



By Robert N. Stavins

A Convergence of Interests at COP19

The Nineteenth Conference of the Parties of the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change came to a close in Warsaw, Poland, on November 23 after what has become the norm — several all-night sessions culminating in last-minute negotiations that featured diplomatic haggling over subtle changes to the text on which countries were finally willing to agree.

The key task of this meeting was to pave the way for the negotiations later this year at COP20 in Lima, Peru, as a lead-up to the real target, reaching a new international climate agreement at the 2015 negotiations in Paris to be implemented in 2020 (under the so-called Durban Platform for Enhanced Action), when the second commitment period of the Kyoto Protocol comes to an end. If that was the key objective, then the Warsaw meetings must be judged to be at least a modest success — the baton was not dropped; rather it was passed successfully in this long relay race of negotiations.

But, as I have written in many previous columns, the challenges standing in the way of an effective international climate change agreement are numerous and severe. So, is there any cause for optimism regarding the path ahead? Regular readers of this column will know that I tend to see the half-full glass (or even one-

tenth full glass) of water, and in this case I think there really is cause for cautious optimism regarding the future.

This is based upon a singular reality: the growing convergence of interests between the two most important countries in the world when it comes to climate change and international policy to address it, namely, China and the United States.

First of all, the annual carbon dioxide and other greenhouse gas emissions of these two countries have already converged. Whereas U.S. CO₂ emissions in 1990 were almost twice the level of Chinese emissions, by 2006 China had overtaken the United States. We are the world's two largest emitters.

Second, cumulative emissions are particularly important, because they are what cause climate change. Also, any discussion of distributional equity in the climate realm inevitably turns to considerations of historic responsibility. Looking at the period 1850–2010, the United States led the pack, accounting for nearly 19 percent of cumulative global emissions of GHGs, with the European Union in second place with 17 percent, and China third, accounting for about 12 percent of global cumulative emissions.

But that is changing rapidly, because of the fact that emissions are flat to declining throughout the industrialized world, but increasingly rapidly in the large emerging economies, in particular, China. Depending upon the relative rates of economic growth of China and the United States, as well as many other factors, China may top all countries in cumulative emissions within 10 to 20 years.

Third, China and the United States both have had historically high reliance on coal for generating electricity. At a time at which U.S. dependence on coal is decreasing

(due to increased supplies of unconventional natural gas and hence lower gas prices), China continues to rely on coal, but is very concerned about this, partly because of localized health impacts of particulates and other pollutants.

Importantly, both countries have very large shale gas reserves. U.S. output (and use for electricity generation) has been increasing rapidly, bringing down CO₂ emissions, whereas Chinese exploitation and output has been constrained by available infrastructure, that is, lack of pipelines. But that will change.

Fourth, in both countries, subnational climate policies — cap-and-trade systems — are moving forward. In the case of China, seven pilot CO₂ cap-and-trade regimes at the local level are being implemented, while in the United States, California's ambitious AB-32 cap-and-trade system continues to make progress.

Fifth and finally, there is the reality of global geopolitics. If the 20th century was the American Century, then many observers, including leaders in China, anticipate (or hope) that the 21st century will be the Century of China. And, as I was quoted by David Jolly in the *New York Times* as saying, "If it's your century, you don't obstruct, you lead."

Of course, the increasing convergence of Chinese and U.S. perspectives and interests could produce a coalition of obstruction rather than an alignment of progress, but these historic developments in the two key countries leave me cautiously optimistic — or perhaps, just hopeful — about the path ahead.

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