

## Opinion

## What do Chinese negotiators think? Lessons from Copenhagen

The Climate Change Global Summit in Copenhagen in December 2009 provoked strong responses from commentators, activists, politicians and country leaders. There was a palpable sense of disappointment at the watered down accord issued at the end of so much effort and talk. Perhaps most remarkable, however, was that the world's largest carbon emitter – China – was singled out as the biggest impediment to reaching a full agreement with specific targets. Much has been written about why China refused targets and what its objectives were. Less has been said about what the Copenhagen process shows about China's negotiating behaviour. What happened in December was deeply revealing and understanding it might aid any future international negotiations involving China.

HOWEVER FRACTIOUS BATTLES to forge consensus amongst the political elite in Beijing have been in the past, there has usually been a clear leadership figure or, at the very least, a leading group made up of the Party Secretary and Premier. In the 1980s, the era of Deng Xiaoping as paramount leader, the whole Opening Up policy was dependent on Deng's political support. Without this, nothing happened. Even in 1992, with clear opposition in the party to greater opening up, Deng was able – at the age of 87 – to undertake his Southern Tour and reaffirm the Chinese government's commitment to greater economic reform. In the 1990s, Jiang Zemin as Party Secretary and Zhu Rongji as Premier and Head of Government, pushed through tough state-owned enterprise reform and secured China's entry to the World Trade Organisation, despite internal opposition. They faced down issues over relations with the US and the policy on Taiwan, and reined in the People's Liberation Army in 1998 by divesting it of commercial interests.

The Hu Jintao-Wen Jiabao era has been defined by power in consensus building. The period of the 'big, powerful leader' dominating the landscape is over. Maoist and Dengist

centralised power was partially discredited by the Cultural Revolution of 1967 to 1976 and the Tiananmen Square massacre in 1989. Unlike their predecessors, Hu and Wen do not possess the immense political capital to unilaterally force issues through. They have turned this into a strength, however, by creating a more modernised sense of the exercise of power. They patiently build wide agreement within key departments of the state and the party. There are no longer all powerful Godfathers.

Had there been such a Godfather, however, Copenhagen might have been easier. Hu and Wen have been pretty open about the absolute priority of economic growth for their legitimacy and the hold of the Communist Party on power. Without solid GDP growth, China will be swamped with unemployment. It will run out of wealth to address some of the issues it has put on hold – the building of social infrastructure, equality and, most relevant to Copenhagen, environmental sustainability. The current Chinese government has made it clear that this, at heart, is their key red line. For Hu and Wen to choose to fight over this would be political suicide.

Below: Chinese premier Wen Jiabao addressing the COP15 climate change talks in Copenhagen, December 2010.



Chinese leaders are predominantly from a scientific background. Seven of the current nine members of the Standing Committee of the Politburo, the summit of decision making in China, are technocrats. Hu is a water engineer, and Wen a geologist. They are more scientifically literate than the vast majority of their western counterparts. In the last five years they have shifted from their position of regarding scientific evidence for man-made climate change with scepticism. Their own scientists have gathered evidence, which appears to accord with what the rest of the world is saying. The impediment of an elite in Beijing regarding the need for caps on emissions, etc. as yet another western originated plot to stifle their growth is now largely gone. That, at least, is progress.

Just as in Western societies, there are a wide spectrum of views within society about climate change, carbon emissions and how to deal with it. Chinese leaders getting out of step with public opinion and signing up to deals which could be interpreted as not in China's interests would be incendiary. Hu does not want to go down in history as the second Zhao Ziyang, unceremoniously turfed out of power for selling out China's interests, especially at a time when China is about to attempt its first ever truly peaceful leadership transition from the Fourth to the Fifth generation of leaders, something that needs to happen by October 2012.

In the run up to Copenhagen, an immense debate took place within China's 29 central ministries, and within its 31 provinces and autonomous regions, with hugely complicated calculations about what each could contribute to the overall climate change package. That process ended at the beginning of December last year, when the central government, after its own cogitations, issued a statement on its position before the summit. Foreign ambassadors were summoned to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in Beijing and told, in some detail, where China stood. They reported back to their capitals and their heads of government and foreign ministers and chief negotiators were informed. So far, so good.

Once in Copenhagen, however, two separate narratives emerged. They need to be carefully distinguished. The political elite – epitomised by those sitting on the Standing Committee of the Politburo – had taken their position. For domestic consumption, however, there was a need for China to be seen as asserting itself at Copenhagen. Reports of China's obstructive behaviour were probably prompted by this and other orders demanding a more assertive presence. Added to this mix is increasing confidence on the part of China in the face of the implosion of Western financial and moral credibility since the start of the global financial crisis in 2007. China's initial behaviour was, unsurprisingly, interpreted as arrogant and unhelpful. Perhaps less expected was the increasing anger from developed world countries, in the form of the G77, who started to detect real evidence of brute Chinese self-interest taking a precedence over collective ones.

Running parallel to this narrative, was a second one, of the elite themselves, whose consensus on such a complex, new, and central issue had been hard found. For them, China's position was not the issue that was up for negotiation; it was the need to bring the rest of the world closer to China. Wen Jiabao was there not, as he stated to one leader, to 'negotiate' but to simply assert. Attempts to push him into negotiation were doomed. He had no power base or authority to make any changes to China's position. Had China really expected to negotiate at Copenhagen they would have sent Hu Jintao himself. For two days, Wen suffered the indignities of being importuned and begged and pressured into a negotiation he believed he had no need to enter into and which he had no locus to become involved in.

Climate change is a unique issue and the demands that it makes on policymakers in China particularly complex. But this issue and China's approach to it are not going away. So what can we learn about Chinese negotiating behaviour from Copenhagen? Consensus is hard won and once reached, tough to shape or move. There is no powerful figure in contemporary Chinese politics that can assert a position and then carry public opinion with them. Instead, there is a delicate and complex symbiosis between opinion and leadership, involving a process of negotiation which is ill understood and opaque. And finally, China's negotiation tactics and positions on these 'global issues' are linked with the needed reform of its own decision-making and administrative systems. Their lack of accountability and transparency impact on China's position on outward-looking issues like climate change and economic reform. Until they change, China's stance is unlikely to shift.

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