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As global climate negotiations open in Copenhagen, most of the commentary has focused on two issues: modest greenhouse-gas-emissions targets announced by the United States and China and the “climate-gate” email scandal. This makes sense, because the United States and China are the world’s largest emitters and because everybody loves a good scandal—especially when it is linked to a controversial issue. But as a result, few are watching Europe, where an interesting internal debate is underway.

In 2008, the European Union agreed to a plan to reduce its emissions by 20 percent below 1990 levels by 2020, with a provision that allowed EU leaders to commit to 30 percent reductions if other major emitters took ambitious action. Now a group of seven EU members—led by the United Kingdom and summit host Denmark—are pressing to take just that step in response to the American and Chinese moves. Some others, most notably Poland, are considerably less interested in deeper emissions cuts.

The British-Danish position (also backed publicly by France, Germany, Spain, Sweden and Finland) seems driven by a desire to embrace and reward the announcements by the Obama administration and Beijing with a view to encouraging each to take further action and helping each to demonstrate domestically that others are taking major steps. This is striking in view of what the United States and China have actually suggested they might do. (Neither has offered a real commitment.)

In America’s case, the Obama administration has been discussing committing to a 17–20 percent reduction in our emissions below 2005 levels by 2020. But compared to American economic growth between 1990 and 2005, this shrinks to low single digits below 1990 levels—well below the 7 percent from 1990 levels to which former–Vice President Gore unsuccessfully committed America in Kyoto in 1997. And that was 7 percent by 2012. At least some Europeans are so desperate to try to help Mr. Obama that they are prepared to accept an additional 10 percent commitment by 2020 in return for the United States not meeting its agreed but unratified 2012 commitment by 2020. This is (charitably) a very bold move, especially in view of Republican opposition (and concern among moderate Senate Democrats) that could send a potential “Copenhagen Protocol” down the same failed path as Kyoto.

In the Chinese case, Beijing has outlined a 40–45 percent improvement in its greenhouse gas intensity, a measure of emissions per unit of GDP, by 2020. This is significant in the sense that it would represent a major increase in China's energy efficiency. But it is rather less important in two other ways: it reflects what Beijing plans to do anyway for its own reasons, entailing no particular sacrifice, and it is rather unlikely actually to reduce China's emissions when compared to China's economic growth projections.

Poland—which had a relatively easy time so far meeting its Kyoto commitments due to its post-communist economic collapse, but is now on an upward trajectory that Warsaw wants to maintain—is much more nervous about taking on additional emissions reduction obligations and is demanding an impact assessment before the EU takes action, knowing that this will prevent any deeper EU commitment at Copenhagen. This reflects broader economic divisions between the EU's older and newer members on energy policy and other economic issues. On a different tangent, it would also put even more pressure on Poland to shift from domestic coal to imported Russian natural gas, further increasing Poland's dependency on Moscow.

In the end, there is a good chance that core EU states like Britain, France, and Germany will be able to push Poland into an agreement, whether strictly through diplomacy or with financial incentives (which may be Warsaw's more practical goal). But the dispute makes clear that notwithstanding its media image, Europe is far from united on climate and energy policy—and that Americans should not focus solely on the actions of China and other major developing economies.

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