

Not-so-wonderful Copenhagen

A forthcoming climate-change summit will not produce a binding deal on emissions.



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Expectations for the Copenhagen climate conference, held next month in Denmark, have been steadily dwindling. On Sunday November 15th, as Barack Obama toured Asia, he and the Danish prime minister, Lars Lokke Rasmussen, quietly agreed what many had anticipated—that no binding agreement would be reached at the conference. There is now no hope of new legal targets for emissions-reductions to replace those set out in the Kyoto Protocol and which will lapse in 2012. Instead the pair suggested that the best to be expected is a political deal on cutting emissions.

Some of the blame for this must be directed at Capitol Hill. Not only will Mr Obama now not sign a cap-and-trade bill before Copenhagen; the Senate is not even expected to pass one. The House of Representatives passed in June its version of cap-and-trade but the Senate, preoccupied by a debate over the reform of health care, has left climate talks to inch along slowly behind. John Kerry, one of the Senate's cap-and-trade champions, now says he hopes for a vote on the bill only in the spring.

But American congressmen are not alone in shouldering responsibility. Each tortuous round of negotiations ahead of Copenhagen has lengthened the list of issues up for debate. The negotiating text is now a snarl of material that few parties can agree upon. And big developing countries have been almost as immovable as America, at least publicly. China's president said in September that his country would in time cut the amount of carbon dioxide it emits per unit of GDP by a "notable amount". But Sun Guoshun, a Chinese diplomat in Washington, says that a figure is unlikely to emerge before Copenhagen. India (a much smaller polluter) has steadfastly resisted binding targets for poor countries. Many in Washington believe that America, just as it did at Kyoto, will not accept a deal that requires nothing concrete on emissions from the developing world.

Yet this does not mean that America will never get around to cutting emissions. During Mr Obama's trip to China climate change was at the top of the agenda. Some had hoped that Mr Obama and Hu Jintao, China's president, might announce a means of breaking the negotiating deadlock. Instead they unveiled some practical measures on energy.

These include the creation of a Sino-American clean-energy research centre, with initial funding of \$150m, and an electric-vehicles initiative. A plan was also aired to increase energy efficiency, especially in buildings. By some estimates, China will add housing and office space equivalent to America's entire stock over the next 20 years.

The two countries also promised to work together on “cleaner” coal (both countries sit on huge reserves of the stuff). Carbon-capture-and-storage technology for coal-fired power plants does not yet work at the scale and cost required. But James Rogers, the head of Duke Energy, a big American utility, says optimistically that perhaps only China has the resources to develop a workable system of carbon-capture, and America could reap the benefits. Last, the two agreed to co-operate on finding and using natural gas from shale. Gas power emits just half the carbon-dioxide of coal.

Focusing on measures like efficiency and cleaner power rather than targets may be the only way to get a bill through the Senate and thus make a binding international deal possible. But the interplay between international negotiations and the Senate’s deliberations is delicate. The Senate wants proof that developing countries will not get off the hook while China and India will avoid commitments as long as it seems that the Senate is unwilling to move. Copenhagen is now unlikely to be celebrated as the city where the world took big steps towards tackling climate change. A binding deal will have to wait until 2010, perhaps at a mid-year meeting in Bonn or in December in Mexico City.

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