

# THE UNITED STATES AND CLIMATE NEGOTIATIONS

November 2010, Cancún

## Key messages

- The fossil fuel industry and polarized politics killed US domestic climate legislation, and have negatively impacted the United States' contribution to international climate discussions
- The Obama administration has acted unfairly and aggressively in the negotiations to try to extort unreasonable concessions from developing countries
- The Obama administration has proposed a "new paradigm" of voluntary pledges - rather than binding, science-based mitigation commitments - that threatens to completely undermine the current climate architecture
- The Obama administration must stop pretending it can lead internationally, and must start leading domestically, so the US can fulfill its responsibilities to its own citizens and the world

## Failed tactics

In the run-up to the December 2009 UN Copenhagen climate summit and in the months afterward, many countries felt compelled to tolerate US efforts to weaken international climate policies because they believed this was the only way to bring it on board, given the precarious state of US domestic climate legislation. However, climate legislation was not taken up by the US Senate in 2010, and it never became law.

The November 2010 elections in the US have made clear that the US won't be getting on board any time soon. Almost all the new Republicans joining the Senate are climate deniers. Control of the House of Representatives is now in the hands of Republicans, under the leadership of the very conservative John Boehner, who is known for saying, "The idea that carbon dioxide is a carcinogen, that it is harmful to our environment, is almost comical."

## US attempts to lower international mitigation efforts

The US is the only wealthy country that has not ratified the Kyoto Protocol, the only international instrument related to climate change that contains legally binding emission reduction targets. The first period of emission reduction commitments under the Kyoto Protocol ends in 2012, after which a second commitment period is supposed to start.

Instead of supporting this second commitment period, at the Copenhagen climate talks in December 2009, the US championed the "Copenhagen

Accord," a weak, nonbinding document that features national pledges to reduce emissions that countries individually put forward, regardless of science, equity, and what national pledges add up to in aggregate. (The Kyoto Protocol assigns an aggregate and individual mitigation targets for developed countries.)

The US claims not to take a position on the Kyoto Protocol, but the "pledge-based" or "bottom-up" approach it has promoted in the Accord is, in practice, an attempt to replace the Protocol with a far weaker substitute.

## Bad behavior at the UNFCCC

The United States has acted aggressively with regard to international climate negotiations to try and win concessions from developing countries. For example, US Special Climate Envoy Todd Stern has vigorously pressed to shift the burden to address climate change onto many developing countries by calling for an agreement that is "legally symmetrical" with "the same elements binding on all countries, except the least developed."

In another example, to compel developing countries to associate with the Copenhagen Accord, the Obama administration threatened to withhold climate finance from countries outspoken in their opposition to it. Obama carried out this threat in the cases of Bolivia and Ecuador.

Recently, the US articulated that it will block forward movement on establishing a global climate fund in

## Key issues for negotiations

- The US must support a science and equity-based international climate regime in which developed countries – including the US – take on binding emission reduction commitments.
- The US should plug a comparable emission reduction commitment into the section of the Bali Action Plan designed for it, and end its efforts to kill the Kyoto Protocol.
- The US should support the establishment in Cancun of a Global Climate Fund designed within and under the authority of the UNFCCC, with no role for the World Bank.
- The US must commit to contribute its fair share of climate finance from public sources.

Cancun if its demands on mitigation and transparency from developing countries, especially China, aren't met.

Stern issued an ultimatum at the Geneva Dialogue on Climate Finance in September, saying:

“We are not going to move on the Green Fund [a UNFCCC climate fund to help developing countries adapt to and mitigate climate change] and the \$100 billion [in long-term financing that the US had previously promised to help mobilize] if the issues that were central to the Copenhagen Accord, that were part of the balance of the Copenhagen Accord, including mitigation and transparency, don't also move.”

These statements and others have led many in civil society and developing countries to charge the US with unethically holding climate finance hostage.

### A Way Forward

**Mitigation.** It is clear that domestic politics at this time will not allow the United States to lead global efforts to tackle climate change. The Obama administration must stop pretending it can lead and cease its efforts to drag the rest of the world down to its very low level of ambition, when what the climate crisis demands is far higher ambition from all developed countries.

In 2007, international climate negotiators developed a solution to bring the slow-moving US on board with global climate action—a solution that won the support of the Bush administration. The 2007 Bali Action Plan included a carve-out for the United States: a special section (paragraph 1(b)(i)) to ensure that the US would make emissions re-

ductions that were comparable to those made by other wealthy countries under the Kyoto Protocol negotiating track.

Instead of trying to torpedo the Kyoto Protocol, the US should take on a comparable commitment (increasing its shamefully low 3-4 percent below 1990 levels by 2020) under its own special section of the Bali Action Plan while other developed countries continue with emissions reductions under the Protocol.

This would allow the world to move forward and avoid the danger of a gap between Kyoto commitment periods, during which binding emissions reduction targets for other developed countries could disappear. The European Union, rather than continuing its strategy of catering to the US, could reemerge as a climate leader and take up the cause of binding, equitable, and science-based emissions targets.

**Finance.** The US must also withdraw its threat to hold climate finance hostage. While earlier this year winning praise for being the first developed country to seriously engage in conversations on establishing a Global Climate Fund, the Obama climate team is now threatening to sabotage the process.

The US must work for the establishment in Cancun of a Global Climate Fund under the authority of the UNFCCC that is designed within the Convention. The World Bank – with its poor record on democratic governance, social justice, and the environment – should have no role in the Global Climate Fund. The US must also commit to contribute its fair share of climate finance from public sources.

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International Forum on Globalization  
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