

05/05/2010

The Copenhagen Protocol

How China and India Sabotaged the UN Climate Summit

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What really went on at the UN climate conference in Copenhagen? Secret recordings obtained by SPIEGEL reveal how China and India prevented an agreement on tackling climate change at the crucial meeting. The powerless Europeans were forced to look on as the agreement failed.

At some point his patience was at an end, as depleted as the oxygen in the small conference room. He could no longer keep still, not even for a second.

The words suddenly burst out of French President Nicolas Sarkozy: "I say this with all due respect and in all friendship." Everyone in the room, which included two dozen heads of state, knew that he meant precisely the opposite of what he was saying. "With all due respect to China," the French president continued, speaking in French.

The West, Sarkozy said, had pledged to reduce greenhouse gas emissions by 80 percent. "And in return, China, which will soon be the biggest economic power in the world, says to the world: Commitments apply to you, but not to us."

Sarkozy, gaining momentum, then said: "This is utterly unacceptable!" And then the French president stoked the diplomatic conflict even further when he said: "This is about the essentials, and one has to react to this hypocrisy!"

A hush came over the room. Even the mobile phones stopped ringing. It was Friday, Dec. 18, 2009, at about 4 p.m. That was the moment when the world leaders meeting in Copenhagen **abandoned their efforts to save the world.**

The Summit within the Summit

The world's most powerful politicians were gathered in the "Arne Jacobsen" conference room in Copenhagen's Bella Center, negotiating ways to protect the world's climate. US President Barack Obama was perched on the edge of a wooden chair with blue upholstery, talking to German Chancellor Angela Merkel and British Prime Minister Gordon Brown. The blue turban of Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh was bobbing over the tops of a few hastily assembled potted plants. The meeting was soon dubbed the "mini-summit of the 25."

Ethiopian Prime Minister Meles Zenawi was there, representing the African continent, and Mexican President Felipe Calderon was standing nearby. Only one important world leader was missing, an absence that came to symbolize the failure of the climate summit: Chinese Prime Minister Wen Jiabao.

Instead, Obama was sitting across from China's deputy foreign minister, He Yafei. It was a diplomatic affront that would be mentioned during the course of the meeting.

Even three months after the noteworthy events at the climate summit in Copenhagen, the Chinese leader still seemed to feel a need to publicly justify his absence in the room at the time. And those who were present are still not entirely clear as to what was actually agreed during the negotiations.

Since the Copenhagen showdown, international climate politics have faltered like a mortally wounded animal -- something that can also be observed at the meeting taking place this week at the Petersberg conference center outside Bonn, Germany.

Reconstructing the Decisive Meeting

The public was kept almost completely in the dark about the hectic crisis meeting that took place behind closed doors in Copenhagen and dragged on for 10 hours. The Chinese are said to have openly warned their Danish hosts against indiscretions.

Now, for the first time, SPIEGEL is in a position to reconstruct the decisive hour-and-a-half meeting on that fateful Friday. Audio recordings of historical significance, in the form of two sound files that total 1.2 gigabytes in size and that were created by accident, serve as the basis for the analysis. The Copenhagen protocol shows how the meeting Gordon Brown called "the most important conference since the Second World War" ended in a diplomatic zero. As if viewed through a magnifying glass, the contours of a new political world order become visible, one shaped by the new self-confidence of the Asians and the powerlessness of the West.

"What are we waiting for?" Chancellor Merkel says in English, hoping to bring the faltering negotiations back on track. Meanwhile, more than 100 other world leaders, people who apparently had no say in the matter, were getting bored in the plenary chamber next door. They apparently believed, erroneously, as it turned out, that the 25-member mini-summit would produce some sort of document.

In fact, an oppressive mood had already spread through the halls of the congress center. The motley collection of environmental activists had been locked out of the conference by then, leaving only their abandoned booths standing in the no man's land of the world's supposed saviors.

'Any Objections'

Danish Prime Minister Lars Lokke Rasmussen opened the meeting in the Arne Jacobsen room. Even though he was the host, Rasmussen lacked experience in the rules of engagement on the international stage, and he seemed a little disoriented in the maze of international climate politics. He said that a draft agreement had been worked out which reflected the concerns of the participating countries. "I think we have to now ask if there is some major objections," he said quietly in his not-quite-perfect English.

With little assurance left in his voice, he turned over the microphone to one of his legal advisers, who rattled off the corrections of mistakes that had crept into the hastily written draft agreement.

When has it ever been the case at an international conference that world leaders had to concern themselves with such minor details? "I don't think anything like this has ever happened, and I'm not sure whether something like this will ever happen again," says UN chief negotiator Yvo de Boer.

Environment ministers and bureaucrats had presented their bosses with a 200-page bundle of documents, because they had been unable to agree on emissions levels, reduction measures and control measures. When the heads of state and government arrived on Thursday, they were shocked by the chaos their subordinates had left for them after 10 days of negotiations.

'We Need Some More Time'

On Thursday evening, Denmark's Queen Margrethe hosted a gala dinner for world leaders at the parliament building. On the sidelines of the event, the Chinese leader heard a rumor that the US government had scheduled an important round of negotiations without inviting

him personally. Wen Jiabao was offended and withdrew to his hotel room, where, to the irritation of the other leaders, he remained for much of the remainder of the conference.

Instead, he sent his negotiator He Yafei to the nightly meeting of world leaders. Together, they asked the Danish host to reduce the maze of documents to a few, key pages. They still contained bold statements, such as the goal of a 50-percent reduction in global CO₂ emissions by 2050 (compared with a 1990 benchmark). That kind of a commitment would have required that the United States, China and India also agree to cut their greenhouse gas emissions in half. At that point, Achim Steiner of the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) was still rejoicing over the potential agreement, saying: "This isn't a train wreck. It really has teeth!"

With a success of this magnitude, the European leaders, especially Angela Merkel, would have been able to return home for the Christmas holidays with their heads held high.

Playing for Time

But now, on Friday afternoon, the Chinese negotiator looked at the document from the previous evening and said: "Mr. President, given the importance of the paper, we do not want to be rushed... We need some more time." Yafei is one of his country's top diplomats, a cosmopolitan man with frameless glasses who has a better command of the English language than many of the world leaders who were sitting at the same negotiating table.

He Yafei was playing for time and constantly requesting interruptions, because he needed to confer with his prime minister, Wen Jiabao. Merkel upped the pressure, saying: "So we just have to go."

There were still two important placeholders, X and Y, in the draft agreement. They marked the spots where the percentage targets for reductions in greenhouse gas emissions, for the industrialized nations and emerging countries respectively, were to be entered. "We cannot go over and say nice things but x and y wait please one year or so," Merkel said. The German chancellor was determined to secure a commitment from China and India to participate in the climate protection efforts.

But China and India were unwilling to make that commitment. Behind the backs of the Europeans, they had apparently reached their own agreement with Brazil and South Africa. "We have all along been saying 'Don't prejudge options!,'" said a representative of the Indian delegation*, prompting Merkel to burst out: "Then you don't want legally binding!"

This, in turn, prompted the Indian negotiator to say angrily: "Why do you prejudge options? All along you have said don't prejudge options and now you are prejudging options. This is not fair!" Chinese negotiator He Yafei stood by this remark.

Breach of Process

British Prime Minister Brown, speaking in a sonorous voice, tried to mediate. "I think it's important to recognize what we are trying to do here," he said. "We are trying to cut emissions by 2020 and by 2050. That is the only way we can justify being here. It is the only way we can justify the public money that is being spent to do so. It is the only way we can justify the search for a treaty."

Norwegian Prime Minister Jens Stoltenberg pointed out that it was the Indians who had proposed the inclusion of concrete emissions reductions for the industrialized nations in the treaty.

But India had made an about-face within hours and was no longer interested in his own proposal. An unidentified member of the group was outraged, saying: "I am surprised that our Indian friend would say that an amendment by the Indian environmental minister this morning is no longer there. This is a breach of process."

Merkel took one last stab. The reduction of greenhouse gases by 50 percent, that is, limiting global warming to 2 degrees Celsius, was a reference to what is written in the IPCC (Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change) report. Then she directed a dramatic appeal at the countries seeking to block the treaty: "Let us suppose 100 percent reduction, that is, no CO₂ in the developed countries anymore. Even then, with the (target of) two degrees, you have to reduce carbon emissions in the developing countries. That is the truth."

Refusing to Give In

Of course, Chinese negotiator He Yafei knew perfectly well that Merkel was right, which was precisely why he could not possibly agree with her proposal. It would have meant that

China was required to check its economic development. Double-digit growth figures would no longer be an option for the Asian giant.

The Chinese diplomat refused to give in to the Europeans' demands, saying: "Thank you for all these suggestions. We have said very clearly that we must not accept the 50 percent reductions. We cannot accept it."

This was the point where Sarkozy, who had had enough, accused the Chinese of hypocrisy. As one of the attendees recalls: "There was a sense that we had reached a logjam, an abyss."

Finally, the politician spoke up whose claim to being the most powerful man in the world would soon be based solely on his many nuclear weapons: US President Barack Obama. By that point, hardly anyone in the room dared to even bite into the soggy mozzarella sandwiches that were constantly being served.

Obama Stabs the Europeans in the Back

Like the Europeans, the US president was also intent on securing a commitment to protect the climate from the new economic superpowers, China and India. "I think it is important to note that there are important equities that have to be considered," he said, with a distinctive note in his voice that suggested the foresight of a statesman.

Obama reminded his fellow leaders that the industrialized nations are also dependent on the will of their citizens to contribute to saving the climate. "From the perspective of the developed countries, in order for us to be able to mobilize the political will within each of our countries to not only engage in substantial mitigation efforts ourselves, which are very difficult, but to also then channel some of the resources from our countries into developing countries, is a very heavy lift," Obama said. Then, speaking directly to China, he added: "If there is no sense of mutuality in this process, it is going to be difficult for us to ever move forward in a significant way."

Finally, Obama addressed the diplomatic snub the Chinese prime minister had delivered with his absence: "I am very respectful of the Chinese representative here but I also know there is a premier here who is making a series of political decisions. I know he is giving you instructions at this stage."

But then Obama stabbed the Europeans in the back, saying that it would be best to shelve the concrete reduction targets for the time being. "We will try to give some opportunities for its resolution outside of this multilateral setting ... And I am saying that, confident that, I think China still is as desirous of an agreement, as we are."

'Other Business to Attend To'

At the end of his little speech, which lasted 3 minutes and 42 seconds, Obama even downplayed the importance of the climate conference, saying "Nicolas, we are not staying until tomorrow. I'm just letting you know. Because all of us obviously have extraordinarily important other business to attend to."

Some in the room felt queasy. Exactly which side was Obama on? He couldn't score any domestic political points with the climate issue. The general consensus was that he was unwilling to make any legally binding commitments, because they would be used against him in the US Congress. Was he merely interested in leaving Copenhagen looking like an assertive statesman?

It was now clear that Obama and the Chinese were in fact in the same boat, and that the Europeans were about to drown.

The Chinese negotiator confidently rejected Obama's criticism, saying: "I am speaking not on behalf of myself, but on behalf of China." Then he took on the French president's gaffe, and said: "I heard President Sarkozy talk about hypocrisy. I think I'm trying to avoid such words myself. I am trying to go into the arguments and debate about historical responsibility."

History Lesson

He Yafei decided to give the group a lesson in history: "People tend to forget where it is from. In the past 200 years of industrialization developed countries contributed more than 80 percent of emissions. Whoever created this problem is responsible for the catastrophe we are facing."

What a humiliation it was for Chancellor Merkel. Photos were taken later on that showed her wearing a pink silk blazer, but with her face looking gray and exhausted. She attempted to

show the world a dignified façade, speaking of a "new world climate order" that had been reached in Copenhagen. But speaking privately after the meeting, it was clear that she was furious about its failure. She swore to herself that she would not risk the same kind of humiliation again. The chancellor was deeply disturbed by the Chinese and Indian show of power, as well as by Obama's maneuvering.

She must have felt very lonely in that room, with its mustard-colored walls. And the Chinese game wasn't over yet. "I have a procedural question," He Yafei said. "I kindly ask for a suspension of a few minutes for consultation. We need some time of consultation." What he meant was that he wanted to make a phone call to his prime minister.

"How long?" Merkel asked.

The chairman, Rasmussen, made the decision. "We meet again (at) half past four. Forty minutes."

Decisions Made Elsewhere

But the meeting did not reconvene. The key decisions were made elsewhere -- without the Europeans. The Indians had reserved a room one floor down, where Prime Minister Singh met with his counterparts, Brazilian President Lula da Silva and South Africa President Jacob Zuma. Wen Jiabao was also there.

Shortly before 7 p.m., US President Obama burst into the cozy little meeting of rising economic powers.

At that meeting, everything that was important to the Europeans was removed from the draft agreement, particularly the concrete emissions reduction targets. Later on, the Europeans -- like the other diplomats from all the other powerless countries, who had been left to wait in the plenary chamber -- had no choice but to rubberstamp the meager result.

'Too Complicated'

There is one politician who thought a great deal about his experiences in the Arne Jacobsen room in December 2009: Mexican Environment Minister Juan Elvira Quesada. His country will host the next major climate summit this November.

In Copenhagen, Quesada learned that the existing procedure is ineffective. "When more than 190 countries are supposed to reach a consensus, it's simply too complicated," he says.

At the November meeting in Cancun, he says, he would prefer not to even touch the document that was painstakingly drafted in that small group of world leaders. "If we were to simply move forward with the Copenhagen paper, it would be a disaster."

**Eds Note: In the print edition of DER SPIEGEL, the comments from the Indian negotiator were attributed to Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh. Merkel's Chancellery attributes this and following comments to a low ranking Indian negotiator.*

Translated from the German by Christopher Sultan

URL: <http://www.spiegel.de/international/world/0,1518,692861,00.html>

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