



Speech to Institute for Environmental Security conference, “From Bali to Poznan”

*Alex Evans
European Parliament, Brussels, 18 December 2007*

We’ve already heard from other speakers about the outcome from the Bali conference. I won’t say more on that now except just to note that whatever you thought about the outcome, Bali was in the end ‘talks about talks’.

What I’m going to speak about now is instead the content of the talks themselves, now that countries have decided to launch negotiations, to Copenhagen and beyond. In particular, I want to discuss what an endgame for limiting warming to two degrees Celsius might look like.

So let’s remind ourselves first of the yardstick that the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change has set for policymakers in the Fourth Assessment Report’s synthesis paper, published just before the Bali conference. If we’re serious about limiting warming to between 2 degrees Celsius (the EU’s stated goal) and 2.4 degrees Celsius, then:

1. carbon dioxide levels need to be stabilized between 350 and 400 parts per million – they are currently at 370 – and
2. CO₂ equivalent level (for all greenhouse gases rather than just CO₂, in other words), must be stabilized at between 445 and 490 parts per million. Current levels are 455.

What do these target ranges imply in terms of emissions? In a nutshell, it’s much more demanding than anyone’s yet willing to let on – including Europe.

When you consider the most up-to-date ‘coupled’ computer models of the climate – which, unlike the older ‘uncoupled’ versions, take ocean sinks into account, resulting in greater accuracy – we find that to keep concentrations within the IPCC concentration ranges just mentioned, we need to be looking at global emissions of close to zero by 2050.

It’s a much more ambitious target than the cut of around 50 per cent by 2050 often cited by EU leaders. And it would imply a global cut by 2020 of *at least* 40 per cent – and much more than that for developed countries, assuming that the framework agreed is equitable.

So that’s the challenge. What are the prospects for achieving it?

In the post-Bali environment, we essentially have a new ‘Quad’ group of leading players, like the one that used to prevail on trade – but with a rather different membership. In the new climate Quad, the key constituencies are the US; Europe; China; and India. (We’ve already discussed their respective positions at Bali, and I won’t say more on that here.)

But the biggest issue of all still remains off the table.

No-one – not the EU, not the US and its allies, not China, not India – is calling for a binding ceiling on greenhouse-gas levels in the air (a “stabilisation target” in the jargon), that then leads to the definition of a ‘safe global emissions budget’.

It’s a rather surprising omission. After all, it’s hard to see how we’ll achieve the goal of the 1992 UN Climate Convention - stabilizing greenhouse gas concentrations at a safe level – unless we *quantify* that safe level.

So how do we explain this strange consensus on no stabilization target in the next commitment period?

Well, you don’t have to be a genius to see why the US would be opposed to such a target. If climate change isn’t an urgent problem, why raise the stakes by initiating discussion of a global emissions budget likely to result in targets much more exacting than those agreed under Kyoto?

But for Europe, China and India, the reason is more subtle. It has to do with this crucial fact:

You can’t discuss a stabilization target without discussing binding targets for developing countries. How else, after all, can you have a global emissions budget?

And here’s the problem. While many EU policymakers privately believe developing country targets to be essential, they also judge that there is insufficient political space to allow such a discussion – and hence remain silent.

China and India agree. For them, it’s just too hazardous to talk binding targets without some upfront guarantee of equitable treatment that safeguards their right to develop. Otherwise, they fear, the risk is that they will be railroaded into a target that will prevent them from growing their economies and eliminating extreme poverty.

So that’s where we were before Bali, and that’s where we are now.

Unless we can find some way of unlocking the politics of developing country targets, then we can’t stabilize greenhouse gas concentrations. It’s that simple.

Yet so difficult, so hazardous, so politically toxic is this discussion, that the one Quad member calling for developing country targets is the US! – apparently in a bid to try to stymie the negotiations.

This is the impasse that we must find a way through.

In the remainder of this talk, I want to suggest that there’s a way through this impasse – an opportunity that Angela Merkel has already identified and is running with.

Over the past few months, Mrs Merkel has begun to speak regularly about the need for a global framework based on the concept of convergence towards equal per capita rights to the atmosphere.

According to briefings to the media by German officials, this idea results from conversations between Merkel and Indian prime minister Manmohan Singh at the 2007 G8 summit in Heiligendamm, where Singh reportedly stated that convergence to per capita equity would be the price for Indian participation in a future deal.

If this is the case, then this opens up the possibility of a real discussion between developed and developing countries about the principles that might underpin a future global “grand bargain” on climate change.

Convergence, after all, is – at least on paper – a means of operationalising the long-discussed principle of ‘common but differentiated responsibilities’ within the scientifically sound context of a safe global emissions budget.

Under a process of convergence, countries’ emission rights within a global emissions budget would move from their current shares – where emissions are proportionate to wealth – to a new allocation proportionate instead to *population*. This process would take place over a negotiated timescale of anything from one to a hundred years.

So how does the approach I’ve just sketched out shape up in the political positions of the Climate Quad?

Well for India, a global framework based on stabilization and convergence is a no-brainer.

After all, Indian emissions in 2004 were 1.02 tonnes of carbon dioxide (CO₂) per person, while the global average was 4.18 tonnes. Even if Indian emissions grow rapidly, it will still be years before her per capita emissions exceed the global average.

Because of that, a global emissions trading scheme based on convergence to equal per capita levels would be highly profitable for India. (The same basic dynamic is also true for Brazil, although to a slightly lesser extent.)

For Europe – assuming that member states and the Commission get behind Mrs Merkel’s proposal – the approach could be attractive because it matches up with Europe’s analysis of the urgency of tackling climate change. It’s based on a stabilization target.

If Europe wants to deliver its proposed limit of 2 degrees of warming, this is one way – maybe the only way – of doing it.

For the US, convergence to equal per capita emission rights is unlikely to represent its preferred vision for future climate policy – even if we do see a Democrat administration from 2009.

But its ideal vision, remember, is binding targets for no-one – a vision that failed to find much support at Bali. If the US is now falling back to a position of binding targets for developing as well as developed countries, then the obvious question is, if not through convergence, then how DO you propose to operationalise the principle of common but differentiated responsibilities in the context of your call for binding targets for China and India?

And then there’s China – where the political calculation is least clear-cut of all.

China’s 2004 CO₂ emissions were some 3.65 tonnes per person – much closer than India to the world per capita average (though still light years away from the American level of 19.73 tonnes per person).

And according to International Energy Agency estimates, China’s per capita emissions level could exceed the global average by as soon as 2008.

When this change takes place, it will represent a major watershed in international climate policy.

Whereas for India, participation in a global deal based on per capita convergence makes sense for reasons of profitability alone, the same will - from next year - not hold true for China.

In this sense, whether China should support a stabilisation ceiling – and the targets for developing countries that it would inevitably entail – depends entirely on how urgent China perceives climate change to be, and how badly it wants the world to agree a solution to the problem.

If China thinks that climate-driven damages are likely to be sufficiently serious and detrimental to Chinese interests to warrant solving the problem sooner rather than later – by setting a stabilisation target, in other words – then that will necessitate the development of a Chinese view on how the resulting “global emissions budget” should be shared out.

What does this come down to? In a nutshell, four conclusions:

1. If Europe is serious about two degrees, then it has no time to waste in starting discussions about a stabilization target. If it wants a stabilization target, then it needs binding targets for developing countries, in the context of a global emissions budget. And convergence to equal per capita emission rights is the only approach so far proposed by any EU member state for sharing out such a global emissions budget.
2. Europe’s most obvious ally in this enterprise would be India – assuming that Europe is willing to step up to the plate and talk per capita convergence. As mentioned earlier, an approach based on convergence is likely to be highly profitable for India.
3. We need to be realistic about the US. Just because it has called for binding targets for developing countries is not to say that it will welcome convergence, even given a Democrat Administration: Senator John Kerry said as much in Bali. But if Europe calls for this approach, then it can at least maximize political momentum, and call America’s bluff on the issue of developing country targets.
4. And the great unknown: China. Unlike India, Chinese support for a global framework based on a stabilization target and per capita convergence does not make sense for reasons of profitability alone. So for Europe, it makes sense to engage intensively with China, above all to underline that *if* China thinks climate change is serious, then it depends on a stabilization target, and a global emissions budget binding targets for all – and that China will therefore need to come to a view on how such a global emissions budget should be shared out.