The Debate: Ayukawa

Nearing the Tipping Point: The Failure to Find a Way Back

By Yurika Ayukawa

THE UNITED NATIONS Climate Change Conference in Copenhagen was a total failure. Even the heads of state could not agree on the critical issues to save the planet and produced a very weak document that failed to be adopted in the final plenary session.

What was expected from Copenhagen was a legally binding agreement in which all developed countries, including the United States, would adopt ambitious targets to reduce carbon emissions during the so-called second commitment period of the Kyoto Protocol (post-2012). Developing nations would take actions to mitigate climate change in the context of sustainable development, with support from developed nations. The aim was to keep the global rise in temperature from pre-industrialized levels well below 2°C in order to avoid the catastrophic and irreversible effects of climate change. In short, it was meant to bring the world a major step back from the tipping point.

Instead, we got a piece of paper called “the Copenhagen Accord,” drafted by heads of government to pave the way for an eventual deal. But the agreement, made over late-night discussions, was crafted by the leaders of only 26 countries. The rest of the 119 leaders attending were given only one hour to read and accept it. As a result, at the final plenary meeting to adopt it, fierce fights lasting several hours broke out among the various parties. This was due to both a lack of transparency in the way the accord was crafted and substantial weaknesses in the paper itself. Some even said it was effectively a suicide note for mankind.

Consequently, the conference merely “took note” of the Copenhagen Accord and attached it to the so-called “decision text,” along with the names of the countries that signed it. This, in the end, effectively killed the accord, a better outcome than having it adopted.

The accord does refer to the need to keep global temperatures below the 2°C threshold, but does not show how to get there. It also contains no global emissions goal for 2050, no figures for mid-term carbon emission targets for industrialized countries and no figures for the appropriate national mitigation actions to be taken by developing countries. Instead, countries are only asked to fill out a voluntary form with appropriate target figures by the end of January 2010.

Significantly, there is no reference in the Copenhagen Accord to the second commitment period of the Kyoto Protocol. This is a critical omission, since any penalty for not meeting a country’s commitment during the first commitment period (2008-2012) can only be applied during the second commitment period. Without a second period, all of the commitments for the first period could vanish altogether.

While developed countries agreed in the accord to provide approximately $30 billion to developing countries for the period 2010-2012 to reduce emissions, preserve forests and adapt to climate change, and to provide $100 billion a year by 2020, it is by no means certain that this will happen. That’s because under the UN’s Framework Convention on Climate Change, the so-called Conference of Parties (COP) must formally adopt this accord as a “Decision Text” in order for it to become operational.
Most serious of all, the accord contains no mandate or timeline to reach a COP decision and produce a more comprehensive, legally binding treaty. In short, this is a state of emergency for the planet.

Climate change is heading towards the worst-case scenario if we do not take action now. In the Third Assessment Report of the UN Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change in 2001, it seemed that the worst-case scenario could be avoided if we kept the global temperature rise to below 2°C. By the time the Fourth Assessment Report was issued in 2007, however, it appeared the two-degree threshold might already be too high.\(^1\) Recent scientific analysis suggests that the atmospheric concentration of greenhouse gases should be brought back to 350 parts per million from the current level of 380 ppm, and that the temperature rise should be kept to 1.5°C.\(^2\) In order to achieve this, more than 100 developing countries are calling on developed countries to reduce their emissions by at least 45 percent from 1990 levels by 2020, and by 95 percent by 2050. However, as of early December, the aggregated figure for emissions cuts put on the table by developed countries was in the range of 16 percent to 22 percent, which would lead us to a global temperature rise of 3-4°C.

The major factor behind the failure of Copenhagen was the unwillingness, and lack of ambition, of the industrialized countries to take the necessary actions, especially the US. Although it was widely acknowledged that the US had to be an essential part of any post-2012 climate-change framework, the Americans did not come up with any reduction target, saying they needed domestic legislation to enable them to table any figure at the negotiations. As a result, other developed countries such as Australia, Canada, Japan, New Zealand and the European Union put on hold any effort to lead the negotiations, because they were not sure whether the US would come back to the table.

Furthermore, the US and other industrialized countries demanded that China and other major developing countries make their emission reduction targets binding, and have them measured, reported and verified in the same way as the US. This created hostility towards the rich nations among all the developing countries, who said the demands were a breach of the fundamental principles embedded in the Framework Convention on Climate Change and the Bali Action Plan, which is “common but differentiated responsibility” and “historical responsibility.” Although in the past year China became the top current emitter of greenhouse gases, the cumulative emissions from pre-industrialized levels rank the US as the No. 1 emitter (accounting for 27.2 percent of total emissions) followed by Europe (24.1 percent).\(^3\) Since the industrial revolution, almost half of all greenhouse gas emissions in the atmosphere have come from the developed countries.

The intensified conflict in Copenhagen had its roots in climate change meetings in September and October in Bangkok. There, officials from the US and Australia made proposals to abolish the differentiation between the developed and developing countries. The EU also made a proposal to do away with the Kyoto Protocol, going instead for one legally binding instrument under the Climate Change Convention that would include the US

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3 J. Hansen, Storms of my Grandchildren — the Truth About the Coming Climate Catastrophe and Our Last Chance to Save Humanity, Bloomsbury Publishing (December 8, 2009).
and major developing economies. Japan made a similar proposal in April 2009, seeking a single protocol. The developing countries were enraged that developed nations appeared to be giving up on the Kyoto Protocol, the only legally binding tool to limit their emissions.

Later, on the first day of the Barcelona climate change negotiations in early November, representatives of the so-called African Group took the floor and said that until the numbers to amend the Kyoto Protocol for the second commitment period were decided, they would not participate in any other discussions, and walked out, together with the rest of the Group of 77 (G-77) developing countries. Though the meetings resumed a day later, there was no progress, and this signaled a likely collapse of the talks at Copenhagen.

In order to avoid a collapse, Danish Prime Minister Lars Lokke Rasmussen, host of the Copenhagen conference, began a frantic round of flights to various national capitals, negotiating with many heads of state with his own draft of a “political agreement” in which he proposed a two-step approach: first, agree on a politically binding outcome, and second, reach a legally binding agreement in 2010. But this backfired on the big developing countries. Brazil, South Africa, India and China formed the so-called BASIC nations. In Copenhagen, this antagonistic and brittle geopolitical structure totally broke down, when the US struck a separate deal with them during the late-night drafting session, creating a new divide among the G-77 countries, with smaller developing countries being marginalized.

All countries should recognize that the earth is in peril, and should focus on how to save the planet, rather than how to protect only their national interests. We should all aspire to a vision of a more sustainable and comfortable low/zero carbon society by 2050. In order to get there, all countries should re-consider their domestic policies, and join in a race to become the leading country in a new, more sustainable growth model.

As for my own country, the new government under the Democratic Party of Japan should recognize this postponement of a successful outcome of the Copenhagen meeting as giving it extra time to introduce the three major policies mentioned in its party manifesto: namely, a carbon tax, feed-in tariffs to increase the use of renewable energies and a “cap and trade” emissions trading scheme for big greenhouse gas emitters. These are needed to meet the target to reduce emissions by 25 percent from 1990 levels, which they had declared already. This means the government should craft global warming legislation immediately and embrace this target as our own without conditions.

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