US goes to Basics over Copenhagen accord tactics

WikiLeaks cables show how the Basic countries are the object of US diplomatic attention and admiration

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Close reading of the cables released by WikiLeaks reveals in excruciating detail the US tactics deployed to achieve its aim of overwhelming the opposition to the Copenhagen accord.

In the cable requesting intelligence from UN diplomats, it names specific countries of interest, including China, France, Japan, Mexico, Russia and the European Union, and seeks biographical details of individuals such as credit card and frequent-flyer numbers. It also seeks compromising intelligence on the officials running the climate negotiations, such as "efforts by treaty secretariats to influence treaty negotiations or compliance".

Despite pushing the accord hard, America's deputy climate change envoy, Jonathan Pershing, revealed some concerns about it in the meeting with the EU climate action commissioner, Connie Hedegaard. The cable notes Pershing saying the national action plans to cut emissions submitted "by some major economies were 'opaque'". Hedegaard agrees - "China's submission was open to interpretation" and Pershing says "Brazil's and India's submissions were as well".

In the other key cable from Brussels, the US deputy national security adviser, Michael Froman, gives an admiring assessment of the Basic countries' tactics of opposition: "It is remarkable how closely co-ordinated the Basic group has become in international fora, taking turns to impede US/EU initiatives and playing the US and EU off against each other. Basic countries have widely differing interests, but have subordinated these to their common short-term goals. The US and EU need to learn from this co-ordination and work much more closely and effectively together ourselves, to better handle third country obstructionism and avoid future train wrecks on climate, Doha or financial regulatory reform."

The Basic countries (Brazil, South Africa, India and China) are the object of much US diplomatic attention. The US courted Brazil both before and after the Copenhagen summit, apparently believing it to be the most amenable of the Basic bloc. In June 2009, the embassy in Brasilia has identified a "clear opportunity to nudge the development of Brazil's negotiating position in a more positive direction", according to a cable, and once again money is the potential lubricant.

Brazil's then vice-environment minister, Izabella Teixeira, had spoken to the US deputy chief of mission, Lisa Kubiske, "on the idea of a partnership with the US" involving political dialogue and concrete technical projects on climate change. Teixeira said: "The US could send a strong signal about its new commitment to climate change by making a significant contribution to the Amazon Fund." However, the US has not yet made a contribution.)

By November 2009, with Copenhagen looming, the Brasilia embassy suggests presidential overtures are needed: "Brazil is still willing to come out siding with China and India on key issues. Nonetheless, it ... has room to improve its position going into Copenhagen and interventions by President Obama ... may help tilt the balance."

After the Copenhagen failure, the embassy reports: "Despite the grumbling, Brazil is neither disowning the Copenhagen accord nor backing away from its ambitious proposals on mitigation".

The US had also identified financially beneficial actions that would ease China's resistance. On 27 May 2009, the Senate foreign relations committee chairman, John Kerry, met the Chinese vice-premier, Li Keqiang.

"Li seized on Kerry's proposal for deeper co-operation on green technology research, calling this 'immediately realistic'," a cable reports. Li says: "China wishes the US would lift high technology export restrictions", a move that would benefit China's manufacturers but terrify some intellectual property holders.

If China is, with the US, the biggest player in the climate change negotiations, then Saudi Arabia is the most difficult, being the only country to openly doubt the reality of human-caused climate change.

The US engages heavily, with the most revealing information coming from a cable with the subject line: "Two faces of Saudi Arabia's climate negotiating position". It analyses ways to gain Saudi support for the accord, as well as the mixed messages coming from the kingdom.

The US ambassador, James Smith, says in the cable: "Saudi officials have suggested that they

need to find a way to climb down gracefully from the country's tough negotiating position. More sustained engagement in co-ordination with other governments, particularly if pitched as an effort to develop partnership, may help them do so." On a practical level, he notes: "Saudi officials are very eager to obtain investment credits for carbon capture and storage (CCS) and other technology transfer projects."

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