

Sorting Blinks from Winks in the Copenhagen End Game

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In the world of military intelligence much time is spent trying to distinguish “blinks” – unpremeditated random actions – from “winks” – deliberate moves designed to communicate intent and draw out a response. The climate change negotiations have now entered a phase where a team of tame “spooks” is needed by anybody trying to make sense of the myriad messages emerging from the hectic schedule of pre-Copenhagen meetings.

The APEC Summit saw confident headlines that the US and China had agreed to a Danish proposal to make the Copenhagen outcome non-legally binding. On closer examination these reports came from a US press conference following an informal Heads breakfast. Meanwhile the real US-China Summit two days later agreed that both countries are “striving for final legal agreement” at Copenhagen, and the Chinese confirmed they are still “studying” the Danish proposal. A “Pre-COP” Ministerial meeting held in parallel in Copenhagen showed a range of conflicting messages from countries; with Saudi Arabia defending the Kyoto Protocol, some developing countries backing a new single negotiating process but a strong push from Brazil and others to maintain a legally binding Copenhagen outcome.

Even the US seems unclear what it wants. With Obama promoting an agreement at Copenhagen which has “immediate operational effect” but his lead negotiator discussing a mid-year deadline for completing a treaty. Of course, these outcomes need not be mutually exclusive, but in the fevered atmosphere of the end game confusion is predictably interpreted as conspiracy.

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This is damaging to the negotiations. The APEC story drowned out the positive announcements of new mitigation commitments by Brazil and South Korea. It also markedly increased the already high level of distrust between countries. Conversations in the negotiating corridors increasingly circle round what these events imply about the motivations of the main players. Is the US Administration acting in good faith but hamstrung by a hostile Congress? Or is there a subtle strategy to neuter the international regime and avoid pressure to increase US commitments? Will China align with its traditional allies in the G77? And if so, can it support the proposals from the industrialized countries? Will India stick with its oft-quoted red lines, or are these merely negotiating chips to be relinquished in return for new finance? The inability to sort blinks from winks - and conspiracy from confusion - makes countries fearful of making the bold diplomatic moves needed to make Copenhagen a success. It also fuels an increasingly pessimistic media cycle and undermines public faith in the effectiveness of the international negotiations.

This is the wrong way to approach the climate change process. We are not back in the Cold War trying to determine the aggressive intent of a declared and secretive enemy. Copenhagen is a multi-polar negotiation between highly interdependent countries who are aiming to preserve their mutual climate security. It is not a game any one nation can win, but it is one we can all lose..

Stripping away the confusion the underlying dynamics of the Copenhagen end-game are rather more straightforward:

- there is no credible alternative to a legally binding international agreement to limit global climate change below 2C; any “bottom-up” system of country pledges will always fail to drive the necessary scale and pace of reductions as it does not help countries take on domestic interest lobbies.

- The US will not accept a binding target unless China and India also agree to be bound to commitments that are internationally verifiable.
- But China will not commit to decarbonise its economy unless the US accepts a binding and ambitious emissions reduction target.
- The majority of developing countries will not agree to any new framework unless it binds developed nations and contains significant new medium term public finance for adaptation, forestry and clean energy.
- Europe and Japan – who have met their reduction commitments under the binding Kyoto Protocol - can only accept the weak US commitments which are on the table if a new agreement is at least as binding as Kyoto, and the US commits to comparable emission reductions by 2030 at the latest.

This is the inexorable logic of the multilateral negotiations and leaves a clear set of decisions for the US. The Obama administration will struggle to convince the US Senate to pass a domestic Climate Bill if it cannot show that this is part of a wider international effort that delivers climate security for America. A binding international agreement that commits China and India to real emission reductions would show the value of US leadership. To achieve this, the US will have to agree to be bound itself and to put its 2030 mitigation target and some commitment to medium term finance on the table.

None of this need breach the wise position of the US negotiators that they are not prepared to sign up to an international agreement unless they are confident they can pass the domestic legislation needed to implement it. The administration has a good story to tell of how committing to US legislation has catalysed serious emission reduction commitments from all major economies.

The US has more room for maneuver than it currently thinks. If President Obama wants to make real the leadership he has proclaimed so eloquently in his speeches, now is the time to send a clear, unified and unambiguous message to the other Parties. We want a 2C agreement; we will put forward what is needed to secure this; we expect others to agree to be bound by their promises - as we agree to be bound by ours; this will require a legally binding treaty. We may need more time to agree final details, but we are ready to make substantial and lasting commitments in Copenhagen.

All of this leads to a simple conclusion: if political leaders are unable to reach a binding international agreement in Copenhagen in December they must come up with a credible plan for concluding that agreement no later than June 2010, before US Congressional mid-term elections. Allowing the process to drag on beyond June 2010 risks a repeat of the Doha WTO negotiations, which have limped along without resolution for over a decade. Reaching agreement by June 2010 is challenging but achievable if Copenhagen provides the necessary political impetus.

Specifically, Copenhagen needs to do three things:

- Give a clear political mandate to negotiators to reach agreement on all key issues by at the latest June 2010 and to enshrine this agreement in a legal instrument or instruments.
- Set out in as much detail as possible the content of the eventual legal instrument(s), including emissions reduction targets for developed countries, nationally appropriate mitigation actions for developing countries, the long-term financing architecture, and the international framework for measurement, reporting and verification of commitments.

- Maintain momentum through commitments to immediate action before 2012, including quick-start funding for adaptation, tackling deforestation and low carbon growth plans.

There are no fundamental obstacles of interest to such an agreement, but it will require great diplomatic skill and significant trust between countries to deliver; neither of which are yet apparent in the current negotiations. There are still some countries trying to block any substantive deal, but they are now a vanishing minority. In contrast, the impetus to agreement is supported by an unprecedented range of global business, finance, labour, faith and civil society coalitions who are aligned around the common elements of a Copenhagen deal.

In the final weeks towards Copenhagen it will be easy to be caught up in the day-to-day turmoil of events, but while fascinating as a spectator sport this chatter is not what will determine the final outcome. The world is close to an ambitious deal; what is missing is the trust needed to cement the process through to a legal conclusion. Trust will be built through plain speaking not hints, spin and clever tactics. That is why Obama must go to Copenhagen along with other leaders. Only a personal face-to-face commitment will generate the trust needed to seal the deal.

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