

A Plea for Reason

An IISD Commentary

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This year's first set of international climate change negotiations took place in Bonn, March 29 to April 8, with no real surprises or tangible results. To be fair, none were expected, as this was the first of a series of negotiations (six at the last count) leading up to a possible agreement at Copenhagen by December 2009. Such an agreement, if reached, will play a critical role in defining the international regime on climate change, particularly in setting the global framework for how countries will respond to the current and growing threat of climate change. The big question before this just-completed stage was how much of a difference the profile of the U.S. would play in the negotiations. The short answer: all the difference in the world, thankfully.

Despite the fact that the U.S. had no time to develop any sort of detailed mandate on the myriad of issues under consideration (there are over a hundred issues under some form of negotiation in these international climate change talks) and so were not able to contribute significantly to the substantive discussions, the tenor of their constructive engagement made a real difference. So much so we witnessed for the first time (and probably the last time) a standing ovation by the NGO (non-governmental organizations) community for Jonathan Pershing, senior State Department official, at a briefing held by the U.S. government. This had a spillover effect in most of the negotiating forums as well. No, we did not witness some massive shifts in policy or political positions in these preliminary discussions. But we did see a new attitude, a more positive tone. At this stage of the game, that is probably more important than any progress on the technical issues, because for at least the last nine years these talks have been characterized by acrimony and the blame game.

There was however a powerful exception to this new spirit and it reared its ugly head at the worst of times—the evening of the last day of the meetings. The last item was to cover the conclusions of a somewhat arcane-sounding negotiating group called the Ad Hoc Working Group on Further Commitments for Annex 1 Parties Under the Kyoto Protocol. It's the last phrase (“Annex 1 Parties Under the Kyoto Protocol”) that has made these discussions so difficult. To put it simply, its mandate is to indicate what actions and commitments developed countries will agree to take after 2012 (after the conclusion of the Kyoto Protocol period) to help avoid the serious consequences of climate change. The only problem is that includes everyone but the U.S., since it is the only developed country that did not ratify the Kyoto Protocol. And so we have carried on a discussion now for over two years that, honestly, carries on an Alice in Wonderland quality.

Those developed countries who did agree to targets under the Kyoto Protocol are once again expected to take on even stronger commitments without any assurance that the world's two largest emitters—China and the U.S. (together representing more than 50 per cent of the globe's greenhouse gas emissions)—would be coming aboard, and with what commitments. The result is a sad spectacle where a few developed countries are put under a

magnifying glass of relentless criticism by a long list of developing countries, with everyone fully knowing the serious limitations of an agreement that excluded its more significant economic and industrial “partners.” The negotiations turned especially acrimonious when it became clear that a number of the Annex 1 Parties would reject any indicative reduction target numbers for them going forward in the negotiating text. To most eyes, it looked like this track was going backwards, not forward. So the accusations, unfortunately, started flying. The real clincher was hearing China raking these countries over the coals (pun intended) for playing dice with the global environment, knowing (but certainly not acknowledging) full well that without commensurate actions on their part, the climate change crisis will never be effectively addressed. By the end of the evening, the rhetoric had become so vitriolic some (including this author) became concerned about its spillover effect on other aspects of the negotiations, particularly the negotiating group focusing on “long-term cooperative action under the Convention,” which will be considering actions/commitments on the part of all Parties.

Frankly, the sooner the Ad Hoc Group on the Kyoto Protocol is put to bed, the better for all, but it does not appear developing countries, particularly major developing economies, are keen to let that occur—it helps them ward off increasing pressure to take on international commitments to limit their greenhouse gas emissions. For the sake of the future of these negotiations, these two tracks must be integrated, if not in form, at least in substance. And developed countries must then demonstrate leadership in taking on robust targets immediately with major developing economies showing a willingness to take on policies that benefit their sustainable development priorities, while also effectively addressing the global climate change threat. This is not a developed vs. developing country issue—it is a global matter calling for a level of multilateral cooperation that mirrors the nature of the real and rising threat.

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