










NEWS ANALYSIS

Obama Hobbled in Fight Against Global Warming


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WASHINGTON — [President Obama](#) came into office pledging to end eight years of American inaction on [climate change](#) under President [George W. Bush](#), and all year he has promised that the United States would lead the way toward a global agreement in Copenhagen next month to address the warming planet.

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But this weekend in Singapore, Mr. Obama was forced to acknowledge that a comprehensive climate deal was beyond reach this year. Instead, he and other [world leaders agreed](#) that they would work toward a more modest interim agreement with a promise to renew work toward a binding treaty next year.

The admission places Mr. Obama in the awkward position of being, at least for now, as unlikely to spearhead an international effort to combat global warming as his predecessor — if for different reasons.

In Mr. Bush's case, he remained skeptical about the science of global warming until near the end of his presidency and dubious about the need for concerted global action.

And his reluctance was echoed by a Congress that wanted to see clear commitments from developing countries like China.

But Mr. Obama has been a champion of climate change regulation. He has moved unilaterally to limit greenhouse gases from vehicles and large sources such as [coal](#)-burning power plants. And in recent months, China, India, Brazil and some other developing countries have issued promises to slow the growth of emissions, although with the knowledge that a binding treaty to enforce such pledges will not take effect for at least several years.

Yet Mr. Obama has found himself limited in his ambitions by a Congress that is unwilling to move as far or as fast as he would like.

American negotiators have been hamstrung in talks leading to the Copenhagen conference by inaction on legislation supported by the administration that would impose strict caps on carbon dioxide emissions. The House [passed a relatively stringent bill in June](#), but the Senate is not expected to begin serious debate on the measure until next year.

Without a firm commitment from the United States — for decades the world's leading emitter of climate-altering gases — other nations have been reluctant to deliver firmer pledges of their own. Mr. Obama's aides say he remains determined to use his domestic authority and international clout to continue pressing toward a global agreement. despite the latest setback.

“Is this impasse the United States' fault? Of course. But others are at fault as well,” said Dan Becker, director of the [Safe Climate Campaign](#) in Washington, citing the opposition of

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polluting industries and the reluctance of emerging economies to commit to binding curbs on emissions. “We have both the obligation and capability of taking the lead on this issue. The longer we delay, the more extreme the steps that will have to be taken.”

Mr. Obama expressed support on Sunday for a proposal from Prime Minister Lars Lokke Rasmussen of Denmark to pursue a two-step process at the Copenhagen conference.

Under the plan, the 192 nations convening in the Danish capital would formulate a nonbinding political agreement calling for reductions in global warming emissions and aid for developing nations to adapt to a changing climate. The group would also promise to work to put together a binding global pact in 2010, complete with firm emissions targets, enforcement mechanisms and specific dollar amounts to aid poorer nations.

“We must in the coming weeks focus on what is possible and not let ourselves be distracted by what is not possible,” Mr. Rasmussen said in Singapore, making clear he would prefer to lock in the progress that has been made to date and not postpone action until countries are prepared to accept legally-binding commitments.

Although many read the compromise as a sign that the Copenhagen talks were doomed to produce at best a weak agreement, Yvo de Boer, the [United Nations](#) official managing the climate negotiations, said the statements out of the Singapore meeting did not limit his ambitions.

“Copenhagen can and must deliver clarity on emission reduction targets and the finance to kick start rapid action,” Mr. de Boer said. “I have seen nothing that would change my view on that.”

Not everyone blames the United States for the apparent deadlock. A [European Union](#) official, who asked that his name not be used so he could speak more freely, said that Mr. Obama was moving to use his executive authority to regulate greenhouse gases, but that India and China had delivered little beyond promises.

He said that it had been clear for months that Copenhagen was not going to yield a breakthrough and that there was plenty of blame to go around.

Rajendra K. Pachauri, the chairman of the [Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change](#), said the compromise agreed to by the leaders in Singapore was an honest admission of what had become obvious over the past several weeks, as negotiations toward a climate treaty stalled.

But he said the admission was a severe disappointment from President Obama and the other leaders.

“It signifies an abandonment of moral responsibility that a position of leadership on the world stage clearly implies,” Mr. Pachauri said in an e-mail message, adding that the scientific consensus on global warming demanded immediate action, not stalling tactics.

Mr. Obama, speaking in Japan on Friday, seemed to anticipate the criticism the United States will face for the setback in the Copenhagen talks. He said he had started a momentous change in American policy on global warming that would take some time to complete.

“Already, the United States has taken more steps to combat climate change in 10 months than we have in our recent history,” Mr. Obama said, “by embracing the latest science, by investing in new energy, by raising efficiency standards, forging new partnerships and engaging in international climate negotiations.


“In short, America knows there is more work to do,” he said, “but we are meeting our responsibility, and will continue to do so.”


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