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So this is the way extremely compromised United Nations conferences end: not with a bang but with a demoralizing whimper. The 19th edition of the UN-sponsored climate change negotiations, held in Warsaw the last two weeks, sputtered to a pitiful close over the weekend; drained by sharp sparring between developed and developing economies, by walkouts conducted by civil society organizations, and by accusations against host Poland's less than ambitious program, the talks fell short of already modest expectations.

The talks began on a surprising, even promising, note. On the first day, lead Philippine negotiator Yeb Saño focused the assembly's attention on Supertyphoon "Yolanda" and its devastating impact on the Philippines. His emotional appeal drew a straight line between climate change and the emergence of more powerful typhoons (as well as other severe weather phenomena), in an easy-to-follow speech that aired on television around the world. It shone the spotlight on the consequences that poorer, less developed polities suffer from the rise in global temperatures, and—all too briefly—it allowed some of the conference delegates to imagine a different ending to the annual forum.

It was not to be. Anyone looking for potent symbols could readily point to Poland's inexplicable decision to host the World Coal Association's International Coal and Climate Conference at the same time (and practically in the same venue) as the annual UN climate change talks. The use of so-called dirty coal is one of the main sources of greenhouse gas emissions; limiting these emissions is the long-term objective of the UN climate talks. (There was also the extraordinary sacking of Poland's environment minister, the presiding officer of the Warsaw talks, during the conference—apparently because of policy differences with the Polish government on the issue of shale gas.)

But deeper reasons lay in the geopolitics of climate change. Australia, for instance, has under a new government become a stumbling block to progress as well as a subject of derision in the negotiations; the Guardian quoted Saleemul Huq, the leading expert in the relatively new field of "loss and damage," as putting the blame squarely on the Australians. "Discussions were going well in a spirit of cooperation, but at the end of the session on loss and damage Australia put everything agreed into brackets, so the whole debate went to waste."

The United States, the world's largest economy and, after China, the second leading source of greenhouse gases, went to Warsaw without any domestic consensus on climate change; unlike its concerted effort in Copenhagen in 2009, when it sent delegations from both chambers of the US Congress to emphasize support for the need for a binding agreement, its approach in Warsaw could be best described as playing for time. For instance, it said it could announce its emission reductions for 2020 only in 2015—clearly an acknowledgment of the inhospitable legislative climate back in Washington.

Perhaps most telling was the unusual exchange of words between the climate commissioner of the European Union, Connie Hedegaard, and representatives of a group of "like-minded" countries, including China, India, Malaysia, Saudi Arabia and Venezuela. Hedegaard expressed frustration at the unwillingness of several countries to commit to a timetable for reducing emissions (something already agreed on in last year's climate change conference in Durban, South Africa), and especially at the willingness of some countries to opt out of any such emission-reduction timetable.

The lead Venezuelan delegate, Claudia Salerno, responded in kind. She did not mince words, describing Hedegaard's statements as "damaging seriously the atmosphere of confidence and trust in this process." She also said: "We are shocked by the brazen attack against our group by Hedegaard—it is incredible that she has chosen to accuse our group of blocking progress."

But in fact this like-minded group acted just as many other blocs in the international bazaar that is the climate change negotiation track acted: It sought primarily to protect its interests, even at the expense of an increasingly imperiled, fossil-fueled world.

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