Treading Water: How the US Is Blocking Progress on Climate Change

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As the predictions for global warming get more and more alarming, talks on a worldwide climate treaty have stalled -- largely due to the United States. The G-8 summit in L'Aquila, which begins Wednesday, is likely to generate little more than the usual platitudes.

Two degrees Celsius (3.6 degrees Fahrenheit) doesn't sound like much. The temperature in L'Aquila, a small city in Italy's central Abruzzo region which was hit by a devastating earthquake in April, goes up by two degrees as soon as the sun rises. Anyone staying overnight in L'Aquila would likely not even notice such a small change in temperature.

When the leaders of the G-8 group of industrialized countries gather at a military academy on the outskirts of L'Aquila on Wednesday, they will also be discussing a two-degree rise in temperature -- but one with more palpable effects. The fact that the average temperature on earth will increase on this scale in the coming years represents a massive change. Average global temperatures have risen by 5 degrees Celsius (9 degrees Fahrenheit) since the last ice age. Climatologists say that additional warming by more than two degrees would trigger substantial changes in the earth's climatic systems.

The Amazon and Congo rainforests could dry up, mountain glaciers, with their freshwater reserves, could disappear, and enormous quantities of methane could escape from thawing permafrost soil. Scientists believe that the more than 35 billion tons of greenhouse gases a year that are currently entering the atmosphere from countries around the world are enough to derail the climate system.

The latest information coming from the scientific world suggests that the consequences of climate change could be far worse than previously predicted. According to a climate change "synthesis report" released in June, with which climatologists provided an update on previous predictions, the concentration of CO2 in the air is already too high, and the oceans are warming up much more quickly than the United Nations' Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) had assumed two years ago.

But even as leaders around the globe insist that they want to do everything possible to prevent such a temperature increase, international negotiations have been bogged down for months. The United States and many resource-rich nations are blocking progress, so much so that no breakthroughs are expected to emerge from the G-8 summit in L'Aquila.

The international politicians gathering in L'Aquila at the invitation of Italian Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi know that their hands rest on the earth's thermostat. They also know that their influence will be critical to whether new, more effective climate protection rules will be adopted at the United Nations climate summit in December, rules that would replace the widely ignored 1997 Kyoto Protocol.

Business as Usual

Economists have calculated that it will be cheaper to halt climate change than to suffer its consequences. Some

corporate leaders even anticipate the advent of a "green economic miracle," provided global politics embarks on a different course. But the obstructionists currently predominate in most G-8 countries. Russia and Canada want to be able to sell their fossil fuels without constraints, while Japan is worried about economic losses.

The United States has taken the most adverse stance, even though President Barack Obama campaigned on a platform to save the climate and has assembled what could be described as a dream team when it comes to environmental policy. Energy Secretary Steven Chu is a Nobel laureate in physics and an advocate of action against global warming, presidential science adviser John Holdren is a noted professor at Harvard University, and the deputy special envoy for climate change, Jonathan Pershing, was a brilliant environmental lobbyist before assuming his new post.

But the Obama administration is realizing that ordinary Americans are adamantly opposed to their country becoming the global leader in a radical new green movement. A majority of Americans do not consider the climate crisis to be particularly important: According to a poll carried out in January by the Pew Research Center, only 30 percent of Americans rated global warming as a top priority for President Obama. The issue came last on the list of priorities, far below the economy and terrorism.

Meanwhile the US oil and coal industries' experienced lobbyists are hard at work to influence public opinion. And when a member of the House of Representatives recently referred to climate change as a "hoax," his comments were met with applause. Although Obama is allocating billions and recruiting top scientists nationwide for climate protection, he has deliberately not yet given a strong speech on the environment directed at the rest of the world.

Energy Secretary Chu is noticeably troubled by his country's failure to take a leadership role. He recently cleared his calendar for almost three days to discuss the latest conclusions of climate research with other Nobel laureates in London. When asked about concrete CO2 targets, Chu responded by giving lengthy descriptions of energy-saving building codes and pointing out the environmental benefits that could be achieved if the roofs of all buildings in the United States were painted white in the future. The physicist deliberately avoided global politics.

When German Chancellor Angela Merkel visited Washington recently, her original intention was to chide Obama on his lack of commitment. But then her advisers told her that in doing so, she could very well jeopardize the narrow majority support in the House of Representatives for the first US climate protection bill, which was up for a vote that same day. The legislation, which still requires Senate approval, does not provide for significant reductions in CO2 emissions until 2050, although it would create the first emissions monitoring system ever implemented in the United States. Merkel decided to change her tone.

Practiced in Platitudes

It seems just as likely that the G-8 nations will also hide behind platitudes -- an approach in which they are well-versed -- when they meet in L'Aquila. Their leaders have often issued pleasant-sounding closing statements that were followed by little action, including pronouncements like: We will help Africa develop, we will fight tuberculosis or we will protect the rainforest. Each of these vows to save the world led to a handful of pilot projects -- so that the relevant officials would have something to show for themselves.

What distinguishes this summit from others, however, is that its resolutions will likely set the tone for the even more important gathering at the end of the year. Some Nobel Prize winners have described the Dec. 7-18 United Nations Climate Change Conference in Copenhagen as "the most important conference in the history of mankind," because its resolutions will have an impact far into the future. Climatologists believe that it is critical that emissions reduction begin immediately. To remain at or below the two-degree threshold, they write in their synthesis report, emissions "theoretically speaking, must be reduced by 60 to 80 percent immediately."

In practical terms, however, the negotiators for the UN member states are light years away from mandating a binding trend reversal in global emissions. At recent preliminary negotiations for the Copenhagen conference at the Maritim Hotel in Bonn, the delegates became bogged down in details, because they knew that their governments are not prepared to make real concessions.

"We want to see a greater emphasis placed on the importance of regional cooperation in climate protection," said a Japanese representative. "We want to see the phrase 'technology transfer' replaced with 'technology implementation,'" the Ugandan delegate demanded. It continued like that for two weeks.

The frustration could clearly be sensed in the hallways outside the meeting rooms. "We are treading water because the Americans are not moving forward," said an Indonesian delegate. "We are disappointed at the way Japan, Canada and Russia are blocking everything," said the Brazilian negotiator. "A few Western countries are trying to assign the responsibility for CO2 emissions to developing countries, to divert attention away from their own failure," China's special ambassador for climate negotiations said.

US delegation head Jonathan Pershing, whose full beard gives him something of the air of a Californian hippie, was on the next floor up. "If the US would reduce its emissions to zero, we would only see a delay in global warming of a few years because emissions from developing nations grow so fast," he told SPIEGEL in an interview.

Pershing is right. China's emissions have more than doubled since 1990. Indonesia's clearing of forests makes it the world's third-largest source of CO2. Greenhouse gas emissions are also significantly on the rise in India.

The Climate Debt

But, according to the World Resources Institute, almost one-third of CO2 emissions originate in the US. Meanwhile one in 14 CO2 molecules comes from Germany, a relatively small country. This is what emerging nations refer to as "historic climate debt."

The G-8 nations -- the US, Germany, Japan, Russia, Canada, Italy, Britain and France -- make up only 13 percent of the world population today. But they have been the source of more than 60 percent of the carbon dioxide emitted since 1850 for energy production. The United States wants to play down the importance of this climate debt and force emerging countries in particular to do their part. The Americans want these nations to make binding commitments to action, rather than just setting CO2 targets.

Obama himself, however, will see his hands tied in Copenhagen by the US's new lax national climate law, assuming it doesn't get rejected before then. The law calls for only a 4 percent reduction in CO2 emissions by 2020 compared to 1990 levels, not the 40 percent reduction environmentalists and climatologists say is necessary.

This has prompted Germany's chief negotiator on climate protection, Environment Minister Sigmar Gabriel, to start thinking about unorthodox solutions. Gabriel believes that it is possible to accommodate the Americans. "If they cannot commit themselves to suitable reductions by 2020, they should at least make a binding commitment to reduce their emissions all the more sharply by 2025 or 2030," says Gabriel.

To be able to work out such solutions in time for the Copenhagen conference, Gabriel wants the G-8 nations to now put their emissions reduction schedules on the table and make billions available to help developing nations. This is the only way, he argues, to build the trust which is necessary between the highly industrialized counties on the one side and the developing and emerging economies on the other, if a consensus is to be reached in Copenhagen.

Gabriel summed up his wish in his typically pithy fashion: "Show us your curves."

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