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Every day is Copenhagen

A breakthrough in international climate policy is still possible

Neither the industrialised nor the emerging countries are able to solve the climate problem by "going it alone", write Claus Leggewie and Dirk Messner. In Copenhagen, the European Union needs to table a set of exacting reduction targets, without conditioning them on the willingness of others to follow suit.

Hopes for an internationally binding climate agreement were rudely dampened at the most recent meeting of the APEC countries, and then at the Sino–US summit, where the powers assembled there even fell back behind commitments they themselves had made. Does that mean we have missed the last exit to a genuine turnaround in climate policy? In the eyes of a majority of climate researchers, all we have left is a window of opportunity of just a few years to avert dangerous climate change, indeed a destabilisation of the Earth system. A good number of people (not only in the rich North) are experimenting, on their own initiative, with more climate-compatible lifestyles. On the other hand, the political horizon has continued to be defined by election days, powerful old-industry veto groups from the energy and automobile industries, and the time-consuming routines of international politics, with the result that effective climate protection measures are put off for another day.

The essence of the climate dilemma is that the regional blocs — which continue, despite changing realities, to be categorised as industrialised and developing countries — and the national negotiating delegations have become bogged down in the quibbling typical of diplomatic group dynamics. There is the mistaken assumption that everyone, by working on their own, stands to gain more than could be achieved through global cooperation in the interest of all. Former German Environment Minister Sigmar Gabriel has referred to this self-blocking as "a game of Mikado": whoever moves first loses.

In fact, precisely the opposite is the case. The European Union would be ill advised if, having come closest of all to meeting the reduction targets for greenhouse gases laid down in the Kyoto Protocol, they now declined to move any further, pointing to the refusal of the US and China to follow suit. However, all of the world nations and peoples will be affected equally by the outcome of this tactical manoeuvring: virtually unchecked growth in worldwide emissions. The longer a global solution is put off, the more costly, and indeed the less likely, it will become. In fact, a destabilised Earth system could even trigger a global civilisational crisis. Today's generation of decision-makers is therefore the last that has it in its power to avert dangerous climate change. If the present opportunity is missed, the only options left will be crisis management and damage limitation.

It is anything but a secret that the 192 countries involved seem unable, in the framework of a tangled negotiating architecture, to reach agreement on joint consequences. Barring a political miracle, the climate summit is unlikely to adopt anything more than an informal obligation — one underpinned by few concrete milestones — to reduce greenhouse gas emissions substantially by 2050. This will generate an illusion of success that is bitterly needed to ensure that the world's governments do not simply return to their day-to-day routines and NGOs do not relax their pressure. This, it seems, is the only possible basis on which to agree to meet for a new climate summit in 2010, and to come up there with a set of concrete reduction figures.

This means that in Copenhagen, the European Union needs to table a set of exacting reduction targets, but without conditioning them on the willingness of others to follow suit. Several important actors, including Russia, Brazil, India and Indonesia, which have until now not exactly figured as the avant-garde of climate policy, are moving in the right direction, showing willingness to make substantial commitments.

It is the US and China that hold the key to a turnaround in climate policy. The US, thanks to its extravagant, oil-dependent American Way of Life, is the world's largest per capita emitter of greenhouse gases. Much time was wasted during the Bush era and so-called "climate sceptics" have enjoyed — and continue to enjoy — a strong position in public opinion no less than in organised lobbies.¹ Nevertheless, even the US has come to acknowledge the natural limits of the Earth system and to concede that the country has no right to continue to consume and emit excessively at the expense of others. In the past decade the country has been prodded to action from below, by the country's states and municipalities; now, under the administration of Barack Obama, efforts are gaining traction at the federal and international levels. Obama has, in eight short months, put many things right that it took the Europeans twenty years to accomplish. In the meantime Obama, relying on the Environmental Protection Agency, is governing by decree, as it were; after all, it is generally agreed that climate change is harmful to public health, and that, more importantly still, it constitutes a national security risk. The US federal government is making huge sums available to modernise public buildings, to reduce fuel consumption, and to build a state-of-the-art energy infrastructure.

Denouncing Nobel Laureate Obama as a "climate killer" serves only to undercut his position vis-à-vis Capitol Hill. Obama, mindful of the fiasco his predecessor Bill Clinton experienced, will not sign an international agreement before Congress has passed an energy and climate bill, the so called "Clean Energy Jobs and American Power Act". Seen in terms of the US perspective, the "post-Kyoto architecture" is more likely to be a loose network consisting chiefly of worldwide emissions-trading and decentralised cooperation projects. Above all, the US is banking on a great leap forward in technology, one backed by legislation and price-keyed consumer guidance that will be able to radically reduce emissions by 2050. Here we find a large measure of congruence with Europe, and it is entirely conceivable that Washington would be prepared to provide the oversight bodies for a global CO₂ management system — a new climate and energy Bretton Woods, as it were.

Searching for international partners, US politicians and business leaders are looking less to the "European paragons" across the Atlantic than to the People's Republic of China and the Pacific Rim, where they see, generally speaking, the greatest levels of dynamism. This is not to say that large-scale European projects like the Desertec solar power initiative in North Africa and the Middle

East have not captured their fancy, too. There are major differences between these climate worlds: while Europe continues to focus on the international negotiating arena, stressing the need for a global regime, the US, adopting an inductive and "bottom-up" approach, places more trust in bilateral initiatives with China, India, and other emerging countries. When it comes to technology transfer, research cooperation, and energy-efficiency projects, the US has made greater advances than the Europeans.

China is currently emitting roughly five tons of greenhouse gases per capita. While it is true that this is only half of what the average European citizen emits, and no more than one quarter of what the US or Australia are contributing per capita to climate change, Chinese emissions are several times higher than those of the poor developing countries, whose patron China dearly wishes to be. If the PRC continues on its current fossil growth path, by 2030 it will be accountable for over one third of global greenhouse emissions. That said, in recent years China's climate policy has — despite public perceptions in Europe — come a long way. Under fire for its human rights and democracy policies, China is in no way fond of the idea of being cast in the role of the climate baddie in world politics.

However the main force driving the Chinese turnaround in energy is a domestic one. Chinese climate researchers have provided incontrovertible proof of how hard hit the country already is by drought and desertification, water scarcity and rising sea levels. Along the course of the Yellow River, from source to estuary, we can observe the whole range of impacts that result from an overheated modernisation. These are coming to be recognised in China as a threat to economic development — and precisely that is the Achilles heel of a state party intent on drawing its domestic legitimacy from economic growth.

The discussion over Beijing's role in international climate policy is accordingly contentious. The official pre-Copenhagen line is: China will pursue its own, verifiable national climate goals, increase its energy and carbon efficiency, and expand its use of renewable energies. At the UN General Assembly in September, President Hu Jintao for the first time acknowledged that China needs to reduce its future emissions, without specifying either a roadmap or an emissions cap, at least as long as the US is unwilling to commit to concrete reduction targets. But there are other voices. Hu Angang, a widely acknowledged Chinese climate researcher, recommends concrete "decarbonization roadmaps" for greenhouse-gas-intensive regions and industries in China, pointing out that several urban conglomerations on China's east coast are soon set to reach emission levels similar to those in Europe. China, he notes, must and can do more than it is currently prepared to offer in Copenhagen. Meanwhile, there are reports that circles close to the government, as well as far-sighted businesspeople, are even calling for China to shift rapidly and comprehensively to non-fossil growth, regardless of how the Copenhagen summits ends. Radical climate protection is, in other words, generally seen as the best investment in the future, not least in Africa.

This line of argument ultimately makes sense for Europe as well. Based on resource-saving technologies, intelligent mobility concepts, and "zero-emissions cities", China could even assume the role of a pioneer on the way to the low-carbon economy — after all, what we see now is an authoritarian system responding more agilely and quickly than the world's democracies. The economic conditions also seem to augur well, for China — unlike the debt-ridden US and the ailing European economies — appears to be

mastering the current world recession reasonably well. If China forged resolutely on in this way, it would give the starting signal for the race to reach a climate-compatible world economy, a race that the rich democracies would soon be forced to join.

The Group of 77, the network of the developing countries, has done very little indeed to simplify the wrangling over climate issues. The G77 is rightly calling for radical emission reductions on the part of the industrialised countries, as well as appropriate financial support for measures to adapt to climate change. In response, all they have heard thus far from the industrialised countries amounts to soft and non-committal declarations. At the same time, the G77 continues to insist that developing countries are unable to assume legally binding climate obligations. But what may make sense for the majority of African countries has long since ceased to apply for emerging countries with high and fast-rising per capita emissions, including Malaysia, Venezuela, Mexico, South Africa, and China. For these countries, the G77 proposes voluntary commitments and sets of national targets — instruments which they otherwise show quite an aversion to, but which can be counted on to receive the backing of the US and China.

It is *misalliances* of this kind that have hobbled the Kyoto Process. The mutual recriminations exchanged between North and South, which have become part and parcel of the structure of UN diplomacy, have prevented any serious debate over the fair contributions that all countries could make to climate protection. The 2°C target re-affirmed at the 2009 G20 summit, widely thought to be the limit beyond which the world climate could reach its tipping point, may be read as a conclusive indication that between 2010 and 2050 greenhouse gas emissions must not exceed a figure of roughly 2.7 tons per capita. Over 100 countries are already in excess of this level, among them Cuba, Ecuador and Albania. The need to rapidly stabilise and reduce greenhouse gas emissions therefore not only concerns the industrialised countries, even though the contributions expected of them will necessarily be very sizable. If we are not to resign and switch over to adaptation measures designed for global warming of three and more degrees, international climate policy is going to have to take a giant step forwards. What is needed in Copenhagen is not more fine-tuning but a conceptual restart.

After Copenhagen

Even though the pre-Copenhagen situation may not seem to indicate it, the conditions given and instruments available in fact hold considerable promise.

1. In *practical* terms, many countries, including the Europeans, the US, China and India, are finally moving in the right direction — although their tempo will have to pick up enormously if they are not to jeopardise the 2°C target.
2. In *normative* terms, both in the international community and among leading politicians, there is more unanimity than ever before that the threat to the world climate, to biodiversity and to other natural foundations of our civilisation, calls for reasonable action. There is a realization that efforts must be geared to the welfare of future generations, and no longer focused merely on short-term national interests and regional egoisms. What is called for is nothing less than a kind of world government — something that would make perfectly good sense if, say, the world were faced with the immediate threat of a major meteorite impact (the standard paradigm of disaster research), and indeed seems to have made perfectly good sense when the G20 assembled to come to

decisions on managing the international banking crisis. Just about all of the world's nations are now aware that they are, as it were, condemned to cooperate.

3. Another formula that would be applicable in our case might be seen in an inclusive *equity rationale*. The problem besetting the climate negotiations has been that participants and stakeholders have not seen their own interests accorded just and equal treatment. It is neither possible simply to turn a blind eye to the unequal development experienced by the rich North and the poor South, nor to continue to uphold the anachronistic dualism that tacitly cedes to China the developing country status it claims for itself. In other words, three principles of equity need to be realised at once. Following the "polluter-pays" principle, no one would deny that the rich countries, owing to their cumulative emissions since the beginning of industrialisation, now have a special obligation to reduce emissions on a massive scale. But in order to prevent huge and irreversible damage, the emerging countries also need to give due consideration to the precautionary principle anchored in the Climate Framework Convention (UNFCCC Art. 3). That is, they will either have to leave the path mapped out in the history of industrialisation or not embark on it in the first place. Finally, since the international community has acknowledged in principle that climate change is a "common concern of humanity," the *principle of equality* would require a long-term convergence of per capita emission rates keyed, in stages, to economic performance (measured in terms of per capita income) and avoidance capacity (measured in terms of available standards of technology and governance).

This has concrete implications for climate negotiations. Instead of negotiating reduction targets for (often arbitrarily selected) country groups or individual countries, all parties need to gear their efforts to a global budget of permissible CO₂ emissions. On this basis, agreements need to be reached on steps for gradually achieving an equal per capita distribution of emission rights — something that would serve to hugely reduce the complexity of the climate talks. A simple, fair and transparent climate formula would make it possible to calculate funding levels for developing countries, to organise a global system of emissions trading, and to set national stabilisation and reduction targets for all countries.²

One inescapable conclusion that must be drawn from the physics of climate change is that between 2010 and 2050, every individual in the world will be need to be restricted to a total budget of 110 tons of greenhouse gases. This can be used as a basis to calculate the national greenhouse gas budgets with which, in the future, all of the world's countries will have to make do. This tally also indicates that the "peak", in other words the point at which global emissions needs to start declining, will have to be reached between 2015 and 2018 at the very latest.

The calculations of the German Advisory Council on Global Change illustrate unmistakably that the world is well on its way to "carbon bankruptcy" — if annual emissions continue at the levels measured in 2008, the global greenhouse gas budget will be fully depleted in a period of only 25 years; despite the climate protection successes it has posted thus far, Germany will be "broke" in only ten years, the US in as few as six. But even emerging countries like China, Mexico or Chile will have used up their budgets in 25 years, if they continue at their present emission levels.

Neither the industrialised nor the emerging countries are able to solve the climate problem by "going it alone". This is precisely the rationale for the third element of the new architecture of global climate governance — an auspicious win-win perspective for all parties, one that would work in favour precisely of the world's least developed countries. Since the budgets of "low-emission countries" in South Africa or India, Bangladesh or Vietnam, will be sufficient to get along until 2050 and beyond, the high-emission countries will be able to engage in trade with them: greenhouse gas credits in exchange for transfers of capital, knowledge, and technology. A world climate bank authorised to impose comprehensive sanctions would develop rules governing this trade and ensure that they are complied with.

A stringent emissions trading system would have two advantages. First, it would create, for all countries, monetary incentives keyed to energy and greenhouse gas efficiency. OECD and emerging countries would seek to reduce their emissions as quickly and sustainably as they possibly could, otherwise they would be forced to purchase additional emission rights. The developing countries would likewise be interested in engaging in climate-compatible modes of production, because this would enable them to sell their surplus credits. Climate compatibility would in this way become a driving force of the world economy, climate protection a strategy suited to strengthening competitiveness. Placing caps on global and national emissions budgets would set the stage for a "low-carbon economy" and create stable and predictable frameworks for businesses enterprises.

Second, a budget approach would link climate policy with a global development partnership. For some 70 developing countries with emission levels low enough to enable them to sell emission credits, emissions trading would provide the financial resources they need to build sustainable, future-oriented economic structures. In other words, for a good number of developing nations, among them the poorest countries in Africa and South Asia, a prudent climate policy would open up new, undreamed-of development perspectives, with what were once donors and recipients of classic development aid finally becoming climate partners with equal and interlocking interests. If it is permitted, in international politics, to outline a concrete utopia, one linking development, security, and peace policy, it might even be said that the looming threat of carbon bankruptcy could ultimately bring about something on the order of a "climate dividend".

Even if Copenhagen "fails", the climate crisis will give rise to a new architecture of global governance, one that redefines power and opens up genuine opportunities for today's have-nots, with climate change serving to accelerate the process involved in exchanging and transforming elites. Countries like Brazil, India or Mexico have realised that they are, in this way, playing a world political role; and Russia's modernisers are also coming to understand that it will take more than petro-dollars to achieve success in the twenty-first century. With the world greatly interested in seeing the Chinese economy restructured without undue delay, there will be no way around climate partnerships between China, Europe, and the US — and the result would be a virtual "world climate government". In other words, it could very well be that the pressure building up in the world climate cauldron will, step by step, induce the world's governments to cease viewing climate policy only in terms of their own, egoistic perspectives and to engage in it with a view to the welfare of the world as a whole. This would lead to a resolution of the apparent contradiction that many of the world's 192 countries are prepared to take measures "on their own" to which they are unwilling or unable to commit to at

the negotiating table.

The European Union must, therefore, not make its ambitious targets contingent on whether the US and China show a willingness to budge. The EU can reduce its emissions by over 30 percent and still profit from the technology offensive, becoming the world's strongest economic region. Germany should again assume a leadership role here, doing what it can to get the heel-draggers in eastern central Europe on board. The climate is at least as "system-relevant" for world society as big banking corporations with their international operations. Costa Rica and the Maldives, but Norway too, have committed to far more ambitious goals. And it would be a good thing if even hard-boiled political practitioners were, for once, to assume the standpoint of the AOSIS states, the group of small island nations and countries with low-lying, vulnerable coastlines. We are all, as the saying goes, Tuvalu...

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Progress will only come about through the interaction between regenerative technology, market incentives, prudent legislation and the imaginative participation of civil society. People acting as agents of change are to be found in all walks of life, and by no means only in the rich North. They can be found in environmental organisations and climate alliances, in Agenda 21 groups and parties, but also in private businesses (including, prudently, those that stand to lose from the global climate deal), ministerial bureaucracies and municipal administrations, newspaper editorial offices and universities — and, not least, among so-called average consumers.

The advocates of sustainable lifestyles and modes of production are nowhere near as isolated as they are often made out to be, and may at times believe themselves to be. Word is getting around that a climate-compatible approach to economic life does not always and everywhere mean doing without, indeed that it may even lead to substantial gains in quality of life, energy security, and global stability. In other words, our everyday Copenhagen starts with saving energy at home, with switching to public transport, and with steps to restrict the proliferating urban sprawl. It is precisely here that we can learn how to attain the "good life" without contributing to dangerous climate change.

¹ For a discussion of the continuing effects of Bush-era climate change denial and the political parochialism stalling the necessary decision-making in the US, see: Rick Piltz, "[Why is there no US climate policy](#)".

² The German Advisory Council on Global Change (WBGU, www.wbgu.de), among others, has developed a "budget approach" of this kind that lays the foundation for a new architecture of global "climate governance". See: Claus Leggewie, "[From carbon insolvency to climate dividends](#)".

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