



What to Expect at Copenhagen

Jacob Funk Kirkegaard says that after scaling back expectations, the climate summit will likely yield a political agreement to curb carbon emissions—making progress toward an eventual agreement.

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Steve Weisman: This is Steve Weisman at the Peterson Institute for International Economics. Jacob Kirkegaard, research fellow at the Institute, is here to talk about the Copenhagen Climate Conference, which begins this week, the second week of December. Jacob, thank you for joining us.

Jacob Kirkegaard: My pleasure.

Steve Weisman: There were a lot of predictions that very little, if anything, was going to happen. But lately, the news reports have suggested that some progress might be achieved in Copenhagen. What is your view?

Jacob Kirkegaard: I would agree with that last sentiment that we can actually be more optimistic—if you like—than just a couple of months ago. Because there has been a very sort of effective, expectation management exercise going on, I guess you could say. I think it's clear that in the United States, this conference of the current climate change negotiations is sort of the beginning of the political response to climate change. But that's actually not true in the rest of the world. This conference—which is, in fact, formally known as the 15th conference of what's called the conference of the parties of the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change—is actually a process that has been going on since the early 1990s. What the Copenhagen Summit is supposed to do is end what was a two-year negotiating window that was agreed upon in 2007 during the previous big summit in Bali. Some of you might recall that it was a summit in which the US Federal Government—the Bush administration—was not even represented. But a certain number of Congressional Democrats and others went there. But the big point here is that this is really a continuing of an ongoing process. It's sort of a new plateau or a new pinnacle has been reached. Because what really is at stake here is taking the existing framework, the Kyoto Agreement—which obviously the United States is not a party to and which really only refers to a relatively limited number of industrialized countries—and basically compels them to reduce their greenhouse gas emission. What really is the goal of the Copenhagen Conference—and this whole longer-term process—is to expand this Kyoto Protocol, as it's called, to something that

also includes obviously the United States and other industrialized countries but crucially also developing countries.

Steve Weisman: Let's talk about the countries one by one. First the United States: What is it bringing to the table?

Jacob Kirkegaard: The United States is—in terms of hard concrete commitments—frankly not bringing anything at all simply because of the fact that Congress has been notoriously slow—or busy with other more important subjects this year. And obviously also, you had a change in administration since 2008. So, the United States is not bringing any hard concrete commitments.

Steve Weisman: But it's bringing a pledge of sorts.

Jacob Kirkegaard: It's bringing a pledge and it's bringing first and foremost, the political commitment of President Obama as well as of the Congressional Democratic leadership that the United States “in due time,” will make its effort. And what President Obama is going to Copenhagen with, is essentially he has committed the United States to follow what the House passed in June, which is a 17-percent reduction of US CO₂ emissions by 2020 over the 2005 levels.

Steve Weisman: A 17-percent reduction from the 2005 levels?

Jacob Kirkegaard: Yes, from the 2005 levels. And relative to the European Union, that's a decisively modest goal, because the European Union has committed to reducing its emissions level by 2020 for 20 percent—but relative to 1990 levels, which obviously was an earlier period, [in] which there was less emission. So the target is smaller.

Steve Weisman: How does that compare to what China and India are bringing to Copenhagen?

Jacob Kirkegaard: This is essentially one of the big stumbling blocks—if you like—of the current negotiations. Because China and India—as developing countries—are still clearly [in] a rapid economic growth phase of their economic development. So, they don't bring “commitments” to reduce the absolute level of CO₂ emissions. What they are instead bringing—which is a significant improvement to the situation just two or three months ago—is commitments to reduce the carbon intensity of their economies, which basically means that they will agree to reduce the number of the level of CO₂ emissions per unit of GDP. Which means that they will continue to increase the absolute level of CO₂ emissions, but as their economies grow. But it would be at a much reduced—not much, definitely at a reduced tempo and at some point in the not-too-distant future. And this is really what a lot of discussion is going on about. When exactly is that point going to be reached that developing

countries have to commit to having an absolute cap of their absolute level of carbon emission? Some say it should be 2020. Obviously developing countries say, “No, no, no, no—that’s way too low; we need to be able to grow our emissions level much further into the future.”

Steve Weisman: President Obama is going now at the end of the conference, instead of the beginning. Why?

Jacob Kirkegaard: I think that basically shows his increased commitment to this whole process. He was initially going to go to Copenhagen as sort of—almost as a side show for him being in Oslo picking up the Nobel Peace Prize. I don’t know what went on behind the official screens. But I think it’s pretty clear that the major other parties—particularly the Europeans—have told him that frankly that’s just not good enough. Because everyone knows that the political compromises that need to be struck to make this deal possible will be struck toward the end of the conference. You can say that his role in the conference is now much more constructive. He’ll be there at the table—

Steve Weisman: He’ll come in toward the end?

Jacob Kirkegaard: Not just him. Right now there are more than a hundred heads of government of state coming to the conference, which I believe is actually the biggest collection of world leaders to ever come to the same conference. And there is going to be some significant bargaining going on. And therefore, I think it’s crucial—beyond the fact that obviously the most powerful man in the world is showing up—as a powerful, symbolic gesture toward the sort of money time, if you like, of the summit. But also that he’s there. He is able to basically get the best deal for the United States.

Steve Weisman: You mentioned that the picture is different from what it was even two or three months ago. What changed?

Jacob Kirkegaard: I think that it is a very significant process of scaling down expectations here. As I said in the beginning, it’s important to think about this as an ongoing process—at least in the rest of the world. So, you’ve got to think a little about what can international summits yield, or what can the result be? You can obviously have a complete collapse akin to what you saw in Seattle in the WTO conference there during the Clinton administration.

Or you can also have a slightly less bad scenario, which is sort of agreeing to disagree. We’ll just freeze everything and then come back in another six months or a year and then start over again. And maybe the political situation will have changed. That essentially is what continues to happen in the WTO, or has happened with the Doha Round, in the last many years. And then starting from the other end, you can

have essentially a brand new treaty ready to be signed and all the legal language and everything agreed upon.

That's essentially what the world's governments have basically mutually agreed that we're not going to get there in Copenhagen. But we're also not going to have—in my opinion—a WTO Doha-like freeze. We are instead going to have—and this is the change in the last couple of months—is a political agreement among the major industrialized nations and crucially, the major developing countries [on] what should the different players be doing? Because as I said earlier, it is incumbent upon the industrialized countries to reduce the level of CO₂ emissions—and the developing nations to do something to at least reduce the intensity of their CO₂ emissions and then at some level absolutely cap it. But the precise role of what developing countries are actually compelled to do is one of these major things still being negotiated.

Steve Weisman: Jacob, you're from Denmark. How do you think the Danish leadership has fared in handling this?

Jacob Kirkegaard: Let's see once the summit is over. I think they probably will get credit for having good conference facilities, hopefully good security. I certainly can attest—having lived in Copenhagen in many months of December—that December is not weather-wise conducive to mass demonstrations. So from that perspective, Copenhagen is a good summit location. But I think first and foremost, I think it shouldn't be so much thought about Denmark being the host of it, because I think it's more important that it's hosted in Europe. Because it has meant that the European Union—as a large entity in these climate change negotiations—has filled, I think, an even broader and more compelling cause to be out early on and announcing an ambitious target for these UN negotiations. And I think that that—more than the fact that it's in Copenhagen, you know, relative to Germany or some other European country—that's what has mattered.

Steve Weisman: Where is the next one?

Jacob Kirkegaard: The next one I believe is next year in Mexico City. These basically, rotate between the major continents.

Steve Weisman: Jacob, thanks for bring us up to date on that.