

President Obama has, of course, already been to Copenhagen once this year — in his quest to bring the Olympics to Chicago — and brought nothing home to show for it. The stakes for the December [United Nations Climate Change Conference](#) are obviously much higher: the negotiation of an international agreement to govern greenhouse gas emissions when the Kyoto Protocol expires. But the first Copenhagen trip makes the question of whether Obama should go back to attend the December conference that much trickier. For political and symbolic reasons, should Obama go? On the one hand, if he found time to fly to Copenhagen to persuade the International Olympic Committee that Chicago should get the Olympics, surely he should return in an attempt to persuade the international community to tackle a far more serious issue. On the other hand, the stakes are much higher so that failure could have more far-reaching consequences: if Obama attends and the conference produces no agreement he may lose significant political face. The Obama Administration has at least so far signaled that Obama won't go: Press Secretary Robert Gibbs has [said](#) that “the meeting that's currently set [is] not necessarily a head of state meeting” and unnamed White House sources are [saying](#) that it's “hard to see the benefit” of Obama going to Copenhagen.

A related question is whether a visit from Obama would make any actual difference in helping secure an international agreement. Obama is obviously hampered by the fact that the Senate has not and almost certainly will not have passed climate legislation when negotiators convene in Copenhagen. So Obama may have little to offer to bolster a weak U.S. position on the issue. On the other hand, things can change between now and then. David Victor, for example, [predicts](#) that the U.S. and China will have a deal on climate policy that will be announced when Obama visits China a month before the Copenhagen talks. If he's right, Obama can point to the new agreement, together with the fact that for the first time ever the House of Representatives has actually [passed](#) a comprehensive climate bill; that the Administration has adopted national emissions [standards](#) for automobiles; that the Environmental Protection Agency has taken [action](#) to regulate greenhouse gas emissions under the Clean Air Act; and that Congress allocated significant [stimulus money](#) for energy efficiency, renewable energy and transmission line improvement as evidence that the U.S. is now making significant progress on the issue. So if the U.S. delegation thinks it has enough to offer to provide leadership toward a new agreement, a visit from Obama could be just enough to push negotiators over the top. But if it appears that the weakness of the U.S. position, together with intransigence from [China and India](#), make an agreement nearly impossible, Obama — perhaps obviously — will sit Copenhagen out.