

A Transitional Climate Summit in Doha

Author: [Michael A. Levi](#), David M. Rubenstein Senior Fellow for Energy and the Environment and Director of the Program on Energy Security and Climate Change
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As the annual United Nations climate negotiations get under way this week in Doha, Qatar, the mood is different from previous years. Delegates by and large remain seized by the challenge of global climate change, which threatens intensifying damages primarily in the future but requires strong action to curb emissions now. Each year, they gather to determine how international cooperation can best help achieve that end and help poorer countries adapt to whatever climate change occurs. The United States will attend the talks along with nearly 200 other countries, as well as delegates from business, nongovernmental organizations, and international bodies. But unlike in previous years, no one is pushing for a breakthrough agreement, nor is there much risk of any existing agreement collapsing. There are still important decisions to be made – and real opportunities for friction – but they are of a lower order than climate watchers have become used to in recent years.

Four Turbulent Years

The most recent cycle of climate negotiations was launched in Bali, Indonesia, at the thirteenth Conference of the Parties (COP-13) to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) in December 2007. That meeting adopted a "Bali Action Plan" that laid down ground rules for negotiating a global agreement to supplement or supplant the Kyoto Protocol at another round of talks scheduled to be held in Copenhagen in December 2009.

The talks limped ahead for the next year as parties waited for the Bush administration to leave office and be replaced by a U.S. executive perceived to have more appetite for a global deal. With the inauguration of President Barack Obama in January 2009, the talks thus intensified. Yet a comprehensive global treaty was elusive. In late 2009 in Copenhagen, amidst contentious and disorganized negotiations, the parties agreed to a "Copenhagen Accord," which laid out a new framework for international climate policy. The accord began to break down a long-standing division over emissions-cutting responsibility between developed and developing countries, and promised large sums of money to help poorer countries change their energy systems and adapt to climate change. Yet the result engendered a widespread backlash, in large part because it was not formally adopted by the

negotiating parties, let alone made part of a binding international treaty.

Much of the next year focused on remedying the first of those deficits, and at the sixteenth annual negotiations, held in Cancun in late 2010, much of the Copenhagen Accord was codified in a formal UNFCCC agreement called the "Cancun Agreements." Negotiators also began to make progress on fleshing out many of the details in the Copenhagen deal, including plans for technology cooperation, verification of countries' climate efforts, and financial transfers in support of climate action. Another major issue rose during the Cancun talks: Parties could not agree on what to do about the Kyoto Protocol, with developing countries calling for developed countries to adopt new emissions targets, and most developed countries resisting. That issue, though, was mostly punted to the next year.

Last year's summit, held in Durban, South Africa, thus turned on the future of the Kyoto Protocol. In the end, the EU agreed to make new commitments to emissions targets, Japan and Canada declined, and others remained ambiguous. (The United States has not ratified Kyoto, and was thus not part of that track.) The countries also, however, returned to the second unresolved question from Copenhagen: the lack of a comprehensive and legally binding successor to Kyoto. The "Durban Platform" promised to start "a process to develop a protocol, another legal instrument, or an outcome with legal force under the Convention applicable to all Parties," by the end of 2015, with the goal of entering into force by 2020. That left much room for interpretation – and deferred any need to add detail into the indefinite future.

Tying Up Loose Ends

The Doha talks thus open without many big issues requiring immediate resolution. Some of the biggest implementation challenges remaining after Durban – most notably finalizing details of a new Green Climate Fund – have essentially been resolved in the intervening year. Europe will haggle with many developing countries about the precise details of its new Kyoto commitments. Having sorted that out, countries will need to formally end the talks that begun in Bali, clearing the way for new negotiations. It is these sorts of loose ends, rather than the grand questions that occupied the previous COPs, that will be the focus of most discussions. Countries will also revisit old fights, calling for more emissions-cutting ambition in the coming years and new approaches to governance of intellectual property rights, but these will produce more noise than substance.

Two issues, though, could still create fireworks. The first is money. At Copenhagen, developed countries collectively pledged \$30 billion of support for poorer countries between 2010 and 2012, as well as \$100 billion annually by 2020. The first of those commitments has come to a close, opening up a new eight-year period of considerable ambiguity. There will be pressure to establish a new mid-term target for financial transfers – perhaps something for the period from 2013 to 2015. But assuming that

target is substantially higher than the one for 2010 to 2012, developed countries will be hard-pressed to find an arrangement where they can actually deliver.

The second challenge will probably surround efforts to narrow down the scope of the Durban Platform negotiations, adding some detail to the vague instructions agreed to last year. Some countries, for example, will want clear language distinguishing the responsibilities of developed and developing countries. Others may want to define the legal form of any eventual agreement more sharply than it was last year.

A Low-Profile Strategy

The United States, often a focus of ire during the annual climate talks, enters this milieu in a relatively comfortable position. It is not part of the Kyoto talks and wisely shows no interest in changing that. It has been a constructive participant in technical efforts over the past year, on issues ranging from technology cooperation to climate finance.

But it still faces real risks at the talks. Some are substantive. Washington knows that it cannot deliver massive sums of money in the next few years, and as a result, it will not sign up to financial pledges that others might push for. U.S. negotiators will also want to avoid narrowing the Durban Platform talks in ways that make it inevitable that any agreement that emerges from them will be unacceptable to the United States.

The others are reputational. If the United States is isolated in its stance on financial or process issues, then it will suffer internationally. To prevent that, U.S. strategy will need to focus as much on keeping partners like Europe and Japan on a similar page as it does on the substance of any outcome. The United States will also come under fire for failing to cut its emissions sufficiently. Others are unlikely to applaud it for [gains due to shale gas](#) and a mild recent winter, focusing instead on shortfalls in national policy.

That points to an enduring reality. International climate diplomacy provides the United States with opportunities to leverage domestic action for greater impact abroad. But the United States still falls well short of what it must do at home to reduce its emissions to ever lower levels. Alas, without the right foundation in domestic policy, even the ideal international arrangement will fall woefully short.