

Speculation over change in role for Chinese climate negotiator

Media outlets in Hong Kong suggest He Yafei has been punished for failing to smooth relations at Copenhagen between China, the US and Europe



He Yafei, the Chinese vice-minister of foreign affairs, at the Copenhagen summit in December. Photograph: Anja Niedringhaus/AP

A senior member of the Chinese negotiating team at Copenhagen has been shifted from his post, prompting speculation that he has been punished for the debacle of the climate talks.

He Yafei, who was at the forefront of [China's blocking actions on the final fraught day of the summit](#), has been removed as vice foreign minister, according to a short summary of government appointments by the Xinhua news agency.

The agency gave no explanation, but the Hong Kong newspaper Sing Tao suggests He has been punished with a shift to a post at the United Nations for failing to smooth relations between [China](#), the US and Europe, particularly as [tempers flared in the last hours of the talks](#).

During the negotiations, He described his US counterpart as "lacking common sense", frustrated the US president, Barack Obama, at his inability to make decisions and astonished the German chancellor, Angela Merkel, by refusing to allow even rich countries to set a target to cut emissions by 2050.

In public, [China has hailed the "significant and positive" outcome](#) of the Copenhagen accord, which committed the world to keeping global warming below 2C.

Privately, however, officials are furious at the public relations disaster of the summit, which ended with Europe blaming China for sinking long-term goals to cut greenhouse gas emissions.

Part of the problem was the vastly different expectations of the delegations. Britain and other European nations intended to bang heads together to achieve progress and to set ambitious targets during the [two-week conference](#).

China, however, was desperate to avoid any goals that might limit its economic expansion. Having [announced its first carbon target shortly before the conference](#), China's negotiators hoped the event would be a chance for the world to applaud the progress the country has made to improve efficiency and boost renewable energy.

The vastly different approaches led to several messy and fractious encounters, at which He Yafei was usually the fall guy.

Although the premier, Wen Jiabao, was the most senior figure in the Chinese delegation, he refused to attend most of the negotiating sessions with other leaders. This was a defensive move rather than a snub. The premier did not want to be strongarmed into a deal he could not guarantee at home.

In his place, he dispatched He, an experienced multilateral negotiator who previously served in senior posts at the United Nations and arms control talks, as well as running the North American department of the foreign ministry.

But He lacked the authority to make decisions. In huddles with world leaders, who far outranked him, all he could do was block. President Obama is said to have declared in exasperation: "It would be nice to negotiate with somebody who can make political decisions."

When he rejected a European proposal that developed nations reduce emissions by 80% by 2050, Angela Merkel described the situation as ridiculous.

The vice-minister also failed to endear himself to the chief US negotiator, Todd Stern, who suffered his undiplomatic wrath after stating that the US was not in historical debt to China because of [climate change](#).

"I don't want to say the gentleman is ignorant," He said. "I think he lacks common sense or is extremely irresponsible."

In the angry aftermath of the conference, senior European diplomats accused China of "systematically wrecking the accord" with leaks and obstructionist tactics.