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Tired of Waiting

This past Monday marked the beginning of 16th Conference of the Parties (COP) of the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) in Cancun, Mexico. Each successive COP is tasked with moving all member nations toward a binding agreement on global climate change action to replace the Kyoto Protocol which is set to expire at the end of 2012.

Previous recent COPs held in Bali and Copenhagen were both memorable for failing to deliver on high expectations of a binding global agreement and now the pressure is on in Cancun to deliver such an agreement.

Needless to say, attempts to forge an international agreement on climate action have proven to be less of a rational, calm, and diplomatic affair; and more so a series of high energy, high stakes, emotional and, at times non-transparent, interactions between duelling nation states and NGOs. As another COP kicks off I am sure we are in for another interesting case study in international environmental diplomacy.

The lines in the sand have been drawn and defended throughout previous COPs and the heated rhetoric is already starting to flow. Much is at stake in developing an international binding agreement dealing with climate change. From a broad perspective, causes of climate change can be traced to specific geo-political regions while the consequences typically diffuse world-wide with little concern for such geo-political boundaries. How does an international agreement distribute responsibilities and remediation in such a situation?

Compounding such difficulties is the fact that although there are claims of emerging scientific consensus on the existence of human-caused climate change, there is little consensus on any of the finer details beyond its mere existence. Nearly every climate scientist holds dear their own distinct predictive model of climate change and nearly every candid climate scientist will admit that there are more uncertainties than certainties in the current state of knowledge. How does an international agreement distribute responsibilities and remediation in such a situation?

Furthermore, any international binding agreement will, by its very nature, seek to alter contemporary lifestyles and economic institutions around the world. This not only necessary in our response to climate change, but may even be desirable given the recent financial collapse. Yet, which national leaders are going to be the first to cede ground from this global moralistic perspective and most assuredly face political fall-out at home, as we witnessed with the development and ratification of the Kyoto Protocol? Climate change is more than only an environmental issue as it contains economic, social, cultural, and

judicial facets—how does an international agreement distribute responsibilities and remediation in such a situation?

I can only hope that if an international agreement is reached that it be more robust than the Kyoto Protocol which it is designed to replace. For all its good intentions, the Kyoto Protocol has been ineffective at holding its signatories feet to the fire, and for this it is lacking in moral legitimacy.

While I hope for the generation of such an international agreement, or at least some meaningful groundwork towards such, in Cancun over the next few days I will be sure to keep doing all that I can to reduce my own environmental footprint. Although an international agreement has a certain degree of elegance it also has a myriad host of obstacles and hurdles, and in the meantime it is important to remember that meaningful change most often starts at home.

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