

Barcelona Postscript

An IISD Commentary

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November 2009

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In the weeks following Barcelona, the pace of developments has strongly picked up, to the point where major announcements with respect to commitments and policy platforms that parties will be bringing to Copenhagen are being made throughout the day, every day.

The most significant symbolic development is probably the announcement from the United States that it will be bringing forward a greenhouse gas reduction target of 17 per cent below 2005 levels by 2020 and that President Obama will be attending Copenhagen himself on December 9. (It should be noted that President Obama's timing in attending the conference is not in line with when other leaders are planning to attend, some eight or nine days later, on the 17th or 18th of December.) There was some speculation that Obama might not bring forward a target to Copenhagen, since legislation had not yet been approved by the U.S. Senate. Given, though, that the arguments in the Senate are more about how to reach the targets rather than the specific numbers, it is less of a risk for him to bring forward the target than it might otherwise have been.

Within days following the United States' announcement, China announced that Premier Wen Jiabao would also attend Copenhagen and that China would be adopting a carbon-intensity commitment of 40 to 45 per cent off 2005 levels by 2020. While this initially sounds stringent, China has had a similar energy-intensity target in place for awhile, and the new announcement does not mark a huge departure from what the original policy would have meant.

South Korea also announced a 30 per cent reduction from business-as-usual emissions by 2020 (which their government states will be the equivalent of a 4 per cent reduction from 2005 levels). Brazil came forward with a commitment to reductions of 36 to 39 per cent of the emissions that result from reduced deforestation. Brazil and France also came to an agreement on a joint declaration on climate change that includes several items, including a 2050 goal of 80 per cent emission reductions from developed countries.

Russia, historically very conservative on climate change, also came forward with a strengthened target; it has now volunteered a target of 25 per cent below 1990 levels by 2020. While the revised target is within its business-as-usual projections, this proposal, along with a statement from Russia's President Medvedev that refers to the "calamitous" impacts of climate change, represents a seismic shift in Russia's profile in these negotiations.

Leaders of the Commonwealth of Nations met in late November and came to an agreement calling for a \$10 billion fund (annually by 2012) for vulnerable states to fight climate change, of which 10 per cent will be specifically directed to small island states. The major developed countries of the Commonwealth (Britain, Australia, Canada and New Zealand) have all agreed to the \$10 billion figure.

In Australia, the Kevin Rudd–led government failed a second time to pass its emission trading system in the Senate, where it holds a minority edge over the opposition. Liberal Opposition Leader Malcolm Turnbull had indicated an intention to vote with the government, but ended up losing his leadership over the issue before a vote could be held. The Liberals are now led by climate change skeptic Tony Abbott, who led the vote to oppose the system. Rudd had previously announced his intention to hold an election over the issue if necessary. Many feel an election would favour Rudd’s ruling Labor Party.

What is most remarkable about this flurry of statements, particularly by developing countries, is not so much the specific targets being proposed but the fact that countries are willing to discuss mitigation commitments, in whatever form, internationally. This potentially represents the first real breakthrough in the debate between the Annex 1 (industrialized) and non–Annex 1 (developing) countries, where up to now there has been a clear demarcation between developed countries, which would have mitigation commitments, and developing countries, which would not.

In Canada, while Prime Minister Stephen Harper committed to attending the Copenhagen talks (after word that President Obama was attending became official), Environment Minister Jim Prentice made it clear that Canada would not be tabling its full climate change plan prior to Copenhagen. Prentice stated that Canada would wait and see what is developed at both the international level and domestically within the United States before Canada would table its full plan. Harmonization with the United States still remains high on the Canadian agenda. And even though Canada’s 2020 target is in the same ballpark as Obama’s, Canada will likely continue to be an object of robust scrutiny by the international community. This scrutiny will probably be much stronger than what the United States will be subject to, with most of the difference due to international empathy for President Obama and differentiation of his profile from that of the U.S. Congress, which is regarded as the real block to the United States taking on more ambitious reduction targets. In addition, the government’s decision to remain a party to the Kyoto Protocol while making clear it would not develop any plan toward actually meeting the target is upsetting an increasing number of countries, particularly in the developing world.

It appears now that the outcome from Copenhagen will likely be a political declaration among leaders—over 70 leaders are expected to attend—that will be complemented by a series of substantive instructions over specific negotiating items, covering a wide range of issues relevant to the four pillars of the Bali Action Plan: mitigation, adaptation, financing, and technology transfer and capacity building. We could then expect that a final legal text would be drafted and adopted sometime next year, probably at COP 16 in Mexico City.

In conclusion, while there are still significant obstacles to overcome at Copenhagen¹—such as a dual track for negotiations that isolates commitments by all other industrialized countries from those of the United States and keeps intact the concept of differentiated responsibilities between developed and developing countries in addressing climate change, the gap in developed-country mitigation commitments between North America and the rest of the world, and the need for adequate levels of financing for developing countries to address climate change—the prospects since the last round of negotiations in Barcelona have significantly improved thanks to this rash of announcements by key parties over the last couple of weeks.

¹ See previous commentaries from yours truly on the negotiations.