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The Durban conference: between Cancún and Paris

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Just about at the time that climate negotiators started packing their suitcases and boarding planes to Durban for the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change's seventeenth Conference of the Parties (COP17), the Paris-based International Energy Agency (IEA) released troubling figures. Data published by the agency earlier in November showed greenhouse gas emissions were at record levels in 2010: 30.4 gigatonnes of carbon dioxide escaped into the atmosphere last year – 1.6Gt (5,3%) more than in 2009, pushing carbon levels to their highest levels yet. The rapid rise occurred even as economic turmoil enveloped global markets.

The data mean that one of the mainstay agreements reached at the COP 16 last year in Cancún – to limit the rise of global mean temperatures at 2 degrees Celsius compare to pre-industrial levels – is already compromised. Nicholas Stern, author of the seminal Review on the economics of climate change, for one, says IEA's figures mean the emissions reduction trajectory is back on the "business as usual" path, which means all efforts towards curbing carbon output since the inception of negotiations have been futile.

International deadlock

Of course the IEA's data are just the last signal of the extent of the climate change problem and the persistent lethargy that has marked twenty years of international negotiations to arrest global warming. In summary the dynamics that deadlock a climate deal are this: The United Framework Convention on Climate Change of 1992 and its Kyoto protocol of 1997 (in force since 2005) exempt developing countries from binding commitments to reduce emissions. Herein lays the rub. With fast growing emerging economies such as China, India and Brazil outside the mandatory emissions reduction ambit, traditionally large emitters, such as the US, Japan and Canada are reluctant to compromise their economic competitiveness *vis à vis* fast growing economies through costly emission reductions. Moreover, the escalation in last year's emissions are predominantly for the account of China and India, whose economies steamed ahead, full throttle, virtually oblivious of the drag on developed economies.

This in turn raises two points: Debt-burdened advanced economies are even less inclined to jeopardize their growth through asymmetrical carbon cut commitments. Second, and perhaps more pertinently, it is clear from the IEA data that emission cuts in advanced economies alone are not going to pass muster. A more encompassing round of reduction commitments is required if the world is to see global carbon emissions peak in 2020 and then decline.

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The above scenario paints a bleak picture: prospects to remove gridlock in the climate negotiation chamber have become nigh impossible in the current economic environment. Therefore the stakes for Durban are high and the prognosis not all too rosy. South Africa, who chairs the meeting, faces a particularly daunting task.

The Durban agenda

The climate negotiation agenda is multifarious and intricate, but the Durban conference essentially hinges on four broad stroke issues: the operationalisation of COP16 decisions; climate finance; mitigation (in particular relating to legal clarity for future binding emissions cuts when the Kyoto Protocol targets expire at the end of 2012); and framing the debate on the form of an inclusive future legally binding agreement.

Adaptation, a particularly neglected stepchild at climate talks so far, has also been earmarked by South Africa for priority, notably – and as this is the first “African” COP – in relation to Africa’s needs in the areas of action, finance and technology.

Minister Maite Nkoana Mashabane, who will head the talks in Durban on behalf of South Africa, has indicated that meaningful progress in these areas are required if Durban is to be a success. But tempering ambitions may be advisable. While modest on paper, reaching consensus on the package of these issues will be a formidable feat.

The decisions at Cancún relate to four pillars of the so-called Bali Action Plan of 2007 – mitigation, adaption, finance and technology – and the institutional form in which they should be framed. It is up to the Durban meeting to set up the framework. This includes a requirement to determine how $100bn towards the Green Climate Fund set up at Copenhagen (COP 15) will be sourced by 2020 – evidently a difficult task given current economic circumstances.

Beyond Kyoto

But perhaps the most daunting of challenges is that around stopping the gap that will be left when reduction targets set under the Kyoto Protocol expire in 2012. Hopes for securing a second commitment period for the Kyoto Protocol have dimmed. Canada, Japan and Russia are unwilling to sign up to new targets as the commitments would by definition be legally binding. And with the US in legal stasis, China and India will balk at a parallel track to get developing countries to move towards binding reduction commitments.

This leaves the EU as the only big emitter willing to make a second round of emission pledges under the KP – a meager harvest of treaty-bound emission cuts, as the EU will only contribute some 11% of total global emissions by 2020[1]. Nonetheless, the bloc is willing to do so to preserve the legal integrity of climate action, but under two conditions: that countries agree in Durban to commit to a road map towards an internationally legally binding agreement and, second, that the system is more robust and fair, by ensuring emission cuts from all major emitters, strengthened accounting systems and introducing and institutionalizing market-based mechanisms.

[1] It is also worth quoting the Conclusions of the Environment Council of 10 October 2011, as endorsed by the European Council of 23 October: “in light of the announcements by several Annex I Parties, a second commitment period under the Kyoto Protocol is unlikely to cover more than 16% of global emissions”.

Developmental imperatives

Where does all of this leave South Africa? The country faces a tough balancing act. On the international stage, SA has fashioned itself after the role of pragmatic facilitator, particularly as conflict mediator on the continent. As host to COP17 it will endeavour to again assume that role. But its various alliances – notably as member of the G-77 and BASIC (Brazil, SA, India and China) – may see it pull in different directions. In view of its BASIC alliance, it is assured that the EU will lean heavily on SA in hope that it can deliver China and India to an ambitious outcome. Hopes may be rewarded with regard to the former; but unlikely so with the latter. And nationally, SA has its own constraints. Developmental imperatives are pressing, and SA carbon-intensity per unit of economic output is among the worst in the world because of its over whelming reliance on coal-fired electricity.

In the run up to Durban, South Africa's Nkoana-Mashabane asserted herself powerfully. Highly principled, she is nonetheless a seasoned diplomat and fully comprehends the stakes and the reality of a magnitude of divergent interests in a particularly volatile economic environment is formidable. Simultaneously, pressure to achieve substantive outcomes is mounting, as time on taking climate action starts running out. The IEA estimates that annual energy-related carbon emissions need to be capped at 32 Gt a year by 2020 if global warming is to be contained within manageable levels. Under the current emissions trajectory the world is off course to reach that goal. Durban may yet prove to be the toughest COP of them all.

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