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## Copenhagen Alert: Obama's Speech Flops, Summit in Crisis

by Mark Hertsgaard

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He came, he saw, he disappointed.

As President Barack Obama arrived in Copenhagen on Friday morning for the last day of the U.N. climate summit, all eyes were upon him. Only Obama, the argument went, had the power and prestige to break the deadlock at this summit, widely regarded as humanity's last good chance to preserve a livable climate. But hopes that the president would bring something new to Copenhagen, that the U.S. position would move closer to what science says is required to avoid catastrophic climate change, were dashed by the president's surprisingly lackluster remarks.

Looking tired from his overnight flight from Washington, Obama told his fellow heads of state and government, "I did not come here to talk. I came here to act." But Obama's speech for the most part merely restated what has long been the U.S. position: a mere 4 percent reduction in U.S. greenhouse gas emissions by 2020, when science says reductions of at least 25 to 40 percent are necessary.

Obama did not put it this way, of course. He said that the U.S. will cut emissions by 17 percent by 2020, in line with the Waxman-Markey climate bill that passed the House of Representatives over the summer. But the U.S. has moved the goalposts. By employing a baseline of 2005, rather than the international scientific standard of 1990, Washington makes its proposed emissions cuts look much larger than they actually are. It's like promising to kick a 50-yard field goal from the 30 yard line.

"Speaking about 17 percent cuts by 2020—to present it that way was, I'm afraid, dishonest," said Kumi Naidoo, the executive director of Greenpeace International.

Obama was apparently trying to strike a balance between what the outside world wants to hear and what the U.S. Congress will accept. The Waxman-Markey bill passed the House by a mere seven votes, and similar legislation faces a difficult battle in the Senate. What's more, any treaty signed in Copenhagen or later could be blocked by a mere 34 votes in the Senate. Since Republicans have 40 Senate seats and most of them are adamantly opposed to taking serious action against climate change, Obama faces a conundrum.

But this political calculation—shared not only by the White House and leading congressional Democrats but also many big environmental groups—overlooks the big club Obama has at his disposal: the newly affirmed authority of the Environmental Protection Agency to regulate greenhouse-gas emissions. The Supreme Court ruled in 2007 that E.P.A. had this authority if greenhouse gases were deemed to pose a threat to public health and welfare. The E.P.A. so ruled on December 4, just days before the Copenhagen summit began.

“Contrary to what we keep hearing from Washington, Obama’s hands are not tied by the tragically weak cap-and-trade bills being debated in Congress,” said Kassie Siegel, executive director of the Center for Biological Diversity. “His administration already has the legal tools to achieve deep and rapid greenhouse emissions reductions from major polluters, consistent with what science demands, through the Clean Air Act. The next step is for E.P.A. to issue pollution-reduction rules for vehicles, smokestacks, and other polluters, and to set a science-based national pollution cap for greenhouse gases.”

“But this thing is not over yet,” Naidoo emphasized about the Copenhagen summit. “At this point in the Kyoto talks [in 1997, when the world’s nations approved the Kyoto Protocol to the UN Framework Convention on Climate change], everyone in the hallways was saying, ‘It’s over, there’s no hope of reaching an agreement.’ But in fact governments did reach an agreement in Kyoto. They stayed and worked until the early hours of the morning, and that’s what leaders will do today if they believe all their rhetoric about climate change threatening mass extinctions, droughts, and other catastrophic impacts.”

Obama’s speech was all the more important given the fact—so little understood in the United States—that the U.S. is by far the world’s leading climate polluter. Yes, China now emits slightly more □ greenhouse gases on an annual basis. But annual is not the most relevant measure. Because the U.S. (like its fellow industrial nations in Europe, Japan, and Australia) has been burning coal, driving vehicles, felling forests, and plowing farmland for many more years than China has, it has put far more greenhouse gases into the atmosphere on a cumulative basis than China has. It is these cumulative emissions that drive global warming, because carbon dioxide in particular stays in the atmosphere for centuries.

“I don’t think the speech will be very well received by China, among others,” said Richard Klein, an I.P.C.C. climate scientist with the Stockholm Environment Institute. “There is such a thing as historical responsibility. [President Obama] has a way with words that works for the media, for the general public, but it doesn’t work for seasoned negotiators who know the ins and outs of these issues and who won’t be reassured that this is a different U.S. from what we’ve seen over the last eight years.”

And so it was when Chinese premier Wen Jiabao gave his plenary speech. In addressing climate change, Wen said, the world must not “turn a blind eye to historical responsibilities ... and different levels of development”—diplomatic code for the position shared by China, India, and other emerging and developing countries that the rich industrial nations make the largest emissions cuts, soonest.

The dangers of the continuing stalemate in Copenhagen were powerfully illustrated yesterday by □□ documents leaked yesterday by the U.N. conference secretariat here. The documents showed that the proposed emissions cuts currently on offer in Copenhagen—not only from the U.S. but all countries—come nowhere to preventing catastrophic climate change. According to the leaked document, which the secretariat confirmed is authentic, the current proposals will lead to 3 degrees Celsius (5.4 Fahrenheit) of temperature rise over the pre-industrial level in which civilization developed. Obama and other leaders of the Group of 8 rich industrial nations agreed in July to limit temperature rise to 2 Celsius, and even that is hardly a safe level. “It will mean 100 feet of sea level rise,” Hans Joachim Schellnhuber, the chief climate adviser to the German government, said of the 2 degree limit. “True, this will be over the next thousand years, but that amounts to ten feet per century and this will be all but irreversible. A 2C temperature rise will also mean the loss of the Himalayan glaciers and coral reefs. What really makes for sleepless nights is the possibility that [2C] will ... trigger runaway global warming.”

“In the face of leaked U.N. documents showing that this agreement is a sham, we were hoping for some movement from the president,” said author Bill McKibben of the activist group [350.org](http://350.org). “Instead, his

response was take it or leave it. One hundred other nations are not making reasonable demands because they want to make the president's life harder. It's because they would like their countries to actually survive the century."

But it ain't over yet here in Copenhagen. Negotiations, including reported meetings between and among Obama, Chinese Premier Wen Jiabao, and other heads of state and government, are scheduled to continue throughout the day and perhaps into the evening. "We can get this done today," Obama said in his speech. But what "this" will be remains the question, for all of us.