

Podcast #35¹

Living in the Future Tense: Climate Change Summit, Part 1

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Welcome to Forums for a Future.

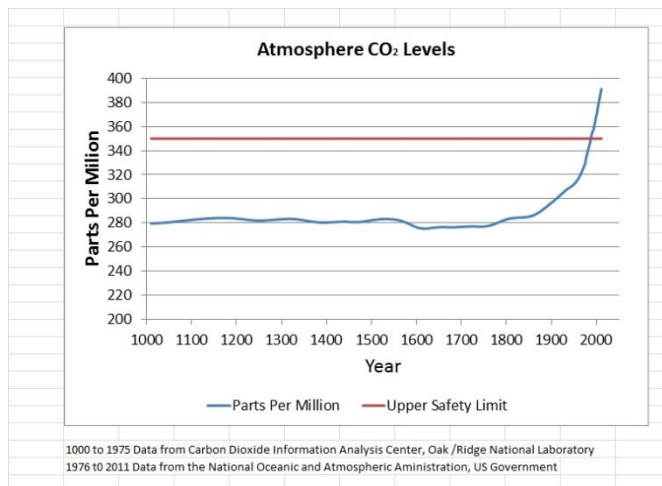
The subject of the current series of podcasts is “Living in the Future Tense.” The series is based on the proposition that the choices we make today will have irreversible consequences within our own lifetime. Thus, for those of us now living, in this the Post-Modern Era, our new reality is that we are living in the future tense: “Today is Tomorrow.”

In the previous era – the Modern Era – people lived in the “Present Tense.” They believed they could have whatever they wanted, now. They lived as if there was no tomorrow.

The defining feature of “living our life in the future tense” is that we are currently *taking to the limit* every aspect of our economic, political and social existence.

The clearest example is the rapid, exponential, growth in world population over the past 100 years which has exceed the capacity of the planet to replace the energy used and to absorb the waste produced. But, there are many other indications that we are living in exponential times for which population growth can serve as a metaphor for the more general concept of “*taking it to the limit, one more time.*”

The political, economic and social reality of “meeting the limits” will be the *defining moments* of the Post-Modern Era. The time span is the 50-year interval encompassing the life span of the majority of people who are alive today. We must now start “Living in the Future Tense:” for today is our tomorrow.



Today’s podcast, #35, is the first part of a three part series on the world summit negotiations to combat climate change. Greenhouse gas emissions are one of the many specific issues *we are taking to the limit, yet one more time.* For the past 1000 years the level of CO₂ in the atmosphere has remained relatively constant at 280 ppm, but starting with the industrial revolution been increasing at an accelerating rate to 390 ppm, well above the upper safety limit of 350 ppm.

In December 2009 the UN held a Climate Change Summit in Copenhagen to attempt to set world policy standards for greenhouse gas emissions. The United States and China were the principle players as the two top green-house-gas-producing countries. The summit ended without a

comprehensive agreement. At the Summit in Cancun in 2010 the nations focused on refining the technical details of the goals established at Copenhagen and re-affirmed their pledges to lower emissions, but postponed any major decisions in how this was to be accomplished.

Part 1 in this series, Podcast 35, will explain why the proposals of both the US and China at Copenhagen and Cancun were self-serving and why neither could expect the other to agree with them. Part 2 in the series, Podcast 36 will provide a rationale for an alternative world standard that is equally fair to both countries. And, Part 3 in the series, Podcast 37, will explain why neither the US or China have been able politically to reach an agreement, and it will provide the means for achieving mutual cooperation.

Part I: Why Copenhagen and Cancun Failed

At the Summit held in Cancun in 2010, unlike the one in Copenhagen, the heads of State of the major nations did not attend, and the large issues of public contention between the United States and China, and with the Least Developed Nations, was avoided by focusing on technical procedures for achieving some of the goals outlined in Copenhagen in 2009. The two central issues of establishing legally binding global standards and an extension of the Kyoto Protocol were postponed for future negotiations.

It is important to understand the reasons for these failures in order to identify the accommodations that must occur if the next summit scheduled for Durban in South Africa in 2011 is to avoid a similar fate.

The United States has proposed that countries should agree to absolute levels of reduction of greenhouse gas emissions. China has proposed that limits be set in terms of a proportion of the Gross Domestic Product (GDP). These are both self-serving proposals, and something that neither could realistically expect the other to agree with. In this sense both represent bad faith negotiations. I will explain why this is so:

Consider first that the US is rapidly losing its industrial base. From 1990 to the 2007 the US lost 2 % of its share of the world Gross Domestic Product (GDP), and it is projected to lose an additional 3% by 2020. Since the CO₂ emissions of both countries closely track GDP, any reduction or increase in the world share of GDP will also proportionally affect the amount of CO₂ emissions (Figure 1). At the Copenhagen negotiation the US's position was that both countries should set limits on total emissions and that by 2020 the US would reduce its total CO₂ emissions by 17%. This is an amount that can largely be accounted for as a result of the projected decline in the US share of world GDP and from new technologies already in place. On the other hand, this standard would negatively impact China's fast growing economy. As a world standard, it was an empty offer.

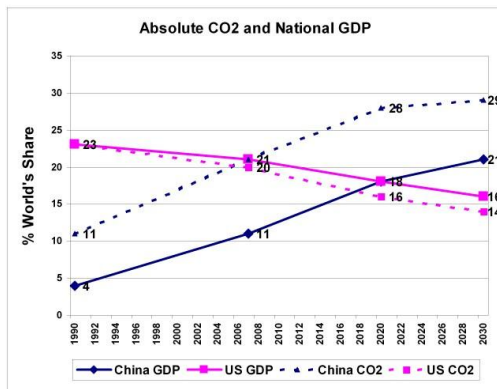


Figure 1. International Energy Agency and Wall Street Journal, see Note 3.

Now consider China. From 1990 to the present China's percentage share of the world's GDP grew from 4% to its present level of 11%, and projected to increase to 18% by 2020. There has been a constant linear increase in emissions over the same period (Figure 1). China's position was to set limits on the "intensity" of CO₂ emissions as a percentage of GDP, so that by 2020 China would reduce it intensity by 40%. This proposal does not reduce emissions, but rather the rate at which emissions grow. However, without any change from "business as usual," China's projected intensity ratio from 2007 to 2020 will fall 21% (from 1.9 to 1.5) simply as a statistical artifact of its increasingly larger share of the world's GDP. (A constant excess of 10 units of CO₂ is a smaller ratio of 18 units than it is of 11 units of GDP.) The remaining intensity reduction is already built into China's development plan for fixing its own unhealthy quality of air. On the other hand, China's proposal to lower intensity levels as a world standard would seriously impact a US economy that has already achieved a lower level of intensity than China's projected goal. As a world standard, it too, was an empty offer.

In the next podcast, Part 2 of the series on the United Nations Climate Change Summits, I will provide a rationale for an alternative World Standard that is equally fair for both the US (and the other Developed Countries) and for China (and the other Developing Nations).

We do not want the final reframe to read we are *taking “it” (Greenhouse Gases) to the limit, **one** last time.*

¹ This essay is based on an audio and video podcast by Professor Renner entitled “**Forums for a Future**”. Text, audio and video copies of the material may be accessed from his website at www.kerenner.com. The direct link for subscribing to the video series from iTunes is:

<http://phobos.apple.com/WebObjects/MZStore.woa/wa/viewPodcast?id=289289719>

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https://learn.usf.edu/webapps/lobj-podcast-bb_bb60/feed/IDH3400.004S11/podcast.xml