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A Course Adjustment for Climate Talks

With little hope that the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) process will produce an effective treaty, at least for the next several years and perhaps longer, are there other paths that could lead to near-term reductions in greenhouse gas emissions? One approach, forcefully articulated by Richard Benedick (*Issues*, Winter 2007), would replace the seemingly fruitless quest for a unified global compact with a mix of separate efforts that might have a better chance of resulting in action. Benedick builds on his Montreal Protocol experience in reducing emissions of ozone-destroying chemicals, in which discussions among a small group of countries and chemical companies provided the impetus for successful and rapid global action.

Nevertheless, almost five years and four more UNFCCC Conferences have passed since Benedick's suggestions, with no obvious progress toward breaking what he characterized as "predictable" patterns, "trivial protocol debates and ritualistic ministerial speeches exhorting complicated and unrealistic actions," that routinely end in "embarrassingly meager" results. The persistence of the stalemate and the urgency of the problem demand that we consider a different strategy.

The all-or-nothing UNFCCC strategy is too easily derailed by the views or actions of one or two countries, which then become the rationale for other countries to refuse to act. Perhaps the real antidote is to open more lines of discussion and communication and to show that smaller measures of progress can be achieved as stepping stones toward

bigger ones. Like Benedick, a number of analysts including David Victor and Robert Keohane are starting to urge alternative approaches, including the virtues of focusing on smaller pieces of the climate change problem.

The argument for segmenting issues and addressing them opportunistically finds further support in the progress that has been made in global negotiations to control nuclear weapons. Just as the experience of the Montreal Protocol demonstrates that significant global progress can begin with actions by a few key countries, the history of arms control illustrates that progress can be made even without the participation of some of the major players.

The virtues of pragmatism

The process of controlling weapons of mass destruction began with a similar seemingly insolvable, yet potentially catastrophic, long-term problem and was initially dominated by high-minded speeches outlining visionary goals for "general and complete disarmament." The UN was the focal point for most of the action, starting with the 1947 Acheson-Lilienthal proposal to place all the world's nuclear materials and facilities under UN control.

The Cuban Missile Crisis demonstrated that nuclear war was not just a hypothetical danger. As the seriousness and extent of the danger became more apparent, discussions of discrete issues began. Pairs and small groups of nations initiated multiple approaches that were aimed at different forms of agreements with the goal of identifying aspects of the armaments competition on which governments might find

common ground. The first significant result was the 1963 Limited Test Ban Treaty (LTBT), prohibiting nuclear testing in the atmosphere, in space, and under the seas.

The rapid negotiation of the LTBT, accomplished largely through the forceful leadership of the United States, the Soviet Union, and the United Kingdom, demonstrates the benefits of breaking out specific elements of the problem that are ripe for resolution. LTBT shows that when the ultimate goal is beyond reach, intermediate steps can be achievable. Key nations were willing to accept a less-than-ideal goal. The LTBT also was consistent with the existing technical capability, which could not verify a ban on underground nuclear tests. Stopping nuclear tests in the atmosphere did not end the nuclear arms race, but it ended the human health damage from radiation released by nuclear explosions. It took another 33 years to complete a comprehensive test ban treaty.

Negotiations to limit weapons of mass destruction now proceed in multiple forums, involving varying groupings of nations and differing approaches. The Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT), a keystone to limiting the spread of nuclear weapons, was negotiated in a multinational forum starting in 1958. Initially, only 18 countries participated, but the talks became more serious when the United States and the Soviet Union decided that an agreement was necessary after China's first nuclear test in 1964.

Although key nuclear nations such as France and China refused to sign the treaty when it was completed in 1968, it still came into force two years later, and eventually they joined. Today, nuclear-armed India, Israel, North Korea, and Pakistan remain outside the treaty, but it otherwise has universal participation and is widely considered to have been successful in limiting proliferation. Before completion of the NPT, it was thought that there would be 25 nuclear powers by the end of the 20th century; today, there are only nine.

The role of the UN has shifted over time, beginning with moving disarmament talks away from the UN General Assembly to a specialized body currently called the Committee on Disarmament (CD). The 1972 Biological Weapons Convention, the 1992 Chemical Weapons Convention, and the 1996 Comprehensive Nuclear Test Ban were negotiated in the CD.

Eventually, the CD itself became paralyzed. Using the UN's consensus rule that gives a single nation the ability to block the will of all other nations, Pakistan has for 12 years prevented the CD from taking the next logical step of a negotiated ban on the production of fissile materials.

But additional negotiating fora have multiplied, including regional configurations. The 1968 Treaty of Tlatelolco created a nuclear weapon-free zone in Latin America and the

Caribbean. Initially, the key nations of Argentina, Brazil, and Cuba remained outside the treaty, but all the region's nations have now ratified the agreement. Similar nuclear weapon-free zones have been negotiated for Antarctica, Africa, Central Asia, Southeast Asia, and the South Pacific and are slowly taking effect.

The United States and the Soviet Union/Russia, which own 95% of the world's nuclear weapons, bear special obligations for ending the threat of a nuclear holocaust, just as special responsibilities might reasonably be expected for major greenhouse gas emitters. Over the past 40 years, the two nuclear superpowers have conducted bilateral negotiations to reduce the size of their arsenals and reduce the risk of nuclear war. Combined with reciprocal, unilateral actions taken at opportune times, these negotiations have reduced U.S. and Russian stocks of nuclear weapons from more than 25,000 each at the height of the Cold War to roughly 5,000 and 8,000, respectively, today.

Numerous other agreements between the United States and Russia have improved communication channels during crises, avoided incidents between their armed forces, outlawed an entire class of missiles, and for a limited time prohibited the deployment of missile defenses.

The weapons experience holds several lessons about the intricacies of interlocking agreements. Authority can be split out for certain kinds of functions; for example, placing them into an independent multinational agency specifically designated to carry out the assigned function. The separate agency can carry out its narrow mandate on which there is general agreement, and over time, as it develops experience and trust, it can expand that mission. This happened with the International Atomic Energy Agency's (IAEA's) assignment to establish and monitor safeguards on declared peaceful nuclear facilities, ensuring that they and the fissile materials they use were not being diverted to weapons programs. IAEA's demonstrated competence has allowed it to gain the confidence of countries and thereby to increase the reach of its inspection function. The IAEA eventually engaged 103 countries in "additional protocols" that give the IAEA further powers to conduct inspections of undeclared, suspected facilities on a challenge basis.

A second example is the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty Organization, which was created on a provisional basis even though the treaty itself has yet to come into legal force. The organization built a global network of sensors capable of detecting even very small nuclear tests, which has aided ratification efforts by showing that the agreement can be verified with great confidence. The network also serves additional purposes such as pinpointing earthquakes.



CHRISTIAN HOUGE, *Antenna Forest*, Digital C-print, 39.25 x 118 inches, 2000.

Related to that has been the trend toward greater intrusiveness and voluntary concessions of national sovereignty for verification of commitments. For U.S.-Soviet/Russian nuclear limitations, such arrangements have progressed from strict dependence on national means (intelligence satellites), to limited onsite inspections, to the maintenance of a permanent presence at production facilities in each other's territory, to the current Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (START), which allows inspectors to actually peer into missile silos and count warheads.

The result has not yet been the complete elimination of nuclear weapons, and progress sometimes has been painfully slow. But the nuclear balance has stabilized at far lower numbers, weapon technologies have spread to far fewer countries, and other types of weapons of mass destruction have been outlawed and destroyed by virtually all nations, greatly reducing the risk of catastrophic wars. This has happened without halting negotiations to wait for reluctant major players.

Don't shoot the messenger, just replace him

A final lesson from the weapons history is the significance of who negotiates. Environment has long been a foreign policy stepchild. Foreign ministries, including the U.S. Department of State, implicitly prioritize political and security concerns as their primary role; economic issues occupy a much lower second tier; human rights receive attention now because they are written into many national statutes and sometimes rise to prominence in a crisis; and environment occupies a still lower tier and receives attention only when a high-ranking individual has a particular interest or when an emergency occupies the headlines briefly. Convincing senior officials that climate change, like arms control, is a security challenge could provide the leverage necessary to pursue a different strategy.

Drawing negotiating lessons from the weapons world might help shift the conversation to an arena that these more powerful officials better understand. They know and respect issues with geopolitical consequences and great po-



tential dangers, but they generally do not believe that the environment falls into that category. They probably do not remember when controlling nuclear weapons was a similarly fuzzy subject largely promoted by do-gooders. Indeed, Polish Prime Minister Donald Tusk may have spoken for the power politics crowd when he was reported to have remarked privately, after opening the 14th Conference of Parties (COP) in Poznan, on his surprise at not seeing a room of ragged environmental activists. An encouraging sign that environmental concerns are rising in visibility is that the U.S. Department of Defense has quietly recognized climate's implications for resource demands that could have implications for national security.

Attracting new voices to the discussion could help break down the insularity of the climate change community. Although the isolation of this group is probably no greater than that of weapons or trade negotiators, any group of people who meet with each other continuously over decades trying to solve defined problems develop a common lan-

guage and culture and their own reference points. They lose perspective and become blind to their assumptions. Climate change is such an important threat that the time has come for the equivalent of an intervention.

Climate negotiations have largely taken place in the environmental backwaters. Some parts of the climate world resisted the potential political boost that might have emerged from the 15th COP at Copenhagen, which attracted 120 world leaders. The commitments by world leaders to hold warming to 2 degrees Celsius and to record individual country mitigation actions did not fit the expectations of climate experts for a so-called legally binding result. The opportunity to take advantage of what looked like the beginning of high-level support for action was lost. Instead, everything went into a freeze for almost 12 months; then pieces of the Copenhagen agreement were incorporated into the work agenda that came out of Cancun.

Thus, leading up to Durban, negotiators were expected to convert the Kyoto Protocol targets of the existing Annex I

countries (the developed world) into actual binding commitments; ensure no gap between the first and second commitment periods of the protocol; develop accounting rules for forest management emissions and removals; clarify assumptions underlying emission reduction targets, including those related to land use, land-use change and forestry, and offsets; establish a Green Climate Fund to manage support for the mitigation and adaptation needs of developing countries; and salvage the various emissions-trading mechanisms for meeting Annex I targets. Since then, the future of the protocol is in considerable doubt, the emissions trading markets are in disarray, and full funding of the Green Climate Fund is in question, as are basic understandings about its terms and conditions. Throwing this set of issues back to the environmental experts is not a prescription for success.

Application to climate challenge

The culture of climate negotiations has not favored separating issues for independent resolution. Supporters of the current negotiations might argue that none of this history is relevant to the climate threat, that the negotiating pathway is dictated by the accelerating climate threat, and that there simply is no time to try experiments and alternative pathways.

It is true that UNFCCC negotiations involve a bigger basket of issues than most multinational talks. Several of the problems to be solved—wearing whole economies from coal and oil consumption, disappearing forests, novel stresses affecting agriculture and disease, and the future of small-island states that will probably be inundated within a few decades, to name just a few—would by itself constitute an unusual test of human problem-solving skills. But isn't this all the more reason for trying new alternatives; changing the scenery, players, or scope of discussion; or attempting iterative actions and venues? The number and variety of the issues is itself an argument for tackling some of them separately.

A critical question is whether it continues to be productive to invest solely in a single exclusive UNFCCC forum for negotiation of a wide variety of issues. The UNFCCC clearly sets out a vision and formula for the organization of responsibilities among countries. But evidence from the weapons regime demonstrates alternative ways to achieve that central vision. Common agreement about the overall goals and objectives can trigger a series of interactions to resolve narrow issues and challenges. When complete agreement is not possible, partial limits can still be beneficial and a starting point for more comprehensive action. Venues can be developed where consensus action can be taken while

debate on related topics continues.

Within the umbrella of the UNFCCC, multiple interactions could take place that would make it possible for a small group of countries to agree on particular actions or for the global community to reach agreement on some narrowly defined questions. Alternatively, entirely separate configurations of interested parties could be developed for specific purposes. They could continue to operate independently or eventually converge back into an umbrella agreement.

The fact that each specific agreement might resolve only a part of the overall climate challenge need not be seen as a liability. More narrow initial agreements on topics such as technology dissemination and financing, forest preservation and restoration, or other pieces of the climate puzzle could advance the ball.

The case for engaging more powerful ministries and government officials in achieving resolution of the many complex climate issues is consistent with many of the negotiating configurations suggested by the arms history. Some defense experts have already reframed climate in the more accurate “threat multiplier” analysis commonly used by the military to explain how extra stresses can turn hazards into disasters. The time might be right to make a refocused plea to top foreign policy leaders in a different set of words. Climate change is too big to be confined to the environmental ghetto; it is not a national security sideshow but increasingly the main event. And if we can understand climate change as a national security concern, it makes sense to look for lessons in the handling of other national security issues, such as arms control.

MIT's scientists warn that business-as-usual greenhouse gas emissions are placing a very bad bet for humanity's future; they calculate a 50% chance that the global average surface temperature will increase at least 9.2 degrees Fahrenheit by 2100. No sane person would board a plane that has a 50% chance of crashing, but humankind is entrusting the entire resolution of the climate threat to an ineffectual annual round of negotiations under a UN umbrella, conducted largely by politically powerless environmental officials. As our GPS devices tell us when we go off course, it is time to recalculate.

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