Durban talks: how Connie Hedegaard got countries to agree on climate deal

The EU climate chief held her nerve to make US, China and India accept a legally binding agreement to cut carbon emissions

Connie Hedegaard, the EU's climate chief, has been hailed the hero of the Durban meeting that reached an unexpectedly solid outcome in the early hours of Sunday.

"She is very, very good and we are very lucky to have her," says Chris Huhne, the UK energy and climate change secretary. "She held everything together in a very impressive manner – a class act."

Hedegaard, below, once the youngest person elected to the Danish parliament, was the architect of the EU plan to gather developed and developing economies together for the first time in a legally binding agreement to cut greenhouse gas emissions. A deal was struck that met nearly all of the EU's aims, satisfied most developing countries and even brought the US on board.

In doing so, Hedegaard saved the UN process of negotiations, which without a deal at Durban would have fallen apart. Hedegaard's manoeuvring also forced China to acknowledge that it will take on commitments on an equal legal footing to developed countries.
"You could hear the shifting of tectonic plates," said one diplomat. "This is hugely important not just for the climate talks but in geopolitical terms."

Key to her success was the hardline attitude Hedegaard adopted. Developing countries, including China, have long insisted that the 1997 Kyoto protocol should be extended when its current targets run out in 2012. EU member states are virtually the only countries willing to do so. But while some member states wanted to offer the extension as a matter of course, Hedegaard had other ideas – it would only be agreed if developing countries also signed up to her roadmap.

That would entail committing to curb emissions on the same legally binding footing as the rich world, as an acknowledgement that the distinctions between developed and emerging economies have changed since 1997, when the Kyoto protocol was drawn up. This also made it possible for the US to join in, because America had insisted it will only join up to any agreement on the basis of such legal parity. Hedegaard knows about negotiations failing – as Denmark's environment minister since 2004, she was the host and president of the 2009 Copenhagen climate summit.

There she witnessed, excruciatingly, at firsthand the embarrassment of the EU at the hands of the US and the BASIC countries – Brazil, South Africa, India and China — when President Obama took his counterparts behind the scenes to forge a deal on emissions that left out the EU. European and UN officials were left visibly flummoxed as Obama announced his deal to the media. That deal was instantly denounced as weak, because countries had not agreed that it was legally enforceable, and the summit ended in scenes of chaos and acrimony.

Durban was Hedegaard's chance to raise a new phoenix from the ashes of the Copenhagen conflagration. And she was determined to do so.

At stake was the whole process of United Nations climate negotiations. The Kyoto protocol was signed in 1997 by all countries, including the US. But the Clinton administration was unable to put it before Congress because opposition to it was so strong. Since then, the UN talks have been in trouble. Without the active participation of the US – now the second biggest emitter – they could not succeed.

Hedegaard's roadmap was crafted in the back offices of the European commission, and she embarked on private meetings with ministers in big and small countries. In October, she had it rubber-stamped by the EU member states.

Despite the battering she received in the conference – from Indian and Chinese ministers, who attacked the EU for trying to strongarm them — she held her nerve. Up to the last moment, negotiators for other countries were briefing that the EU would cave in, and concede that an agreement was not possible. But in the final minutes, the EU agreed to a phrase that it said would ensure future commitments were binding. – they would take the form of "an agreed outcome with legal force".