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BOB DOPPELT: At worst, climate summit was a failure; at best, it's a start

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BY BOB DOPPELT

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COPENHAGEN — It was reserved for dignitaries, and I couldn't attend the plenary. So I sat in the cramped media center watching President Obama deliver his keynote on the last day of the United Nations climate summit in Copenhagen. It was disappointing. He offered nothing new or bold to break the gridlock.

As it became clear that the much-anticipated summit was in danger of ending with a whimper, I began to wonder what the world leaders in the audience were thinking.

They were tasked by the citizens of the world to turn the tide on global warming, our most pressing problem. But it seemed they were going to fail.

The Obama administration put on a full-court press at the summit to show the world that the United States is committed to addressing global warming. Numerous Cabinet members made presentations at the U.S. pavilion. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton had also tried to breathe life into the stalled negotiations by announcing that if certain conditions were met, the United States would "help raise" \$100 billion a year by 2020 to assist poor nations cope with global warming.

But the administration was constrained by U.S. domestic politics. For example, it couldn't commit to more aggressive emission cuts than the modest amount described in the climate bill that passed the House.

Obama's team also knew going into the summit that major disagreements over equity and cost-effectiveness between the United States and China and among poor and rich nations would likely constrain the final outcome.

They were right. The "Copenhagen Accord" that emerged is little more than a proclamation to keep talking.

Obama and other world leaders have tried to spin the outcome as a major success. That's mostly damage control. A binding international treaty to reduce greenhouse gas emissions was supposed to result from the summit. Instead, the accord merely keeps talks alive.

But that itself is a success of sorts. As late as noon on the summit's final day, the talks were completely gridlocked. Even an agreement to keep talking seemed doubtful. To their credit, deft negotiations led by Obama averted a disaster.

In the end, the signatories to the new accord agreed in principle to hold global temperature increases to 3.6 degrees Fahrenheit. This has been hailed a big step forward. But it doesn't really plow new ground. The European Union, the G8 group of industrialized nations, and many other nations have already settled on that temperature limit.

The accord also fails to spell out the actions to achieve that goal.

Another supposed success of the accord is the promise by the big emitters, including China and the United States, to cut their emissions and list their reduction pledges on a global registry. But pledging is not the same as doing.

In addition, if the nations post the reductions they announced at the summit, we are in big trouble. A draft U.N. document marked "confidential" leaked at the conference indicated that the combined emission pledges offered there would commit the world to a frightening 5.4-degree temperature increase.

But the accord also — just maybe — provides a framework that could spur progress down the road. That's because it conceptually addresses some of the key deficiencies that caused the United States to reject the Kyoto Protocol.

One of the major points of contention for the U.S. with Kyoto, and at the summit, was the need for high-polluting developing nations such as China to commit to emission cuts. Kyoto does not require these so-called Annex II countries to such cuts. Now, all 17 of the major economies that contribute about 90 percent of total global emissions have pledged to limit their emissions.

To ensure a level global economic playing field, the Obama administration was also adamant that every nation, including China, tender its emission reductions to independent verification. In a compromise, the new accord says that Annex II nations will submit their plans to "international consultations and analysis."

Although by no means a sure thing, the fact that China put some skin in the game might grease the skids for Senate passage of a climate bill. This could allow the United States to enter into a future international treaty.

The accord also acknowledges other important issues ignored by the Kyoto Protocol, such as the need to fund efforts in poor nations to cope with climate change, to finance programs to reduce tropical deforestation, and to address long-term emission reductions. These proclamations might entice poor nations to play constructive roles in future negotiations.

The president and his team must feel a big sigh of relief. No one should think, however, that the new accord signifies meaningful progress. It mostly represents a frantic attempt by world leaders to have something to show their constituents when they returned home.

That said, the administration should be credited with planting seeds that, if the stars align, could potentially lead to important long-term action on climate change.

Bob Doppelt is director of Resource Innovations at the University of Oregon and heads the

university's Climate Leadership Initiative. He attended the recent climate summit in Copenhagen.

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