

WebMemo



Published by The Heritage Foundation

No. 2880
April 23, 2010

U.N. Global Warming Treaty Process Still Off-Track in Bonn—and for Good Reason

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The United Nations' first significant global warming meeting since last December's Copenhagen summit just wrapped up in Bonn, with no progress toward a new international treaty to replace the Kyoto Protocol. This meeting was supposed to help lay the groundwork for an agreement at the next major conference scheduled for Cancun, Mexico, in December. However, none of the issues that doomed negotiations in Copenhagen have been resolved, and it looks very unlikely that the process will be fixed this year.

But what is bad news for the U.N. climate treaty negotiators is good news for the rest of the world, as a new treaty would be an economically ruinous solution to what is increasingly looking like a non-problem.

Developed and Developing Nations Still Far Apart. Developing nations blame the West—and particularly the United States—for emitting most of the carbon dioxide and other greenhouse gases currently in the atmosphere. For that reason, representatives of these nations have demanded that they remain exempt from any obligations to reduce emissions.

The 1997 Kyoto Protocol required 5 percent emissions reductions from developed nation signatories based on 1990 baseline emissions. But the treaty left developing nations off the hook. Kyoto's provisions expire in 2012, and perhaps the single biggest controversy as the U.N. attempts to fashion a post-Kyoto treaty is the treatment of the developing world. China, India, and other developing

countries insist that they should maintain their exemptions in any post-2012 deal. In addition, many have demanded substantial foreign aid packages to deal with the consequences of warming.

The developing world is correct that the West was the first to industrialize and is historically responsible for most of the emissions, but this point is not relevant from a policy perspective. The reality looking forward is that quickly developing nations—chiefly China—will be responsible for the lion's share of future emissions.¹ In fact, developing-world emissions surpassed those of the developed world in 2005 and are projected to rise at a rate seven times faster in the decades ahead.² China alone out-emits the U.S., and its emissions are projected to increase nine times faster through 2030.³

Thus, any new treaty to replace the existing Kyoto Protocol and provide post-2012 targets and timetables must either include developing nations or be wholly ineffective in achieving the goal of emissions reductions. To its credit, the U.S. delegation has been clear that a new agreement must have meaningful involvement from China and other high-emitting developing nations.

This paper, in its entirety, can be found at:
<http://report.heritage.org/wm2880>

Produced by the Thomas A. Roe Institute
for Economic Policy Studies

Published by The Heritage Foundation
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What emerged from Copenhagen, and is still true in Bonn, is that developing nations refuse to budge on accepting targets and timetables for reducing emissions. In addition, many of these nations expect increased foreign aid from the developed world and reacted angrily to suggestions from the U.S. delegation in Bonn that such aid be tied to accepting obligations to reduce emissions.⁴

This impasse is unlikely to be narrowed in time for Cancun, if ever.

Growing Public Skepticism: The Unspoken Impediment to a New Agreement. At the same time treaty negotiators continue to try to sell the world on a costly new agreement in the midst of an ongoing global recession, the very reason for it—global warming—is proving to be less and less of a threat.

Although U.N. bureaucrats in Bonn ignored growing doubts about the scientific justification for their actions—just as they did in Copenhagen—waning public support is reaching a level where it cannot be ignored. In the U.S., recent surveys show concern over global warming dropping—one poll showed it finishing 20th out of 20 issues in terms of importance,⁵ while another had it finishing eighth out of eight environmental issues.⁶

Those same surveys show the economy and jobs to be the top priorities, which is precisely what a

new global warming agreement would jeopardize. A Heritage Foundation analysis of the Waxman–Markey cap-and-trade bill, which passed the House last June, found gross domestic product losses of over \$9.4 trillion by 2035, over a million net job losses, and household energy cost increases exceeding \$1,000 per year.⁷ A global treaty with similarly stringent provisions would impose comparable burdens.

The skepticism is spreading around the globe. For example, the “climategate” scandal—evidencing gross exaggeration and possibly outright fraud in the very U.N. scientific report that forms the basis of treaty negotiations—has been far more aggressively reported in Europe than in America and has impacted opinion there.⁸ Developing nations have also signaled their lack of any real concern over global warming by their unwillingness to undertake any sacrifices, even small ones, in the name of addressing it.

Beyond questions about the seriousness of global warming are questions about whether an international treaty would do any good. The Kyoto Protocol has thus far harmed the economies of European and other developed nation signatories but has not reduced emissions.⁹ In other words, a new global warming treaty is shaping up to be much more trouble than it is worth and is increasingly becoming a heavy lift politically.

1. See Derek Scissors, “Ten Things About China and Climate Change,” Heritage Foundation *Special Report* No.1, November 2, 2009, at <http://www.heritage.org/Research/Reports/2009/11/Ten-Things-about-China-and-Climate-Change>.
2. Energy Information Administration, “International Energy Outlook 2009,” chapter 8, at <http://www.eia.doe.gov/oi/af/ieo/emissions.html> (November 2, 2009).
3. *Ibid.*, Figs. 83, 84.
4. Arthur Max, “Climate Talks in Bonn End with Contentious Agreement to Intensify Negotiations,” Associated Press, April 12, 2010.
5. Pew Research Center for the People and the Press, “Public’s Priorities for 2010: Economy, Jobs, Terrorism,” January 25, 2010, at <http://people-press.org/report/584/policy-priorities-2010> (April 22, 2010).
6. Gallup, “In U.S., Many Environmental Issues at 20-Year-Low Concern,” March 16, 2010, at <http://www.gallup.com/poll/126716/environmental-issues-year-low-concern.aspx> (April 22, 2010).
7. David Kreutzer *et al.*, “The Economic Consequences of Waxman–Markey: An Analysis of the American Clean Energy and Security Act of 2009,” Heritage Foundation *Center for Data Analysis Report* No. 09-04, August 6, 2009, at <http://www.heritage.org/research/reports/2009/08/the-economic-consequences-of-waxman-markey-an-analysis-of-the-american-clean-energy-and-security-act-of-2009>.
8. See Juliette Jowit, “Sharp Decline in Public’s Belief in Climate Threat, British Poll Reveals,” *The Guardian*, February 23, 2010, at <http://www.guardian.co.uk/environment/2010/feb/23/british-public-belief-climate-poll> (April 22, 2010).

Reality Check. Reality is creeping into the U.N. climate negotiations—the reality that China and other rapidly developing nations are unwilling to check their growing emissions and that the public does not see global warming as a serious threat justifying costly action. This reality is not

going to go away by December. In fact, it may intensify into 2011.

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9. Ben Lieberman, “What Americans Need to Know About the Copenhagen Global Warming Conference,” Heritage Foundation *Copenhagen Consequences* No. 4, November 17, 2009, p. 2, at <http://www.heritage.org/Research/Reports/2009/11/What%20Americans%20Need%20to%20Know%20About%20the%20Copenhagen%20Global%20Warming%20Conference>. It should be noted that emissions have declined, but this is because of the global recession, not the Kyoto Protocol.