

COMMENTARY

A U.S.-Canada Clean Energy Dialogue: An Opportunity for Change or Business as Usual?

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A central topic of the meeting between President Barack Obama and Prime Minister Stephen Harper of Canada on February 19 was how to approach the climate change challenge and, in particular, how to “encourage the development of clean energy technologies.” The outcome of this discussion was the announcement of a “Clean Energy Dialogue.” This dialogue is intended to allow the two countries to collaborate more effectively on the “development of clean energy technologies to reduce greenhouse gases and combat climate change.” President Obama had foreshadowed the establishment of this dialogue in an interview with Canadian press just before his visit to Canada. When asked about whether Canada’s oil sands are a “dirty fuel,” Obama replied that both countries have to deal with fuels with a big carbon footprint, coal for the United States and oil sands for Canada, and that we must develop the technologies necessary to lower the greenhouse gas emissions of these fuels.

Announcing a new energy agreement follows a long tradition of high-level international meetings. Energy cooperation agreements have been used as a tool to show that two (or more) countries share common interests and objectives that require collaboration to overcome. In this case, announcing a new technology dialogue also defers the more difficult task of starting discussions on how the patchwork of climate policies at the provincial, state, regional, and federal level influence our common energy market. After the announcement comes the more difficult task of producing concrete results when the warmth of political statements has cooled.

Energy cooperation with Canada has been active for more than 30 years. Bilateral cooperation covers a broad range of energy topics including policy, automobile efficiency, efficiency standards, and carbon sequestration. A new binding international agreement for energy technology cooperation was signed in 2007 with great fanfare, yet the document had few concrete projects behind it. The United States and Canada also collaborate extensively in all international energy technology programs. These include the technology agreements under the purview of the International Energy Agency as well as the newly formed, largely U.S.-led groups on carbon sequestration, hydrogen, and nuclear as well as the Asia Pacific Partnership.

The key question is whether the resources to effectively engage in meaningful collaboration will be dedicated to this new “Clean Energy Dialogue.” The good news is that the architecture to support collaboration is well established and functioning. What has been lacking has been the dedication of the human and financial resources to actually achieve results. The press statement issued after the Obama and Harper meeting does reference possible sources of funding for collaboration. On the U.S. side this would be drawn from the stimulus money for carbon sequestration and for smart grid technology and transmission investment. On the Canadian side the Clean Energy Fund is mentioned as a possible source. Although a good start, merely mentioning the sources of funds is still a long way from indentifying and actually committing the money as well as human resources necessary to launch a major collaborative effort. The real challenge, one that has rarely been overcome in the past, will be to move beyond the highly visible promises of a high-level political statement to concrete results that will truly advance the objective of moving new clean energy technologies into the market place.

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