NTS ALERT

NTS Alert January 2011 (Issue 1)

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CANCÚN AND CLIMATE SECURITY: NEW APPROACHES, MIXED RESULTS

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As with previous annual meetings of the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC), outcomes of the recently concluded 16th Conference of the Parties (COP16) have implications for the future trajectory of climate-related security threats. This NTS Alert explores these implications by analysing the shifts in diplomatic approach which defined the COP16, and evaluating what these shifts might portend for the future of international efforts to address climate change. It investigates some of the primary reasons for participants electing to employ new tactics in 2010, reviews the outcomes of these tactics and questions the relevance of the COP16 for climate-related security threats.

The flags of Mexico and the UN fly near the entrance of the COP16.

Credit: UN Climate Talks Photo Stream

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Introduction

The United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC), which concluded its annual meetings in Cancún, Mexico, on 10 December 2010, saw the goal of reaching a binding emissions reduction agreement slip further from its long-held position of primacy within international climate negotiations. With the relative failures of the 2009 climate negotiations in Copenhagen looming large, contributors to the 16th Conference of the Parties (COP16) elected to push the most contentious issues of the climate discourse to the future and seek agreements in sectors where debate has been less intractable. The results of this shift in approach were varied. The negotiation process avoided paralysis and made concrete progress in areas such as technology transfers and funding for developing countries, cooperation in forest management, monitoring of state-level climate reportage and a wide range of climate

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Recommended Citation: Ewing, J. Jackson, 2011, 'Cancun and Climate Security: New Approaches, Mixed Results', *NTS Alert*, January (Issue 1), Singapore: RSIS Centre for Non-Traditional Security (NTS) Studies for NTS-Asia.

adaptation measures. By steering clear of the seemingly insurmountable obstacles separating many primary actors in the climate negotiations, the COP16 realised some important gains. However, difficult climate change mitigation challenges went unresolved, and many of the entrenched positions that have led to previous diplomatic impasse will continue to problematise UNFCCC negotiations.

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Pragmatism and Low Expectations: Reasons behind the Cancún Approach

Mexican President Felipe Calderon addresses the COP16.
Credit: UN Climate Talks Photo Stream

With the Kyoto Protocol, which forms the foundation of contemporary international emissions regulation, set to expire in 2012, COP meetings from 2007 through 2009 pursued binding agreements on emissions reductions as a primary and urgent goal. However, during the Cancún meetings, it was apparent from early on that an encompassing agreement on reducing greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions would not be forthcoming. Timothy E. Wirth, president of the United Nations Foundation, predicted near the outset of the COP16 that '[t]here will not be a comprehensive climate agreement reached this year, or perhaps for years to come' (Keen, 2010). Wirth's sentiments were echoed by ministerial level negotiators, with Singapore's Senior Minister S. Jayakumar and others agreeing that a 'big bang' approach to emissions control would not be possible (Ramesh, 2010). These initial declarations reveal a shift away from the focus on climate mitigation strategies that had dominated the UNFCCC process for years. Understanding this conspicuous retreat from the pursuit of binding mitigation requirements requires briefly revisiting the fallout from the 2009 COP15 in Copenhagen.

The outcomes of the Copenhagen climate meetings fell far short of expectations that had been building over a period of years. In an attempt to avoid any lag when the structures outlined in the Kyoto Protocol expire, climate negotiators settled upon the Copenhagen meetings as the point at which a grand bargain should be reached that would lead to a sustainable emissions future. As a result, the 2007 meeting in Bali, Indonesia, and the 2008 meetings in Poznań, Poland, both focused mightily on establishing the foundation for a forthcoming comprehensive Copenhagen agreement. When such an agreement proved unattainable, government negotiators, non-governmental organisations (NGOs), UN facilitators and a range of other stakeholders were forced to re-evaluate the efficacy of setting such high stakes for a single conference.

The fallout from the relative failure of Copenhagen was a reduced set of expected outcomes and an attendant shift in the diplomatic environment that informed the Cancún proceedings. Expected outcomes were tempered by the sober realisation that conflicting national interests had not been sufficiently bridged to allow for a wide-ranging compact on emissions control. Meanwhile, the negotiation process was affected by the growing realisation that there was no guarantee that the UNFCCC would continue to be the primary body within which international climate response efforts are centred. The Major Economies Forum on Energy and Climate (MEF) was founded in March 2009 as an arena within which the world's highest emitting countries could meet to complement ongoing discussions at the UNFCCC. While the MEF and other forums such as the G-20 can provide valuable supplemental venues for climate-related discussions, the UNFCCC Secretariat along with the countries, NGOs and other stakeholders outside of these exclusive groups have an interest in keeping discussions primarily within the UNFCCC structure.[1] Thus, while expectations on outcomes were relatively low, pressure upon delegates to deliver *some* meaningful deliverables from within the UNFCCC context was palpable during the COP16 (Morgan, 2010). This dynamic incentivised levels of cooperation among delegates that were lacking in previous years, particularly in areas outside the emissions reduction sphere. In combination, these atmospherics contributed greatly to a set of agreements that form Cancún's primary legacy.[2]

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Outcomes of the COP16

The COP16 had a number of significant outcomes, most notably in the monitoring, financing, technology transfer and adaptation sectors. Progress was made in Cancún on the reporting and verifying of national emissions reductions through standardised self-reporting mechanisms and international verification mechanisms. Specifically, the COP16 outcomes seek to facilitate more detailed reporting of emissions activities in both developed and developing countries, including the submission of new biennial reports (Diringer, 2010). These

inclusions satisfied countries such as the US which cited transparency and effectiveness issues with previous monitoring structures.

In the financing sector, agreements in Cancún solidified previous monetary commitments and created a new framework for the management of financial transfers. Whereas the Copenhagen Accord discussed financial goals for helping vulnerable states address climate-related challenges, the Cancún meetings saw these goals codified into an action plan extending into the 2020s. Notably, this plan establishes a Green Climate Fund as the operational entity for climate finance, installs the World Bank as the facilitator for the creation of the Fund and locks in the pledge of USD30 billion in 'new and additional' resources from developed countries for the period 2010–2012 (Ladislaw, 2010). In the longer term, the agreement states the intention to mobilise USD100 billion of private finance annually by 2020. These developments assuaged some fears that the funding discussions undertaken in Copenhagen would lack adequate follow-up and institutional management capacities.

The transfer of clean energy and adaptation-focused technologies was also made easier via the actions of the COP16, primarily through the establishment of a Technology Mechanism that aims to match technology suppliers with appropriate areas of need (Stavins, 2010). The Technology Mechanism will be comprised of an executive committee working in conjunction with a Climate Technology Centre and Network to recommend technology development and transfer and encourage collaboration among governments, research institutions and the private business sector (Diringer, 2010). This move was seen as a positive sign for developing countries that have long insisted that they require technological assistance, rather than simply financial transfers, in order to address climate-related challenges.

Finally, the COP16 made further progress in the broader field of climate adaptation. Negotiators established the Cancún Adaptation Framework to bolster adaptation efforts of all parties to the UNFCCC, and formed a process to explicitly assist least developed countries (LDCs) with adaptation plans. A standing Adaptation Committee was also proposed in Cancún for future formalisation at the COP17 in Durban, South Africa in 2011. The Committee aims to provide technical support, facilitate information sharing and advise the COP on a range of adaptation-related matters (Diringer, 2010). The Cancún Adaptation Framework consistently emphasised the vulnerability of developing countries and the capacity for developed states to help create greater resiliency for their less wealthy neighbours. Specifically, the Framework 'requests' that developed countries provide the most vulnerable states with 'long-term, scaled-up, [and] predictable' climate adaptation assistance (UNFCCC, 2010). The previously discussed agreements reached on financing and technology transfers suggest that such adaptation assistance is likely to be supported in practice as a result of the Cancún meetings.

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Climate Security and the COP16

As the most inclusive and substantial annual climate change meeting, COP forums have an important influence over climate security calculations. Assessing this influence requires briefly exploring the nature of climate-related security threats. Several points of convergence connect much of the research addressing the potential security implications of a changing climate. Primary among these is the finding that the communities, states and regions which combine natural vulnerabilities to climate change with low capacities to adapt to these changes will face the most acute social challenges (Barnett, 2001; Campbell et al., 2007; Smith and Vivekananda, 2007; WBGU, 2008). Such vulnerabilities are often exacerbated by the propensity for many citizens of developing communities and states to gain sustenance and livelihoods directly from natural resources. The landmark Fourth Assessment Report (AR4) of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) explicitly refers to such vulnerabilities as most strongly affecting the '[p]oor communities that depend on local food and water supplies' and have 'economies that are closely linked with climate-sensitive resources' (IPCC, 2007). When climatic changes affect these highly susceptible communities, the ensuing challenges can threaten security along a number of fronts.

Climatic changes threaten to increase occurrences of drought and flooding, both of which can lead to population displacements.

Credit: IRIN Photos (left) and Bert K.

Climate change can threaten the individual security of those it directly affects. Relatively gradual changes in climate and weather conditions can, among other things, reduce the viability of traditional forms of livelihood and food acquisition such as small-scale agriculture and fishing, render housing areas and transportation linkages untenable, and exacerbate existing economic and health challenges within affected households. These factors have the capacity to strongly affect the quality of life of those adversely affected by climate change and lead to pervasive poverty, destitution and suffering (Global Humanitarian Forum, 2009). Moreover, climatic changes can alter the strength, prevalence and geographic location of major weather events (IPCC, 2007). These alterations can compound individual risks to natural disasters and lead to abrupt security challenges.

Beyond threats at the level of individuals, it is increasingly apparent that climate change has the capacity to threaten the social fabric and stability of communities, states and regions. Rather than acting in isolation, climate change challenges can compound existing levels of relative and absolute deprivation, social fracturing, displacement and grievance against poorly functioning governments and other groups perceived to be adversarial by those affected (Campbell et al., 2007; Smith and Vivekananda, 2007; Ewing, 2009). Analysts from International Alert recognise these potentially compounding trends and argue that 'there is a real risk that climate change will compound the propensity for violent conflict, which in turn will leave communities poorer, less resilient and less able to cope with the consequences of climate change … [T]he effects of climate change interacting with economic, social and political problems will thus create a high risk of violent conflict' (Smith and Vivekananda, 2007).

It is therefore appropriate to assess the possible ways in which the COP16 agreements might affect climate security calculations. On the surface, the developments appear quite positive. The adaptation section of the Cancún agreement makes a priority of attempting to protect those most vulnerable to the worst effects of climate change. The resulting measures, if adequately implemented, can potentially create renewed levels of social resilience to climate change that will lessen the risks of instability and conflict.[3] Notably, the Cancún Adaptation Framework mentions population displacements, often viewed as a primary climate-related destabilising driver, as a specific area for action (UNFCCC, 2010). The strengthened codification of adaptation financing mechanisms through the Green Climate Fund is also a welcome development from a security perspective, as it will release and manage an increasing level of financial resources to locations that are most in need of assistance. Such assistance measures, which were unquestionably bolstered at the Cancún meetings, have the potential to go far towards reducing climate-related security risks.

However, the 'elephant in the room' at the conclusion of the COP16 for both the negotiating process and the climate security sector is the lack of marked progress on the mitigation front. Climate adaptation is by definition reactionary to the effects and/or predicted effects of climate change. While these efforts are invaluable and necessary, they risk proving inadequate if the climatic changes progress at a rapid and unpredictable rate. Without significant progress on the mitigation front, such natural changes will become increasingly likely. In the words of Pew Center on Global Climate Change contributor Elliot Diringer (2010), '[m]ost negotiators openly recognize that the world is not on course to effectively limit global warming to 2 degrees Celsius, [and] this will become increasingly evident as more time passes'. These mitigation realities should not be glossed over as a result of progress on adaptation and other measures. Mitigation shortcomings also apply to climate security. As the analysis of the German Advisory Council on Global Change, or WBGU (2008), suggests, 'without resolute counteraction, climate change will overstretch many societies' adaptive capacities within the coming decades, [and] this could result in destabilization and violence, jeopardizing national and international security to a new degree'. The best adaptation intentions notwithstanding, addressing the foundational anthropogenic causes of climate change remains essential. Therefore, it appears likely that a strong combined effort of robust mitigation and targeted, well-supported adaptation efforts will be necessary to avoid the most pronounced of the climate-related threats. Without progressive and effective action in both of these primary sectors of the climate discourse, security challenges over the coming decades will have an additional and potentially game-changing multiplier effect.

Notes

1. There are multiple dynamics and interpretations surrounding the role and potential roles of the MEF in the climate arena. David Doniger (2009) argues that the MEF was born as a cover for the US administration of George W. Bush to avoid action in the UNFCCC context. Doniger claims that the Obama administration, conversely, uses the MEF as a platform to supplement the UNFCCC process and it is therefore now a valuable additional forum. Robert Stavins (2010), meanwhile, suggests that a shift in the UNFCCC approach towards parallel processes (such as the MEF and G-20) has occurred, from hostile suspicion to accepting collaboration. Stavins suggests that such movement did occur to some degree under Mexican leadership at COP16.
2. Many factors in addition to those listed here were also important for the relative success of COP16. These include the widely praised chairpersonship of Mexico's Foreign Minister Patricia Espinosa, the arguably progressive policy platform of India and relatively flexible stances of the US and China, the foundations laid by the much-lamented Copenhagen Accord and the extensive technocratic work completed during 2010.
3. Implementation is a constant challenge within the UNFCCC context, but one upon which the UNFCCC spends a great deal of resources. The Subsidiary Body for Implementation (SBI) holds sessions at each COP for this purpose.

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The Centre for NTS Studies of the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies was inaugurated by the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) Secretary-General Dr Surin Pitsuwan in May 2008. The Centre maintains research in the fields of Food Security, Climate Change, Energy Security, Health Security as well as Internal and Cross Border Conflict. It produces policy-relevant analyses aimed at furthering awareness and building capacity to address NTS issues and challenges in the Asia-Pacific region and beyond. The Centre also provides a platform for scholars and policymakers within and outside Asia to discuss and analyse NTS issues in the region.

In 2009, the Centre was chosen by the MacArthur Foundation as a lead institution for the MacArthur Asia Security Initiative, to develop policy research capacity and recommend policies on the critical security challenges facing the Asia-Pacific.

The Centre is also a founding member and the Secretariat for the Consortium of Non-Traditional Security (NTS) Studies in Asia (NTS-Asia). More information on the Centre can be found at www.rsis.edu.sg/nts