

Less than 100 days to Copenhagen: Time to panic?

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With less than 100 days before the crucial global climate change conference opens in Copenhagen, negotiations remain stuck. Initially it was expected that the meeting in Bonn from 10-14 August would launch the 'real' negotiations on a long-term international agreement to combat the risk of climate change, but this did not happen. Some progress was made in informal groups on many of the main topics, but by no stretch of the imagination can this be called a breakthrough. Far from it, the major move forward has been the development of consolidated negotiation texts that attempt to bring together all proposals on each theme. The main negotiation text, however, still stands at 199 pages. At a comparable time in the Kyoto negotiations, the text had been around 30 pages.

Is it time to panic? It all depends on one's expectations. It has long been clear that there is a wide spectrum of possible outcomes. At one end is a fully-fledged agreement with all details adopted, leaving open only the formulation of precise implementation provisions. At the other end is a general political deal where countries commit to an agreement – for later – and outline the main elements. This would probably mean at least another year of negotiations and possibly more.

It seems now that the outcome will tend more towards the latter scenario. This should not come as a total surprise. It has long been clear that the United States would not be ready by the time of Copenhagen, despite the important policy shift on climate change under the Obama administration. A cap-and-trade bill has been adopted in the US House of Representatives but has been pending for some time in a divided Senate. The value of any US commitment, however, critically depends on its prospects to win Senate approval. Other developed countries, such as Australia and Japan, are also struggling to come up with an ambitious, yet domestically acceptable target. And while many developing countries have put in place – often very ambitious – domestic climate change policies, they tend to delay when it comes to making a commitment in international negotiations.

Many observers are now pinning their hopes on the emergence of international high-level leadership to champion the climate negotiations in the context of ongoing parallel processes, such as the Major Economies Forum, the (informal ministerial) Greenland Dialogue, the UN Heads of State or the G20. All of these bodies are scheduled to convene in the intervening days before the next round of climate negotiations in Bangkok in late September/early October.

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While extra momentum from these parallel processes would be instrumental in extracting a political deal, it will not be enough to ensure a fully-fledged agreement. Too many details remain to be settled, which will require weeks if not months of meticulous technical negotiations.

Thus, it may be that the best outcome to be hoped for at this point is an agreement at Copenhagen to continue negotiations in earnest. It is important that the developed countries, led by the EU, do not accede too easily to the less well-founded demands of developing countries, just to be able to declare a political victory.