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Expert Analysis

Clearing the Air in Copenhagen

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As I prepared to depart for the United Nations' climate change conference Copenhagen, starting Dec. 7, the entire process seems awash in doubt, confusion and controversy. Despite the grand hopes of many members of the international community, including many respected politicians and scientists, even the most optimistic advocates concede that it will be impossible to secure a comprehensive and binding climate change agreement. Instead, the delegates will seek a consensus that will guide the drafting and presentation of a formal treaty sometime in 2010, either in Bonn, Germany, or in Mexico City.

That is not to say that Copenhagen won't be important. Undoubtedly, many of the participants still have high hopes that the conference will set the stage for the final act of the climate change drama. They are confident of progress — and their optimism is buoyed by significant announcements of progress, such as deep cuts in emissions by nations such as South Korea and the emerging dialogue between the United States and China regarding some measure of cooperation to break the logjam between those nations' positions. These and many other developments, including the strong support of many nations for progress toward a global agreement, are encouraging many who see the potential for greater teamwork and progress in the negotiations.

The situation remains precarious, however, because even with China's commitment to "slow the growth" of its emissions and with the United States apparently ready to discuss actual reductions along the lines of pending congressional bills, thorny economic and verification problems present major roadblocks. The cost of reducing greenhouse gas emissions in the developed nations themselves, especially in the U.S., is difficult to justify and bear while economic recovery remains weak and uncertain.

Despite these problems, developing nations, especially China, insist that they cannot reduce emissions without major infusions of foreign aid — approaching 1 percent of each developed nation's gross domestic product. Such a massive transfer of wealth not only is unprecedented, but also entails huge economic risks for countries currently struggling to overcome internal financial meltdowns.

Beyond economic concerns, the issue of verification looms as a major obstacle. For any global agreement to be reliable, a unified and trustworthy system of verification must be established. Universally acceptable methods to certify reductions throughout the life of the treaty must be negotiated — methods that will assure all participants that all nations are complying with their commitments and that the value of their efforts is not compromised.

Verification is also costly, and China recently announced that those who insist upon oversight must pay for it. Given this position, the developing world must not only subsidize China's efforts to reduce emissions, but also pay the cost to verify that the reductions are actually made.

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Somewhere in the midst of these disparate positions a compromise may be found, but the nature of the deal is not readily apparent. However enthusiastic some participants may be, this complex problem will not be solved by politics, environmental zeal, goodwill or fear of climate catastrophes. In the final analysis, the process will be resolved, like every international agreement, by the degree to which it serves the best interests of each participating nation — and at this point, that means their *financial* interests. To get to that critical issue, the parties must somehow wade through the social morass that has grown up around the climate change agenda and take a pragmatic, not idealistic, view of the problem.

Unfortunately, the United Nations is its own worst enemy in this process. As it presses for consensus, it continues a wave of divisive and, ultimately, distracting announcements that, in its world view, support the risk of a climate change “catastrophe.” The most glaring of these releases seem to sweep every national and international social issue into the climate change orbit, holding global warming responsible for everything from gender discrimination to inequitable allocations of wealth among nations. Most recently, the U.N. has “linked” climate change to forcing an increasing number of women into prostitution and

has used the threat of a climate change disaster to promote increased attention to population control, including greater support for free distributions of condoms and enhanced education regarding birth control.

Reducing the growth of prostitution and other activities and attitudes that adversely affect women is surely a worthy goal. And controlling the rate of population growth to avoid the extreme financial and environmental disadvantages that it produces is undeniably important. But to conveniently move them into the climate change column, where the U.N. has already declared a universal emergency, smacks of political maneuvering, as opposed to reliable scientific analysis. The decision too closely resembles the opportunistic approach of the Obama administration when, in the midst of the most severe economic collapse in decades, it determined to pursue a broader agenda, including massive health care reform, because “you never want a serious crisis to go to waste.”

The political and scientific processes involving climate change are already plagued by sufficient extremism without adding every controversial social problem to the agenda. Persuading the community of nations to accept fundamental industrial and economic reforms to control greenhouse gases is difficult enough without complicating the agenda with other major concerns. Major elements within many nations, including the United States, remain unconvinced of the dangers of global warming, and even if the scientific impact of the “Climategate” e-mail controversy is controlled, the political impact of those messages should not be underestimated. Adding layers of controversy regarding gender and sociological concerns on top of this already volatile situation only dilutes the U.N.'s credibility.

As I closed my luggage and headed for the airport, hope still remained for realistic, forthright and productive negotiations in Copenhagen. Opportunities to avoid extremism on all sides still abound, and a chance for a meaningful dialogue persists. But those prospects will dim substantially if the already complex process is plagued by opportunistic extremists determined to flood the agenda with other issues.

In an arena where scientific debates are already sadly plagued by shouting matches and personal derision, where the positions of entire nations and peoples are vilified without any pretense of civility, and where honest debate is characterized as obfuscation and

obstructionism, the entire process is at risk. The United Nations, and its members, must realize that the *political* air must be cleared before the environment can be comprehensively addressed. Otherwise, the flicker of hope that persists at Copenhagen may be extinguished.



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