Hawaii climate change summit ends without agreement on emission cuts

By Patrick O'Connor
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Rivalries between the world's major powers have again dominated a major international climate change summit, with a two-day meeting in Hawaii producing no agreement on greenhouse gas emissions targets. No concrete measures were announced aside from a schedule for further discussions later this year.

The "Major Economies Meeting on Energy Security and Climate Change" drew about 160 delegates from 16 countries—the US, Australia, Brazil, Canada, China, France, Germany, Indonesia, India, Italy, Japan, Mexico, Russia, South Africa, South Korea and Britain—as well as the United Nations and European Union. In most cases, the national delegations were led by government ministers responsible for the environment and climate change.

The meeting, which concluded last Thursday, is the second of the "major economies meetings" first proposed by US President George Bush at the G8 summit last May. Bush claimed that the meetings would help advance negotiations toward a successor agreement to the Kyoto Protocol, which is due to expire in 2012. A "post-Kyoto" agreement is to be determined through a series of international meetings, culminating in a summit of world leaders to be held in Denmark in December 2009. Washington insisted that the "major economies meetings"—organised in parallel with the post-Kyoto summits that involve almost every national government—would provide a smaller forum in which those countries responsible for the bulk of global carbon emissions could make progress toward an agreement.

Bush's initiative, launched as his administration was coming under increasing domestic and international pressure over its stance on climate change, was completely hypocritical. Shortly after coming to office, the US president repudiated the Kyoto Protocol and, for years, administration officials sought to cast doubt over the scientific evidence of climate change.

While Bush is now posturing as an advocate for a new international climate change protocol, his administration's fundamental positions have not altered. Washington refuses to accept binding greenhouse gas targets, instead advocating essentially meaningless "aspirational" goals. The Bush administration's central aim remains that of scuttling any potential international agreement which could adversely affect any section of American business, above all the fossil fuel energy industries.

During the first major economies meeting, held in Washington last September, European delegates openly expressed their frustration and questioned the value in convening a climate change summit that did not discuss carbon emissions targets.

For a period it remained unclear whether the Hawaii meeting would go ahead. The European powers threatened to boycott the summit after the Bush administration appeared set to veto the release of a final statement agreed at last December's international climate change meeting in Bali, Indonesia. Washington finally signed on to the Bali communiqué once all the substantive items were removed from the text, including the recommendation of the UN Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) that carbon emissions in advanced capitalist countries be reduced by 25 to 40 percent by 2020, compared to 1990 levels.

Artur Runge-Metzger, the EU's head of climate change negotiations, told the media that this proposed target was not even raised during last week's meeting in Hawaii.

While stonewalling discussion of binding targets affecting the US, the Bush administration is demanding that China, India, and other developing countries accept long-term restrictions on their carbon emissions. Washington is increasingly concerned about its weakening world economic position and is determined to ensure that its Asian rivals do not gain further advantage

by evading restrictions on energy usage.

Only the advanced economies were issued binding targets under the Kyoto Protocol. Many of the developing countries hope that this arrangement is maintained in the "post-Kyoto" agreement. Citing a French official at the Hawaii summit, the BBC reported that "Russia and India refused to include a statement [in the final communiqué] that they had been discussing mandatory, international binding commitments, even though that is exactly what had been discussed".

The abject failure of world governments to address the threat of global warming has led to increasingly strident calls for action from leading scientific bodies. Just days before the Hawaii summit convened, the American Geophysical Union (AGU)—the world's largest scientific organisation dedicated to Earth, atmospheric, and space sciences—issued a statement demanding that global carbon emissions be cut by 50 percent below 1990 levels within this century. Otherwise, the AGU warned, average temperatures would likely rise more than 2 degrees Celsius above nineteenth century levels, a level "projected to be disruptive, reducing global agricultural productivity, causing widespread loss of biodiversity, and—if sustained over centuries—melting much of the Greenland ice sheet with ensuing rise in sea level of several meters".

This stark warning raises the necessity for a long-term international plan, involving the "decarbonising" of the world economy through the restructuring of energy supplies, urban planning, and transportation. But such a plan is fundamentally incompatible with the ongoing division of the world into rival nation-states and the organisation of production on the basis of profit.

This is why none of the capitalist powers are able to advance a rational solution to the climate change crisis. International meetings are instead dominated by squabbles between the various delegations, each of which defends its own narrow economic interests. Discussion also centres on how to maximise the opportunities to profit from global warming via the "free market" mechanisms enacted through the Kyoto Protocol and other international agreements.

A significant portion of the Hawaii meeting was devoted to removing tariff and other trade barriers. The World Bank recently recommended that such barriers on about 40 goods and services deemed beneficial to the environment be removed immediately, with tariffs on another 180 goods to be negotiated in the near future. American big business has enormous profits at stake. Removing tariffs on the initial 40 goods alone will significantly boost US exports already worth $US15 billion annually.

The negotiation of a post-Kyoto agreement is increasingly bound up with worsening economic tensions and trade disputes between the major powers. A number of senior European leaders, including French President Nicolas Sarkozy and European Commission President José Manuel Barroso, have backed placing tariffs on imports from countries that refuse to accept binding carbon emissions targets. "We want industry to remain in Europe," Barroso declared last month. "We don't want to export our jobs to other parts of the world."

The Bush administration responded by denouncing Europe for using climate as a pretext for protectionism.

Such complaints are unlikely to cause much concern in Brussels, with Bush widely viewed as beholden to the immediate interests of the oil and gas industries and a lame duck on climate change. The European powers are already looking forward to dealing with the next administration. The leading Democrat and Republican presidential contenders—Clinton, Obama, and McCain—have pitched their climate change policies to broader sections of US business. All support the creation of an American carbon trading market, modelled on the European Emissions Trading Scheme (ETS), which has delivered massive windfalls to Europe's major corporate polluters.

The third "major economies meeting" is due to be held in April, but there is little expectation that anything significant will be agreed to. "A real breakthrough can only be expected after the American presidential election," German Environment Minister Sigmar Gabriel bluntly declared last week.