, embracing climate policy in the place of denial. At the same time, the window of opportunity is narrow given the pressures of US congressional elections later in the year. No doubt the world looks different after Copenhagen. Big illusions are gone and a sense of realism is settling in. The outcome is likely to be more chaotic but not dysfunctional. Key players will want to come to an understanding among themselves. However, they will do so in a decisively more competitive environment.

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