

China: The Prince of Denmark

Saturday 23 January 2010, by [BELLO Walden](#) (Date first published: 15 January 2010).

Like Hamlet, Shakespeare's conflicted Prince of Denmark, China was caught between conflicting currents in Copenhagen. Its failure to manage these led to its biggest diplomatic debacle in years.

Contents

- [The British Accusation](#)
- [Where China Went Wrong](#)
- [China's Growth Problem](#)

Almost a month after the debacle at the United Nations climate conference in Copenhagen (Conference of Parties or COP 15), the question of who scuttled the talks elicits fury and derision.

Interestingly, in many accounts, President Barack Obama comes across either as a figure who valiantly tries to rescue a doomed conference or as a well-meaning head of state whose hands are unfortunately tied by the realities of US politics

As the villain of the continuing climate drama, Washington has been replaced in much of the media by Beijing. China did make mistakes in Copenhagen, but the media portrayal of it as the spoiler of the climate change negotiations is neither accurate nor fair. Like Hamlet, Shakespeare's conflicted Prince of Denmark, China was caught in multiple crosscurrents in Copenhagen. Its failure to manage these led to one of its biggest diplomatic setbacks in years.

The British Accusation

In the immediate aftermath of the talks, Ed Miliband, Britain's secretary of energy and climate change, charged that an agreement on a 50 per cent global reduction in greenhouse gas emissions by 2050 or on 80 per cent reductions by developed countries was vetoed by China "despite the support of a coalition of developed and the vast majority of developing countries."

Many climate activists would probably have taken Miliband's statement as simply part of the blame game after the controversial ending of a critical conference had it not been seconded—and in detail—by Mark Lynas of the *Guardian*, a British newspaper that is usually critical of the policies of Washington, London, and other northern governments. In a piece provocatively titled "How do I know China Wrecked the Copenhagen Deal? I was in the Room," Lynas described the scene at a key Friday night meeting of selected countries as the clock raced to the conclusion of the conference:

"What I saw was profoundly shocking. The Chinese premier, Wen Jinbao, did not deign to attend the meetings personally, instead sending a second-tier official in the country's foreign ministry to sit opposite Obama himself. To those who would blame Obama and rich countries in general, know this: it was China's representative who insisted that industrialized country targets, previously agreed as an 80% cut by 2050, be taken out of the deal." Why can't we even mention our own

targets?” demanded a furious Angela Merkel. Australia’s prime minister, Kevin Rudd, was annoyed enough to bang his microphone. Brazil’s representative too pointed out the illogicality of China’s position. Why should rich countries not announce even this unilateral cut? The Chinese delegate said no, and I watched, aghast, as Merkel threw up her hands in despair and conceded the point. Now we know why – because China bet, correctly, that Obama would get the blame for the Copenhagen accord’s lack of ambition.”

This account of a relatively low-ranking Chinese official vetoing the naming of unilateral cuts offered by heads of northern countries is shocking until one learns what the *Guardian* piece does not tell you: that the meeting was one of several unofficial meetings of a small number of countries that Obama had called, apparently with the support of host Denmark, in order to impose a deal on the climate conference, and that the drafting of the declaration was, in fact, a violation of an agreed upon conference process.

Where China Went Wrong

Where China went wrong was not so much in opposing the listing of the emission numbers but in agreeing to attend these covert caucuses with Obama and a small group of other heads of state—which included alongside the leaders of selected northern countries those of Brazil, South Africa, and India—that sought to unilaterally draft a declaration. China undoubtedly knew that these meetings undermined the United Nations process since in the days leading to Copenhagen, it had heard its allies in the developing world expose and denounce a covert effort by Denmark to convoke a parallel conference of over 20 countries to push through an unauthorized “Danish text” that advanced a climate agenda favored by the developed countries.

It is perhaps not coincidental that most of the countries invited by Denmark were participants in the “Major Economies Forum on Energy and Climate” first called by President George W. Bush and re-launched before the Copenhagen meeting by President Obama, allegedly to ‘facilitate a candid dialogue among major developed and developing economies.’ The real aim of both the Major Economies Forum and the Danish parallel conference was, in the opinion of some Southern observers, to drive a wedge between the more advanced developing countries and the poorer, least developed, and most vulnerable countries

Second Thoughts?

Having joined the covert Obama caucuses, China then probably realized that it could not lend too much legitimacy to a declaration that issued from them since this would anger the majority of developing countries that were excluded from the meetings, which, as a number of observers noted, resembled the notorious “Green Room” get-togethers of the heavy hitters of international trade during the ministerial conferences of the World Trade Organization. This backtracking probably explains Prime Minister Wen Jiao Bao’s absence from the final caucus to finalize the declaration and China’s fielding instead of a relatively low-ranking official to this meeting attended by selected heads of state. This was the meeting witnessed by Mark Lynas. Blocking the declaration of voluntary emissions reduction figures, which were mainly meant to give the big climate polluters an image of being internationally responsible while not being bound by them, most likely stemmed from the same desire not to give too much prominence to a document being drafted at the margins of the conference.

But by attending the caucuses and participating in the drafting of the unauthorized declaration, China laid itself open to a diplomatic fiasco. Eager to escape the blame for the collapse of what had been billed as the most important conference of our lifetime, the North could sanctimoniously point

to China's blocking the numbers as "proof" of its being the spoiler of the meeting, which is precisely what Britain's Miliband did. At the same time, many developing country negotiators and observers who harbored suspicions of China having a self-serving agenda that was not consistent with that of the global South found confirmation in its joining the Obama caucuses and participating in the drafting of an unauthorized political declaration that the prominent Indian intellectual Praful Bidwai described as a "dirty collusive deal" between the US-led North and the China-led heavy polluters of the South. Despite Beijing's point-by-point arguments in response to the criticisms and accusations attributing the failure of COP15 to China's blocking of key principles in the Accord, the general perception took hold that it was to blame for the failed talks.

To the Chinese leadership, being billed as the villain of Copenhagen must be very frustrating. After all, right before Copenhagen, Beijing promised that it would reduce carbon dioxide emissions per unit of gross domestic product in 2020 by 40 to 45 per cent compared to 2005 levels. Its automobile fuel efficiency standards are now stricter than the US's. It is a global leader in wind and solar energy development. Even Thomas Friedman, no China lover, talks about China's "Green Leap Forward" and how the government is determined to meet the energy challenge "with cleaner, homegrown sources so that its future economy will be less vulnerable to supply shocks and so it doesn't pollute itself to death."

The Real Villain

The reality is that if there was a government that sabotaged the meeting, it was the United States, whose negotiators made clear to the world even before Copenhagen that the US was not yet ready for binding commitments after having evaded its commitments for emissions cuts under the Kyoto Protocol for over a decade. Using opposition at the US Senate as an excuse, Obama's negotiators systematically dampened any hopes for the binding accord that the global public had expected would be the outcome in Copenhagen. The 17 per cent voluntary cut of greenhouse gas emissions from 2005 levels Washington committed after being shamed by those offered by other governments was regarded as a big joke, translating into an insignificant 4 per cent reduction from 1990 levels, which serve as the benchmark for serious cuts.

Whether Obama and his negotiators were right in fearing a right-backlash if they made the US appear too ambitious is a matter of debate, but the truth is that Washington's diplomacy ensured that Copenhagen would be dead on arrival. And one can well understand if Beijing resented Obama's push to engineer a PR triumph via a declaration with high-sounding rhetoric laced with meaningless voluntary commitments but with so little actual commitment on Washington's part in the less than 24 hours he was actually in Copenhagen.

China's Growth Problem

Yet, although one cannot call China the villain of the piece, it did play the role of accomplice through its participation in Obama's unofficial caucuses of the rich and the powerful even as it sought to act as a leader of the "G77 and China" grouping in the formal UN process. The conflicting demands of these two roles underline China's contradictory status in the world: it is simultaneously an economic superpower, one which has a massive imprint on the planet, even as it is a developing country. Its economic and ecological impact on the world is now greater than most developed countries, but its leadership and people continue to see themselves as belonging to the developing world.

In 2009, China displaced the US as the world's biggest automobile market and Germany as the world's no. 1 exporter. According to the US National Intelligence Council, by 2025, China will bypass Japan as the world's second largest economy by 2025 and the US, now the largest, sometime

after 2030.

So fast has China's growth been in the last two decades that, as analyst Zachary Karabell notes, "as many as 300 million people are middle class or upper middle class by any definition, and that number is equivalent to the population of the United States and of the European Union." Yet hundreds of millions of rural Chinese are mired in poverty, earning an average of \$285 a year. Moving up from poverty and hunger is their common aspiration, and Beijing fears that there will be hell to pay if this is thwarted.

Making more and more of its population middle class in order to stave off political unrest is thus the Chinese leadership's overriding goal, and this can only be accomplished, in its view, by continuing on a high-growth path that is dependent, at least in the short term, on coal, of which it is now the world's number one consumer and the use of which has earned it the dubious record of being the world's number one emitter of greenhouse gases. As Richard Heinberg has noted, "while China is quickly becoming the world leader in renewable energy technologies, it has no realistic prospect of phasing out coal without giving up its high GDP growth rates."

China's formal position, leading up to Copenhagen, was that COP 15 should come up with a legally binding agreement committing the US and other industrialized countries that have contributed over 80 per cent of the accumulated carbon dioxide in the atmosphere to deep cuts in their greenhouse gas emissions while limiting action demanded from developing countries like itself to voluntary targets. Yet so destabilizing is China's coal-dependent high growth strategy that even if COP 15 had produced an agreement specifying mandatory cuts from the developed countries, the pressure on Beijing to agree to similar obligatory cuts would grow in the coming years as it overtook Japan as the world's second largest economy and closed in on the US. And the pressure would come not just from the North but the South as well.

Thus the single-minded dedication to high-speed growth, which is the axis around which both its domestic and foreign policies spin, has made it in China's interest to put off as long as possible the day when it will have to agree to mandatory limits on its greenhouse gas emissions. This is why one cannot say that the weak Obama-brokered accord that came out of Copenhagen and was mainly meant to accommodate the United States was not also in synch with what Beijing perceived to be in its own interests.

The planet, however, cannot wait. And the idea that one can deliver a US-style middle class lifestyle for the bulk of its population without provoking a climatic crisis that would boomerang on its own people is a dangerous illusion. Until it finally gets up the courage to turn away from the globally destabilizing high-growth development path pioneered by the North, Beijing will be condemned to play the role of Hamlet in global climate politics, demanding flexibility as a developing country while covertly colluding in defusing tough climate measures that might obstruct its rise as an economic superpower. It is a tragedy that the world cannot afford to be enacted on the global stage.

by Akbayan! Representative Walden Bello

P.S.

* From Focus on Trade #150, 15 January 2010.

* Walden Bello is a member of the House of Representatives of the Philippines representing Akbayan (Citizens' Action Party), president of the Freedom from Debt Coalition, and senior analyst at the Bangkok-based institute Focus on the Global South.