

Understanding the post-Copenhagen world

Three questions that can help us move from China blaming to constructive and innovative climate action

By Dennis Pamlin¹

The question about the lessons learnt and how the outcome in Copenhagen should be interpreted lingers on. The role of China has become the focus for much of the discussion. This paper builds on an article in *China Daily* “It's dangerous to make China a climate scapegoat”.² After this article I have received a lot of questions regarding my opinions on statements made by western policy makers and opinion makers, including what is probably the most circulated China blaming article, written by the journalist Mark Lynas.³ But he is not alone.⁴

The fact that some policy makers (from the EU and US in particular) are trying to blame China should not come as any surprise. Policy makers have a tendency to blame failures on someone else. The dynamics between different countries and blocks of countries are important and will be discussed in another paper. In this article I would like to present three reasons for why China (and many other non-Annex 1 countries) had good reasons for not accepting some of the proposals that western countries wanted to see included in the draft text discussed in Copenhagen.⁵ To understand these reasons, can help inform policies as we move forward. The three reasons are:

1. What was on the table was not as good as some western observers thought.
2. The way the commitment was presented was similar to how western countries have presented commitments that have not been kept and/or changed later.

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² http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/opinion/2010-01/06/content_9271632.htm

³ <http://www.marklynas.org/2009/12/23/how-do-i-know-china-wrecked-the-copenhagen-deal-i-was-in-the-room>

⁴ Another UK person, Ed Miliband, was probably the most vocal politician in criticising China. <http://www.timesonline.co.uk/tol/news/environment/article6964106.ece> and voices from other countries where also heard: http://www.economist.com/world/international/displaystory.cfm?story_id=15179774

⁵ A draft that was not a formal part of the negotiations and discussed only during the last hours of the Copenhagen conference.

3. In a global governance system that has been dominated by western countries for the last 60 years the presence of Asian and other countries has resulted in a mutual lack of understanding of what is a proper way of negotiating. This lack of understanding has in turn resulted in unfortunate situations where the different parties feel insulted and/or misinterpret each other.

As I think most of the people engaged in making China a scapegoat genuinely want to avoid dangerous climate change, it is important to explore the above issues and how misunderstandings can be sorted out before people develop strategies and opinions based on these.

Below I have tried to give a very short overview of the three issues.

1. What was on the table in Copenhagen?

Short answer: A deal that most certainly would lock the world into uncertainty and inequity in a way that no poor country would accept unless the rich countries forced them to accept it.

The suggestion that was presented as a possible outcome of Copenhagen was 80% reductions of green house gasses (GHG) from the rich (Annex 1 countries) and a total global reduction of 50% by 2050. That China and others were not to keen on including this resulted in great frustration.

When analyzing the negotiations it is important take into consideration and to understand the whole document and dynamic of the situation. A country does not need to disagree with a specific number, such as an emission reduction number, in order to disagree to include it. The reason for this can for example be that this country wants to focus on another issue before emission reductions are discussed, or that there are other important aspects which need further clarifications.

It is interesting to take a closer look at the proposed targets. If western countries agreed to 80% reductions of green house gasses by 2050 and the goal is a total global reduction of 50%, we must ask ourselves what would then be left for the rest of the world to do to fulfill the global target, and how the reductions should be implemented.

In order for people to judge for themselves I have put together a simple excel document with a “Carbon Equity Calculator”.⁶ This calculator allows you to see how much developing countries (non-Annex 1) would have to do depending on three factors:

- A. The global target (50% is the default, but in order to stay below 2 degrees with reasonable certainty we need substantially deeper cuts, and for 1.5 degrees even deeper.)
- B. Rich countries’, Annex 1, reductions (80% was discussed in Copenhagen, but some wanted to go further and some wanted weaker commitments)
- C. How much of the 80% (or any other commitment) that the rich countries actually will do in their own countries, and how much they plan to reduce abroad. We have created an Orwellian language with the Kyoto Protocol, due to the flexible mechanisms, were “commitments” to reduce your emissions do not have to mean that you reduce the emissions in your own country.⁷ In the EU context this has often been translated into two thirds being done domestically, but some member states, like Holland, have pushed for policies that allow them to meet even more of their “own” commitments by buying emission rights from abroad.

If we assume that the base year is 1990 for the 80% reductions, this would mean that Annex 1 countries should reduce their emissions from current 18.5 Gt CO_{2e} to 3.7 Gt CO_{2e} by 2050.

The non Annex 1 countries emitted about 13 Gt CO_{2e} in 1990.⁸ Many of them must be allowed to increase their emissions as the per capita emissions in many countries are low, and as they will need to make further investments in basic infrastructure which will, regardless if the best available low-carbon technology is used, result in substantial emission increases. (This is also a part of the historic emissions of Annex 1 countries, which they so far have not been willing to discuss). By 2006, the non-Annex 1 countries’ emissions had increased to approximately 22 Gt. It is hard

⁶ www.pamlin.net/blog

⁷ The reason for this is that we now have a situation where countries first decide on the commitment to reduce emissions, then they start negotiating about how much of these reductions that should be done domestically and how much that can be bought on the carbon market.

⁸ The closest year reporting under UNFCCC exist is for 1994 <http://unfccc.int/resource/docs/2005/sbi/eng/18a02.pdf>

to find any more recent data but we can assume that emissions are around 25 Gt today.

A 50% global reduction by 2050 with a 1990 base year would result in global emissions of around 15.7 Gt. The 80% reductions from the rich Annex 1, would result in a situation where they would emit 3.7 Gt by 2050. Removing these 3.7 Gt from the 15.7 Gt means that there would be 12.0 Gt left for the rest of the world. Compared with the emissions from the non-Annex 1 countries today, it would require a 50% reduction. **From a per capita perspective this would result in a situation where the rich countries have claimed 25% larger emissions than the poor countries, or an (in)equity index of 25** (the inequity index is explained in the Excel document).

For countries that have a fraction of the per capita emissions compared to the West it is difficult to understand why they should commit to reduce their current emissions by 50% and reach a per capita level that is lower than that of the rich countries, especially as the historic emissions are not included in the current calculation.

It is also important to remember that considering what Annex 1 countries have done so far, it is reasonable to assume that the Annex 1 countries based the 80% reduction on an assumption that they would try to buy “emission rights” from the developing countries. If we use a conservative estimate, presuming that 80% of the 80% reduction will be done domestically in Annex 1 countries, this would result in an even more challenging situation for the developing countries. Under these assumptions the Annex 1 countries would have to reduce their domestic emissions by 64%, not 80%. **From a per capita emission perspective it is even more striking. This would give the rich countries three times the emissions per capita compared with developing countries (3.7 tonnes per capita compared with 1.25 tonnes per capita).**

Furthermore, the above assumptions are excluding facts that should be included and that would make the situation even more unfair:

First, they do not include historic/accumulated emissions that are important in relation to equity.⁹

Second, they do not pay any attention to the actual emissions that are needed to sustain the lifestyle in different countries. Kyoto focuses on emissions in countries, but over time the most important issue is not where the emissions take place, but how we can ensure that everyone on the planet are able to live “a good life”. In this context we should remember that up to 30% of China’s emissions are embedded in products that are exported for western consumption, i.e. the emissions that take place in China are not connected to the consumption of the Chinese population..¹⁰ This export is already discussed, but often in a negative way where policymakers want to use this as an argument to block import from countries like China.¹¹ The question about embedded emissions will probably be one of the major challenges in years to come.¹²

As important as the commitment to quantified GHG reductions by 2050 from rich countries, is to get a clear commitment, in numbers, from the rich countries on how they will support global emission reductions, i.e. domestic and in non Annex 1 countries, by 2020 as well as 2050. These numbers should include economic support for implementation of low carbon solutions, export/import of low carbon solutions, public procurement commitment, etc. Support and collaboration must be the focus, not a competition to avoid reductions. Global targets are needed, but it is also as important to agree on a path forward to get there, including to get clarity on the strategies that can deliver low carbon solutions.

2. “What is the track record of western countries in these kind of negotiations that might influence how other countries react”

⁹<http://www.greenpeace.org/usa/press-center/reports4/america-s-share-of-the-climate>
<http://www.reuters.com/article/idUSTRE5615EF20090702>

¹⁰ <http://www.newscientist.com/article/dn14412-33-of-chinas-carbon-footprint-blamed-on-exports.html>

¹¹ <http://www.euractiv.com/en/climate-environment/carbon-tariffs-resurface-copenhagen-aftermath/article-188645>

¹² http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/bizchina/2009-12/09/content_9146286.htm

Short answer: Western countries usually set a long-term target, fail on the short-term commitments and then blame the poor. It does not matter if you go back to 1972 and the Stockholm conference, 1992 in Rio, the pattern is the same.

Many of the assessments from Copenhagen have been written as if the climate negotiations began 24 hours before the end of the conference in Copenhagen. This gives a very unbalanced view of the situation and outcome. Much can be learned from these negotiations and over time it is not hard to see a pattern. A pattern that so far clearly shows that the burden of proof falls on the rich countries.

Let's look at the process from the start. The US signed up to UNFCCC in 1992 and negotiated the Kyoto Protocol in 1997. In 1992, under the UNFCCC, they agreed to stabilize emissions on 1990 levels by 2000. They never kept this promise, instead they increased their GHG emissions from 6.1 Gt to 7Gt, an 15% increase, during this timeframe.¹³

Five years later, 1997 in Kyoto, they told the world that they would reduce their emissions by 7% compared with 1990 by 2012.¹⁴ In order to agree to this 7% reduction they made the protocol a lot worse and filled it with loopholes. They also had a fight with G77 (the developing countries) that wanted to bring in equity and per capita targets into the discussion. India did a fantastic job in bringing this issue up, but the US refused to discuss any issues related to equity or unsustainable lifestyles..

From a political perspective it is worth noting that it was the Democrats (with Al Gore flying in at the last minute) who were negotiating in Kyoto, so it is the same party that Obama and the current US team belongs to.¹⁵ Besides deciding not to join Kyoto the US has increased its GHG emissions since 1990 from 6.0 Gt to 7.2 Gt in 2007, equivalent to approximately a 19% increase.¹⁶

¹³ http://www.epa.gov/climatechange/emissions/downloads09/GHG2007entire_report-508.pdf and also the international assessments: http://unfccc.int/files/essential_background/background_publications_htmlpdf/application/pdf/ghg_table_06.pdf

¹⁴ To be correct it is not 2012 but the average of 2008-12 that the target was based on. This in order to avoid extremely hot/cold/wet/dry years as this affect the carbon emissions in countries.

¹⁵ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kyoto_Protocol#2012_emission_targets_and_flexible_mechanisms.

¹⁶ http://www.epa.gov/climatechange/emissions/downloads09/GHG2007entire_report-508.pdf.

It is possible to go even further back in time to the first international conference on climate change. This often forgotten conference, “Our Changing Atmosphere: Implications for Global Security”, was held in Toronto in June, 1988. The target for a global reduction in the emission of greenhouse gases at this time was 20% below 1988 levels by 2005. Again a target that was not met.

On the other hand China ratified the Kyoto Protocol and has implemented many measures to curb domestic emissions, even if too much focus is still on coal expansion in China.¹⁷

Before blaming China, or anyone else, it might be good to make a scientific assessment of what the different countries have done compared to historic commitments, and compared to the income per capita of different countries. Some who have been part of the negotiations also have a more sober view on the responsibility for the weak outcome.¹⁸

Again China is not perfect and there are many things China can do better, especially when it comes to engaging different stakeholders and set more ambitious targets. For the international negotiations it is however not good if China begins to take on commitments before the rich countries, and especially the US, as this would undermine the “common but differentiated responsibility” principle. Of course China should implement low carbon measures, but action from the rich countries should not be on condition of action from developing countries. **Common but differentiated responsibility was one of the pillars of Kyoto and it is important not to allow the US, or any other rich country, to remove this fundamental support for international equity, a pillar that is a very important part of the global governance system.**

In sum, the fact that western countries have promised but not delivered cannot be ignored when the negotiations are analyzed, that some also try to undermine a

¹⁷ http://info.e-to-china.com/news_updates/62437.html
http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/bizchina/2009-12/07/content_9127391.htm
<http://www.geni.org/globalenergy/library/technical-articles/generation/carbon-markets/xinhua/china-stepping-up-efforts-towards-low-carbon-economy/index.shtml>
<http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2009/may/26/china-invests-solar-power-renewable-energy-environment>

¹⁸ <http://www.guardian.co.uk/environment/2009/dec/28/john-prescott-defends-china-copenhagen>

fundamental principle, common but differentiated responsibility, is also something that must be discussed and taken into consideration when trying to understand the outcome of Copenhagen.¹⁹

3. “Are there differences in negotiation style?”

Short answer: Yes, for 60 years western countries have dominated the global governance system. With many new countries now claiming their place and some are re-emerging historic economic power houses (such as China and India) it is not obvious what standards that should be followed. This results in confusion and misunderstandings.

The current culture of negotiations has been shaped to a large degree by western countries and is something that many other countries feel uncomfortable with. For example, smaller countries have problems due to the fact that there are often a greater number of working groups than they can participate in due to the small size of their delegations.

For countries like China the structure with confrontational negotiations and a tendency to push things to the very last minute after late night negotiations is something that many feel uncomfortable with.²⁰ In order to reach decisions of quality this is not a good way according to Chinese standards. This is partly linked to the fact that many of the leaders in China are engineers that like a science based approach.

It is also common in China to let the experts do the negotiations and when they have agreed internally, the senior official enters and closes the deal. Having ministers without deep knowledge in the area negotiating details is not a very common way in China.²¹

¹⁹ http://unfccc.int/files/essential_background/background_publications_htmlpdf/application/pdf/ghg_table_06.pdf

²⁰ This is not only true for the Climate negotiations, negotiations from China and other countries had the same reservations in the WTO negotiations, especially around the time of the WTO meeting in Hong Kong that followed the collapse of the negotiations in Seattle 1999.

²¹ It feels more the culture with ministers coming in at the last minute it is part of the media culture of the West where ministers, prime ministers themselves must fly in to “save the deal”. The fact that they don’t know the details and the new suggestions have not been analyzed don’t seem to bother them.

The science based approach that China has been promoting so far should be explored further, and China's reluctance to last minute numbers without context might prove to be very wise, maybe even the start of a more sophisticated era in international climate negotiations?

Still China has a lot to improve. Before Mexico it would be great if China could involve more international stakeholders in its own preparations. What China needs to do, in order to improve international relations, is to review the preparation before the negotiations and the negotiation strategy, including communication with/inclusion of both developing and developed countries as well as civil society. More time needs to be spent with the least developed countries and those that are the most vulnerable. China, together with the rest of the BASIC bloc (Brazil, South Africa and India),²² as well as other emerging countries such as Mexico and maybe also Korea, have a very important and difficult role to play.

What China, and the other BASIC countries could explore further is how to create a dialogue platform where all initiatives from this group will include both the rich OECD countries as well as the less influential G77 members. The China-India collaboration is particularly important, after all this year is the year of the tiger in China.

End comments

Let me just end by again noting that China in no way is perfect, and that China also needs to act and contribute to combat climate change.. However, as we discuss the responsibility to take the lead to invest in low carbon solutions and support those in need, it is important to focus on those who have most resources to do so, those who have polluted the most and done the least so far. That puts US in front with EU and Japan second.

The responsibility to lead does not mean that the above countries are the only ones that should act. Climate is a global challenge and everyone must do their part. No country can be left behind, we must ensure that those that can produce smart solutions are given support to accelerate this production, the need for new natural resources in a low carbon economy must be assessed with the countries that have

²² Not to be confused with BRIC's that include Russia but exclude South Africa: <http://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/india/Copenhagen-conference-India-China-plan-joint-exit/articleshow/5279771.cms>

them, the most vulnerable countries must be supported, countries that can use income from high oil prices to invest in low carbon solutions must be included, etc. More than anything, countries must begin to focus on collaboration instead of confrontation. We must focus on how the solutions we need can be delivered, not only the amount of reductions that each country should commit to or not.

As we move forward it is important to respect different perspectives and understand that no one has a full overview of all the aspects that must be solved on the way to a low carbon economy.