

2. POLITICS:

Some understanding, some frustration over U.S. role in climate talks

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Despite widespread frustration with the way the U.S. has played its hand in the U.N. climate change talks over the past few years, delegates from other countries say they know the world's largest historic emitter has made some headway in cutting those emissions at home. They just say it isn't enough.

The Europeans -- who arguably bring the most to the table on both the domestic and international front -- say they know the Obama administration is constrained by domestic policy considerations.

"We know they are doing things at home," said Malachy Hargadon, a delegate for the European Commission, en route to an E.U. delegation cocktail party at the International Convention Centre here Wednesday night.

Hargadon, who worked in Washington for two years, said he knew how difficult it was to pass legislation like the cap-and-trade bill that cleared the House in 2009 only to die in the Senate.

"That's frustrating for us, but I'm sure it's frustrating for them as well," he said. Still, he said, the lack of a comprehensive U.S. climate policy also limits what the international community can achieve on carbon dioxide reduction and finance.

"It can't do everything that we would like it to do at the moment," he said.

While the U.S. does not boast an economywide carbon program, as Europe does, the U.S. can point to a number of new tools aimed at drawing down emissions.

These include a set of new rules and standards for greenhouse gases, mercury and other emissions, which environmentalists hope will shift the balance of U.S. energy production, stimulus funding for renewable energy and energy efficiency, and Obama's proposed near-doubling of fuel economy standards for passenger vehicles.

Faint praise from Europe

This last has been hailed in the U.S. as a historic achievement, but Hargadon said the 54.5 mpg by 2025 standard, while worthy, is not remarkable by European standards.

"It's existing technology that just needs to be put in place in the United States as well," he said. "I think it's a message that American drivers are more and more willing to listen to, because it will save money on fuel."

Europeans have enjoyed something of a star status at this Conference of the Parties, because they have said they are willing to remain within the Kyoto Protocol despite the refusal of other major economies to join, as long as they have some assurance that the rest of the world will agree to binding emissions targets post-2020.

A flyer being circulated by the Global Campaign for Climate Action shows European leaders and negotiators posed, wands in hand, as characters from Harry Potter, with the caption "Kyoto Protocol: the treaty that lived." German Chancellor Angela Merkel has somehow scored the role of Harry.

Roeland van de Geer, a Dutch diplomat and head of the delegation, said outside the same party that Europe does not dismiss what the U.S. has done, and in fact the belief is that U.S. entrepreneurs will have an especially important role to play in the global fight to curb emissions.

"We expect a lot of American innovation -- we need a Steve Jobs for the green economy," he said.

But when it comes to policy initiatives and freedom to engage fully in international climate talks, the U.S. lags other rich nations, van de Geer said.

He said that other countries understand the pressures U.S. special envoy Todd Stern and his team are under not to promise things in Durban that can't be ratified in Washington.

"We do realize that for the American government, the Senate and the House are very important considerations," he said. "The American government doesn't want to come home and say 'we decided this.' But we do hope and we trust that within the host of tensions that we all have -- because we too have parliaments -- that we can work out something."

Van de Geer said he was hopeful that in the end, the U.S. and Europe could find common ground on climate as they had done on so many other issues.

Doubts that U.S. targets will be achieved

Tomas Wyns, director of the Center for Clean Air Policy in Europe, was less sure. He said that European leaders on climate issues are informed about U.S. national and regional emissions programs, and even see some bright spots within it -- they admire California's low-carbon fuel standard, for example.

But overall, Europe is not impressed with the U.S. regime.

"There are things happening, but far too slow and far too little," he said.

International negotiators once hoped that Obama's election would turn over a new leaf in U.S. climate diplomacy -- but that was before they witnessed the death of U.S. climate legislation and the cautious bent of U.S. climate negotiators reluctant to take home a treaty that would likely not be ratified.

"The collapse of the U.S. climate bill has made the E.U. seriously doubt that the 17 percent reduction target as pledged by the U.S. in Copenhagen will really be achieved," he said. He said Europeans had also noticed that that pledge had not been formally mentioned in Durban, leading them to think that the U.S. might be backing away from it.

Wyns said that other countries are now weighing some form of roadmap that would allow countries that are willing to participate in a legally binding agreement after 2020 to move toward one, and allow the U.S. to join in later when political circumstances allow.

"The perception is that the world cannot wait for the U.S. to play ball," he said. "We need to move forward with as many parties as possible and of course get China, India and Brazil on board as much as possible. We can only hope that the U.S. Congress starts behaving more sensibly in the near future and allows the U.S. administration to engage more firmly."

Developing nations, who have made retention of the Kyoto Protocol their top priority for the Durban talks, see the U.S. as a major obstacle to getting what they want. Without the promise of a broader treaty on emissions in the future, Europe has said it will leave the protocol when the first commitment period expires next year. And the U.S. is standing in the way of that by refusing to sit down and discuss a broader agreement unless it would also bind major developing emitters, such as China and India.

"We would like to appeal to the United States to strike a deal. We would like the USA to show leadership," said Chebet Maiku, Uganda's lead negotiator.

Dr. Ugyen Tsewang of Bhutan said his country wants mechanisms to fight climate change. Glacier lake outburst flooding has become a particular problem, threatening the tiny Himalayan nation's only real industry, agriculture.

Sitting outside the plenary hall and whipping out a cell phone from underneath a traditional red striped Bhutanese robe called a gho, Tsewang said he also wants to see the U.S. take leadership.

"I'm not clear why the U.S. is not doing anything. The U.S., they have the money and they have the resources. If the U.S. cannot do it, who can do it?"

Reporter Lisa Friedman contributed.