

December 9, 2004

Looking Beyond Kyoto Protocol

By MASAKI Hisane

With its long-awaited ratification by Russia, the Kyoto Protocol, aimed at curbing global warming, will take effect in February 2005. If this good news calls for a celebration, you might want to keep the Champagne corked until all the guests arrive.

The protocol obliges industrialized countries to reduce emissions of carbon dioxide and five other types of greenhouse gases widely blamed for the warming of the Earth's atmosphere by a combined 5.2 percent from their 1990 levels. This first phase is mandated to be completed between 2008 and 2012. The Kyoto Protocol is of great significance, even epoch-making. For the first time, parts of the international community will be legally bound by specific numerical targets for emissions reductions. It goes into force more than 12 years after the Earth Summit in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil -- where the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change was adopted -- and about seven years after the third Conference of Parties to the U.N. Framework Convention on Climate Change, or COP3, gathered in Kyoto, western Japan, and adopted the protocol.

Japan hosted the Kyoto conference and took the leading role in getting the protocol adopted. Japan faces an obligation to slash its greenhouse gas emissions by 6 percent during the first phase. With Russia's ratification of the protocol in late 2004, Japan began full-fledged work on reviewing the government's existing outline of far-ranging measures aimed at achieving its reduction target. Debate also has got under way in earnest on introducing the so-called environmental tax on sources of greenhouse gas emissions such as coal and oil. The Environment Ministry and environmental groups staunchly advocate these new tax measures. Domestic industries, fearing an increased tax burden, remain vehemently opposed. Japanese industry, many sectors of which are struggling, questions the wisdom of introducing a new tax in the face of increasing competition on international markets amid rapid globalization. They also reason that there is no prospect of the United States returning to the Kyoto Protocol. The U.S. is the world's largest emitter of carbon dioxide, accounting for about 24 percent of total CO2 emissions in 2000.

With the U.S. shunning the protocol, there is a big question mark over how effective it can be. The former administration of Bill Clinton, a Democrat, was enthusiastic about preserving the global environment; Then Vice President Al Gore even attended the 1997 Kyoto environment ministers' conference. The administration of George W. Bush, a Republican who was first elected as U.S. president in November 2000 with the strong backing of the energy industry, announced its withdrawal from the Kyoto Protocol shortly after formally taking office in January 2001. The decision sent shock waves through the international community. Now that Bush has been re-elected for a second four-year term, there is almost no chance of the U.S. returning to the Kyoto fold, at least until his second term expires in early 2009.

In addition to the absence of the U.S., there is another serious problem with the protocol. Rapidly developing nations like China and India have no legal obligations to reduce their own greenhouse emissions. China is the world's second biggest CO₂ emitter, accounting for about 12 percent of total CO₂ emissions in 2000, and India is the fifth-biggest polluter, after the U.S., China, Russia and Japan. Deliberations on what should be addressed in the second phase of the fight against global warming now begin in earnest, with COP10 in Buenos Aires, Argentina this month. The biggest question is whether and how to get those emerging developing economic powers to make a clear commitment to join in reduction efforts, though it may be difficult to get them to join in any legally binding efforts.

As the world's No. 1 and No.2 economies, the U.S. and Japan need to step up their partnership and cooperation to address a wide range of global issues like environmental degradation, despite their continued differences over the Kyoto Protocol. There are at least two good reasons to do this in the area of environment preservation.

First, Japan and the U.S. are in the best position to offer badly needed funds, experience and technologies to the global community. Japan has a particularly important role to play in assisting developing countries in Asia, the center of global economic growth, in solving their own environment problems resulting from rapid development with a view to ensuring their sustainable development in the long term. Japan should provide such assistance to help the nations fight not only localized environmental issues but also issues that could spill over into the entire region, or even farther. Japan rebuilt its economy from the ashes of World War II in a miraculously short period of time and began to proceed on a path to joining the ranks of major industrialized economies. Eventually Japan rose to the world's No. 2 economy in terms of gross domestic product, or GDP, providing a successful model of development for its Asian neighbors. Developing Asian countries can -- and should -- learn a lot from Japan's experiences with serious air, water and noise pollution that accompanied its economic development. Japan succeeded in shedding its notoriety as a "pollution power" it had earned in the 1960s and also succeeded in riding out the two oil crises of the

1970s through strenuous energy-saving efforts. Now Japan is said by many to be the most energy-efficient economy in the world. Japan should make more efforts to help its Asian neighbors address environmental issues utilizing its past experience. The "ASEAN Plus Three," comprised of the 10-member Association of Southeast Asian Nations plus Japan, China and South Korea, held a summit meeting in Vientiane, Laos in late November 2004 and agreed to inaugurate the East Asia Summit, a highly significant step toward creating an "East Asian Community." The first such summit will be held in Malaysia in late 2005. As part of efforts to create such a community, Japan needs to help its Asian neighbors tackle environmental issues and achieve sustainable development.

After its withdrawal from the Kyoto Protocol, the U.S. has been widely considered to be something of a rogue state -- ironically, a term the U.S. itself has often tagged on North Korea, Iran and even Iraq before Saddam Hussein was ousted from power by the U.S.-led coalition forces in the spring of 2003. To be sure, it may be true that the Bush administration is much less enthusiastic about protecting the environment, both domestically and globally, than its predecessors. But the U.S. has experiences and advanced technologies needed to promote protection of the global environment. Look at stringent controls on auto exhaust emissions in California and emission rights trading in place for sulfur dioxide (SO₂) and nitrogen oxide (NO_x), among other things. Even after the Bush administration pulled out of the Kyoto Protocol, Japan has continued to press Washington to rejoin the protocol through various channels, including a newly created conference of environment ministerial-level officials. Tokyo and Washington have also exchanged views and information on emission rights trading, a scheme that industrialized countries are allowed to use under the Kyoto Protocol to achieve their respective greenhouse gas-reduction targets. Japan, the U.S., China, Russia and 10 other countries reportedly agreed at a meeting of environment and energy ministers in Washington in November to jointly develop a technology needed to collect and recycle methane, one of the six types of greenhouse gases to be axed under the Kyoto Protocol. This demonstrates that multilateral cooperation over the environment can involve the U.S., even under the Bush administration. Japan and the U.S. should take the initiative in promoting such multilateral cooperation.

Secondly, criticism of the Bush administration for its "unilateralism" grew, especially after the U.S.-led coalition forces launched a war to oust Saddam Hussein's regime. As a result, the post-Cold War era's sole superpower, backed by unrivaled military and economic might, has seen its "soft power" eroded significantly. Meanwhile, Japan and the U.S. are now moving to beef up their security alliance in tandem with the planned American military's "transformation" worldwide. Japan is expected by the U.S. to play an even more important strategic role as an ally. But any such move by Japan will require broad support -- or at least understanding -- of the Japanese public. By enhancing bilateral partnerships and cooperation on issues of common global concern, and doing so in a high-profile manner, the U.S. could go a long way in repairing its severely damaged image and

standing around the world. Many people in Japan, like elsewhere in the world, now believe that the U.S. is a dislikable and even hateful warmonger and is interested in just pursuing its own national interests at the expense of the others. This negative perception of the U.S. among the Japanese public must be changed if the two countries are to maintain and strengthen overall bilateral relations based on the security treaty in the long term.

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