

# Doha: Towards a grand compromise in climate negotiations

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Seldom has a global conference been so devoid of positive expectations than the coming United Nations Climate Conference that will take place in Doha, Qatar, in late November and early December. In fact, people could be forgiven for thinking a joke was being played on them, given that the meeting is being held in Qatar, one of the world's leading producers of oil, which is a key reason for the world's climate woes.

But seldom has a meeting been as necessary for the future of the planet as the Doha meeting, also known as "Conference of Parties 18" or COP 18. It is this massive gap between the planetary emergency and frustratingly primeval inter-state realpolitik that inflames global public opinion, especially against the two top carbon emitters, the United States and China.

## The Climate Stalemate

The poor prospects for Doha stem, in large part, from the contradictory prescriptions that emerged from the last year's climate summit in Durban, South Africa (COP 17). The meeting approved two instruments; the first enjoins developed or "Annex 1" countries to commit to a second round of cuts under the Kyoto Protocol; the second, the so-called Durban Platform for Action, gives both Annex 1 and developing countries until 2015 to make commitments to make greenhouse reductions and until 2020 to begin implementing them.

The United States and most of the developed countries will go to Doha with little sense of urgency or of responsibility. They prefer to be guided solely by the Durban Program of Action, which effectively gives them a seven-year "grace period" before taking action on their emissions. Since every year that action is postponed brings the world closer to climate disaster, the Durban Platform will surely rate as one of the most ill-conceived agreements in history, probably at par with the 1928 Kellogg-Briand Treaty, which "outlawed" war without requiring its signatories to take practical steps to achieve this goal.

For its part, the Group of 77 and China, the so-called developing country bloc, will arrive in Doha choosing to emphasize the first instrument, whereby the Annex 1 countries pledge to make a second round of commitments to reduce their carbon emissions under the Kyoto Protocol, which ends this

year. There are equally serious problems with this approach. First, having brazenly behaved as a global outlaw by refusing to live up to a convention it helped draft, the United States is not about to make any new commitments under the Kyoto framework. Indeed, its not taking its Kyoto commitments seriously and getting away with it has encouraged Canada, a state headed by climate skeptics, to declare its independence from the Kyoto process.

The second problem is that the world has changed since Kyoto was drafted in 1992. The big emerging economies, also known as the “BRICS,” burst onto the world stage over the last two decades, with fossil-fuel based super-industrialization plans that have made them among the world’s biggest carbon emitters. India is now the world’s 4<sup>th</sup> biggest carbon emitter.

And China has become the world’s biggest emitter, responsible for a whopping 29 per cent of global emissions in 2011, with its emissions rising by nine per cent from its level in 2010. China]—whose per capita of 7.2 tons per person is now well within the range of 6 to 19 tons per person of Annex 1 countries—comes to Doha determined to lodge all responsibility for making cuts on the Annex 1 countries while resisting making mandatory reduction commitments on the ground that it is still a “developing country.”

This, despite the fact that it is now the world’s second biggest economy and is scheduled to drive past the United States in less than two decades. But few among the Annex 1 countries are likely to buy Beijing’s line. Indeed, while not placing Beijing at the same level as a climate outlaw like the United States, a number of developing countries, though not willing to directly confront China, are said to see it as an opportunist hiding behind the skirts of the Group of 77 and are upset at its hard-line stance against making mandatory commitments.

It is clear that despite their seemingly antagonistic positions, the United States and China actually complement each other since their intransigent stands prevents the achievement of a tough global agreement that would finally put a stop to their uncontrolled emissions.

With the two top carbon emitters coming to Doha determined to avoid any binding reductions, Doha faces the danger of being a waste of time, an insignificant way station on the way to 2020, when countries will—theoretically—begin implementing their commitments. By which time, of course, things may well be too late.

## **The Deluge**

The diplomatic maneuvering might have been tolerable were the effects of climate change not expected to be significant until the end of this century, as many scientists thought back when the Kyoto Protocol was being negotiated and ratified in the early 1990’s. But this anachronistic North-South minuet becomes downright criminal given our collective realization now that the full fury of climate change is lashing our planet much, much earlier than expected.

Superstorm Sandy, which smashed onto New York City and New Jersey over three weeks ago, probably removed most remaining doubts in the United States that we are living in times when the new normal is abnormal, except the most antedeluvian Tea Party climate denialists.

Sandy came on the heels of other extreme weather events. Over the last year alone, 97 per cent of the Greenland ice sheet melted in July, more than at any other time in 30 years of satellite observation. This July was the hottest July in the US ever since they started keeping records. A normally dry Beijing had the worst flooding since 1951. Long-delayed monsoon rains in India resulted in the second drought in four years. Last July also, a protracted “rainstorm with no name,”

as many Filipinos termed it, persisted for over a week in the Philippines and plunged Manila into a watery disaster that is probably one of the worst in recent history.

A year earlier, similar floods in Thailand resulted in what the World Bank estimated as the fourth costliest disaster in history. As for the small island states, the most vulnerable victims of global warming, the most recent data shows that the rate of sea level rise during the first decade of the twenty-first century far surpassed previous projections.

World Bank President Kim Yong Ding, not a person given to exaggeration, warns that with the current drift in global climate politics, the aim articulated during the Bali climate talks in 2007 of keeping the rise in global mean temperature to 2 degrees Celsius is now well nigh impossible, with a 3 to 3.5 degree increase now “probable.”

The Bank’s recent comprehensive study of a world where the average temperature has risen by 4 degrees warns that “A 4°C world is likely to be one in which communities, cities and countries would experience severe disruptions, damage, and dislocation.” It concludes: “There is no certainty that adaptation to a 4°C world is possible.”

### **A Glimmer of Hope?**

Yet, as in most other times when the world seems to be about to be plunged in darkness, there emerges a glimmer of hope, a hint of the emergence of a set of circumstances that hints at the possibility of decisive action.

The truth of the matter is that no movement on the front of climate diplomacy is possible without a deal between the United States and China, just as during the Cold War, global peace could not be maintained without explicit and implicit agreement on the “rules of the game” between the two antagonists, the United States and the Soviet Union.

If dread at the probable catastrophic effects of thermonuclear war was what forced the antagonists to compromise during the Cold War—as they did famously during the Cuban Missile Crisis—so could fear of the unimaginable impacts of climate change serve as the catalyst of a compromise between Washington and Beijing. It is safe to say that, while the irresponsible chatter of climate skeptics fills the air in Washington, responsible policymakers there and in Beijing share this alarm of what is likely to come absent meaningful action.

Climate skeptics, political opportunists, corporate interests, and short-sighted growth-focused technocrats have been the main barrier to initiatives to break the stalemate in Beijing and Washington. Yet, as a number of observers have pointed out, certain circumstances have recently emerged that may embolden responsible leaders on both sides to reach out to each other. [i]

In the United States, it is the combination of the pre-electoral vengeance of Superstorm Sandy and the fresh electoral mandate of President Barack Obama. Unmentionable during most of his campaign for reelection, global warming was on the president’s mind during his first post-election press conference, where he declared that he was a “firm believer that climate change is real and that it is impacted by human behavior” and that the US had an “obligation to do something about it.”

Of course, between recognizing climate change and making global commitments lies a wide gulf. Nevertheless, as other leaders have shown in similar circumstances, when political courage is summoned, the politically unrealistic can quickly become reality.

In China, there is currently underway a once-in-a-decade leadership transition. Pundits have characterized the new paramount leader Xi Jinping as someone who is not likely to depart from the policies of the past, including the government's stance in global climate negotiations.

And yet, that the combination of a realistic recognition that the deluge-is-upon-us and courage to act may lead to decisive action cannot be discounted, especially on the part of a new leadership that is hungry for legitimacy in a country whose population has become sensitive to the environmental consequences of the high-speed-growth- at-any-price strategy followed by the earlier generation of leaders.

## **Towards a Grand Compromise**

The Strategic Arms Limitations Treaties (SALT) between the United States and the Soviet Union made nuclear war between them much less likely in the last quarter of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Similarly, a grand compromise or bargain between China and the United States to mutually and immediately undertake deep cuts in their GHG emissions would serve as the breakthrough that would make other significant carbon emitters fall in line and make possible the radical ramping down of carbon emissions that would keep global mean temperature from rising above 2 degrees Celsius by the end of the century.

For the United States, this would mean committing to at least a 40-50 per cent cut from its level of GHG emissions in 1990. For China, the corresponding reduction might be proportionally less, taking into consideration the principles of common but differentiated responsibility and historical responsibility for carbon emissions.

This US-China deal could be the centerpiece of a broader, more comprehensive agreement that could include the following:

Other Annex 1 countries must also agree to very deep mandatory cuts in their greenhouse gas emissions—with cuts being in the range of at least 40-50 per cent from 1990 levels by 2020.

Other "Big Emerging Economies," meaning, among others, India, Brazil, and South Africa must also be subjected to mandatory cuts, though, as in China's case, this would be at rates lower than the Annex 1 countries, following the principles of historical responsibility and common but differentiated responsibility.

These binding commitments must be made and implemented right away, instead of waiting for 2015 to propose commitments and 2020 to begin implementing them as stipulated in the weak Durban Platform.

Industrializing developing countries that are low or insignificant emitters of greenhouse gases must be encouraged, though not required, to make binding commitments as well, to underline to the Annex 1 countries and the Big Emerging Economies the urgency of arriving as soon as possible at a tough global agreement for the sake of all humanity.

Finally, Annex 1 countries must immediately make commitments and transfer funds to the promised but as yet empty \$100 billion Green Climate Fund to assist developing countries to undertake mitigation action and to adapt to climate change, their contributions being assessed according to their historical and current contributions to GHG emissions.

## **Beyond Kyoto and Durban**

This approach goes beyond both the frameworks of the anachronistic Second Commitment Period of the Kyoto Protocol and the inutile Durban Platform. Of course, as with Kyoto and Durban, it would be best for such a comprehensive agreement to be adopted under the umbrella of the United Nations talks to give it legitimacy as well as mandatory sanctions. While the bargain might be too late for the Doha meeting, which begins this week, it could be the focus of intense negotiations soon after and be ready for approval during COP 19 (the 19<sup>th</sup> Conference of Parties), the next climate gathering that will be held someplace in Eastern Europe in 2013.

Of course, a multilateral agreement with a grand compromise between China and the United States at its heart will not be enough by itself to reverse the negative climate trends. Only a comprehensive transformation of the global economy from a global capitalist economy based on lusting after ever increasing profits via the incessant conversion of nature into dead commodities to a low-growth economy that promotes equity along with a harmonious relationship between society and the biosphere will decisively reverse the process. But the Grand Compromise is a necessary element in the broader solution.

Doha is likely to become another 20<sup>th</sup> century-style diplomatic tit-for-tat between the Group of 77 and China and the Annex 1 countries. But the patience of the world is wearing thin, especially when it comes to the United States and China, the globe's leading carbon culprits. If the only thing that Doha can do is to expose the futility of the old strategies and the urgent necessity of exploring of new, old negotiating positions that can lead to a breakthrough before it is too late for all of us, then this diplomatic charade masking as serious climate negotiations will have fulfilled its function.

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\* <http://www.tni.org/article/towards-grand-compromise-climate-negotiations>

\* Walden Bello

Author of more than 14 books, Bello was awarded the Right Livelihood Award (also known as the Alternative Nobel Prize) in 2003 for "... outstanding efforts in educating civil society about the effects of corporate globalisation, and how alternatives to it can be implemented." Bello has been described by the Economist as the man "who popularised a new term: deglobalisation."

Bello predicted the financial crisis several years prior to the current meltdown and is a globally respected figure within the alternative globalisation movement. Canadian author Naomi Klein called him the "world's leading no-nonsense revolutionary."