

# The BLACK C o M M e n t a t o r

An independent weekly internet magazine  
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social justice and peace - Providing commentary,  
analysis and investigations on issues affecting  
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**Nov 29, 2012 - Issue 496**

## **World Climate Change Gathering Awaits Obama Response**

**Left Margin**

**By Carl Bloice**

**BC Editorial Board**

Much has been made during the past couple of months over the fact that critical top leadership decisions were being made in the United States and China at about the same time as clues were sought as to what the changes in our climate would mean for major issues facing the international community. How the question of climate change has been dealt with in the two countries since the U.S. Presidential election and the changing of the guard in the Communist Party of China has offered an intriguing contrast, one that bears examination on the eve of this week's UN climate change conference (November 26 - December 7) in Doha, Qatar, known as COP 18.

The question of ecology and climate change received scant attention during the U.S. Presidential campaign. As it unfolded, incumbent President Obama continued his reticence to say much of anything in public on the subject and the opposition Republicans did their best to avoid the subject entirely. "A presidential campaign offers an opportunity to educate and engage the American people in the decisions that climate change will force us to make," *Washington Post* columnist, Eugene Robinson, observed during the Presidential campaign. "Unfortunately, Obama and Romney have chosen to see this more as an opportunity to pretend that the light at the end of the tunnel is not an approaching train."

The message out of Beijing has been quite different. In his report to the 18th Communist Congress, outgoing party General Secretary,

President Hu Jintao, devoted over 1,000 words to "Making Great Efforts to Promote Ecological Progress."

"We should remain committed to the basic state policy of conserving resources and protecting the environment as well as the principle of giving high priority to conserving resources, protecting the environment and promoting its natural restoration, and strive for green, circular and low-carbon development," Hu told the party congress. "We should preserve our geographical space and improve our industrial structure, way of production and way of life in the interest of conserving resources and protecting the environment. We should address the root cause of deterioration of the ecological environment so as to reverse this trend, create a sound working and living environment for the people, and contribute our share to global ecological security."

"We should strengthen conservation efforts all the way, drastically reduce energy, water and land consumption per unit of GDP, and use such resources in a better and more efficient way," said Hu. "We should launch a revolution in energy production and consumption, impose a ceiling on total energy consumption, save energy and reduce its consumption. We should support the development of energy-efficient and low-carbon industries, new energy sources and renewable energy sources and ensure China's energy security. We should better protect water sources, impose a cap on total water consumption, promote water recycling, and build a water-conserving society. We should ensure that the red line for protecting farmland is not crossed and strictly control land uses. We should strengthen exploration, protection and proper exploitation of mineral resources. We should develop a circular economy to reduce waste and resource consumption, reuse resources and recycle waste in the process of production, distribution and consumption."

Hu Jintao continued, "We should strengthen conservation efforts all the way, drastically reduce energy, water and land consumption per unit of GDP, and use such resources in a better and more efficient way. We should launch a revolution in energy production and consumption, impose a ceiling on total energy consumption, save energy and reduce its consumption. We should support the development of energy-efficient and low-carbon industries, new energy sources and renewable energy sources and ensure China's energy security. We should better protect water sources, impose a cap on total water consumption, promote water recycling, and build a water-conserving society. We should ensure that the red line for protecting farmland is not crossed

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“We will work with the international community to actively respond to global climate change on the basis of equity and in accordance with the common but differentiated responsibilities and respective capabilities of all countries,” Hu concluded.

It was not the first time the Chinese leader had addressed the question of climate change. Before the United Nations General Assembly in 2009, he declared that “out of a sense of responsibility to its own people and people across the world, China has taken and will continue to take determined and practical steps to tackle this challenge. China has adopted and is implementing its national climate change program.”

Of course, words alone will not halt global warning ecological damage and China’s rapid industrialization and economic expansion has engendered severe environmental threats that are far from being overcome. Still, the fact that climate change now receives so much official attention in Beijing is significant. Whether the threat of climate change even exists remains a subject of debate here in the U.S.

Somewhat unexpectedly, President Obama has recently taken up the subject of climate change. Speaking in the first White House press conference since his re-election, he said he intends to take an initiative to forge a political agreement on steps to address the problem.

“So what I am going to be doing over the next several weeks, the next several months, is having a conversation – a wide-ranging conversation – with scientists, engineers and elected officials to find out what more we can do to make short term progress,” Obama said. “You can expect that you will hear more from me in the coming months and years about how we can shape an agenda that garners bipartisan support and help moves this agenda forward.”

“The comments were Obama’s most expansive in years on the dangers of climate change and his strategy for addressing the problem,” wrote Suzanne Goldenberg US environment correspondent for the British *Guardian* last week.” It was also the first time Obama said he would take personal charge of climate change.

“The approach offers a marked difference from Obama’s largely hands-off policy during his first term, when he left Democrats in Congress in charge of crafting a climate change bill. That effort ultimately collapsed in the Senate.”

However, the President’s remarks made it clear that the country is without a comprehensive policy of any kind to deal with climate change and he remains hesitant and politically cautious about what such a policy should be. “If the message is somehow that we are going to ignore jobs and growth simply to address climate change I don’t think anyone is going to go for that. I won’t go for that,” he said. “If on the other hand we can shape an agenda that says we can create jobs, advance growth and make a serious dent in climate change and be an international leader I think that is something the American people would support.”

“Even with those limitations, however, Obama’s comments on climate change represent a break with past efforts by the White House to limit his exposure to what is viewed as one of the most bitterly divisive issues of the day,” wrote Goldenberg.

Others aren’t so sure. An indication that Washington “has faith in the international process would go a long way,” wrote Carl Ritter of the *Associated Press* last week, citing analysts as saying that many people “were disappointed that Obama didn’t put more emphasis on climate change during his first term...He took some steps to rein in emissions of heat-trapping gases, such as sharply increasing fuel efficiency standards for cars and trucks. But a climate bill that would have capped U.S. emissions stalled in the Senate.”

“The perception of many negotiators and countries is that the U.S. is not really interested in increasing action on climate change in general,” Bill Hare, senior scientist at Climate Analytics, a non-profit organization based in Berlin, told the *AP*.

“Part of the reason America still lacks a comprehensive, long-term global warming strategy is that Obama put climate policy lower on his first-term priority list than health care and financial reform,” Stephen Stromberg wrote in the *Washington Post* November 18. “Will the issue get the attention it requires in his second term? In the end, the president on Wednesday was not very encouraging. He had many more details and a far more urgent tone answering questions on budget and immigration reforms. About long-term climate policy, the

best he could manage was this: 'You can expect that you'll hear more from me in the coming months and years about how we can shape an agenda that garners bipartisan support.' That hardly signals an ambition in proportion to the size of the problem."

As for the Republicans, as economist Paul Krugman noted in the *New York Times* last week, "As the evidence for a warming planet becomes ever stronger - and ever scarier - the G.O.P. has buried deeper into denial, into assertions that the whole thing is a hoax concocted by a vast conspiracy of scientists. And this denial has been accompanied by frantic efforts to silence and punish anyone reporting the inconvenient facts." The problem is, however, the GOP retained ability to sabotage any international agreement not to the liking of the oil and energy industrial barons. It is this that prompts the president to cite an actually non-existent contradiction between "growth" and control of carbon emissions.

Some observers have suggested that the message behind the President's caution and emphasis on find a consensus is acknowledgement that Congressional Republicans will never agree to a carbon tax (Grover Norquist wouldn't permit it) and an indication the Administration will not even propose one. That would be consistent with the effort to "reach across the aisle" and find compromise that has been the hallmark of the Obama administration's approach to a lot of things from the beginning. Still it is hard to imagine legislation that is even close to adequate coming from bartering with a GOP leadership that won't even agree that climate change is real. Furthermore, it is a rejection of the plea by many in his own party for the President to take the lead and use his status to inform the public and mobilize forces for meaningful action.

One thing is certain. Obama's announced approach will severely limit his ability to engage other nations in formulating a truly global response. Without a national policy on climate change, there is little for him to pledge. Still, climate change campaigners are said to be cautiously optimistic about the chance of a change in the U.S. stance, especially following the reaction to the Sandy storm and New York City mayor Michael Bloomberg's citing climate change as a reason for his last minute endorsement of Obama's reelection." At Doha, negotiators will be looking for signs of how Obama plans to put his climate mission in action," wrote Goldenberg.

"As the planet warms, it's the poor around the world who will suffer the most," observed progressive radio host Thom Hartmann last week.

"That's the warning coming from a new World Bank report that projects global temperatures increasing 4-degrees Celsius by the end of the century. The temperature increase will be felt the most along the equator in the Mediterranean, North Africa, the Middle East, and parts of the United States. This temperature increase will lead to scarcity in water and food resources and disruptions in biodiversity – which could force mass migrations of people out of affected areas. Rising temperatures will also lead to rising sea levels which threaten cities located in India, Mexico, and Vietnam – as well as several African nations. The World Bank also warns that several small islands around the planet will likely be unable to sustain their populations by 2100. This is the threat that the entire planet faces if global climate change is left unchecked."

Last week, the governments of China, India and South Africa issued a joint position statement calling on the governments of the planet's richer countries to do more to cut greenhouse gas emissions, asserting that as a prerequisite for progress in the latest round of UN climate talks in Doha. "Ministers reaffirmed that the Kyoto protocol remains a key component of the international climate regime and that its second commitment period is the key deliverable for Doha, and the essential basis for ambition within the regime," they said. The Kyoto protocol, which set binding targets on cutting greenhouse emissions, expires at the end of the year.

Commenting on President Obama's recent statements on the subject, the *New York Times* said editorially November 8, "Children should live in a world that is not burdened by debt or weakened by inequality, he said, but also one 'that isn't threatened by the destructive power of a warming planet.' That suggests he knows he has an opportunity to address climate change with more vigor, going beyond auto-mileage standards and renewable-energy jobs to possibly advocating tougher carbon emissions standards."

"Predictions from models tell us that we can't wait even a few more years to address climate change, if we are to minimize warming that will decimate our agriculture with droughts, and eviscerate our economy with storms and fires," wrote Peter Kalmus of California in a Letter the Editor response to the *Times*. "We've had a preview this year. That it will get worse is unavoidable; we need to prevent it from getting much, much worse."

"A Green New Deal would be America's ticket to jobs, security, economic recovery and renewing our position of global leadership. This

may be the last great opportunity for the United States to avoid permanently falling behind China. Here's hoping that Mr. Obama finally finds the courage to stand firm against the oil and coal barons and lead us, our children and future generations away from the brink of climate disaster."

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