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JAPAN AS A LEADER IN TACKLING CLIMATE CHANGE

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The latest report by the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) shows that the scientific community has reached a robust consensus regarding the science of global climate change. Warming of the climate system is unequivocal, as is now evident from observations of increases in global average air and ocean temperatures, widespread melting of snow and ice and rising global average sea levels. It is likely that there has been significant anthropogenic warming over the past 50 years.

The views expressed in this piece are the author's own and should not be attributed to The Association of Japanese Institutes of Strategic Studies.

Global warming will have dire consequences for the world. It will trigger sea-level rises that will erode coastal areas and increase the danger of flooding from coastal storms. It will also cause changes in precipitation patterns, increase the risks of droughts and floods, threaten biodiversity, and pose increased threats to public health.

Moreover, climate change is closely interwoven with other global issues such as poverty, development, and ethnic conflict. What is happening in Darfur is a case in point. Changes in the climate were a critical factor in aggravating an already uneasy relationship between Darfur's main ethnic groups. When drought swept the area, the competition for dwindling access to water and fertile land escalated into a full-scale ethnic conflict.

Addressing climate change is thus no simple task. Yet what is certain is, to protect our lives, economies and land from the adverse effects of climate change, we must reduce emissions of carbon dioxide and other greenhouse gases (GHG) in a dramatic way. This requires a fundamental transformation in the way we power our global economy. We must shift away from a century-old legacy of unrestrained fossil fuel use and its associated emissions in pursuit of more efficient and renewable sources of energy. The era of generating as much GHG as we please is over. Such a transformation requires a concerted effort by the international society to reconceptualize approaches and values. Japan can and must spearhead such transformation efforts.

The first thing Japan has to do is to meet its own international obligations. The Kyoto Protocol obliges Japan to reduce its GHG emissions by 6% from the 1990 level between 2008 and 2012. Almost 40% of GHG emissions come from the industrial sector, e.g., steel mills, cement plants, and other manufacturing plants. However, emissions are increasing the fastest in the business services sector - especially in office buildings, hotels, and shopping malls - and the household sector. The Japanese government must involve these fastest growing emitters if it wants to achieve its Kyoto targets.

Nevertheless, I am optimistic that Japan will achieve its obligations under the Kyoto Protocol. The Japanese government has drawn up a detailed

plan and had it examined and monitored constantly. It is now ready to take any additional measures necessary to meet its obligations. Furthermore, both businesses and the general public in Japan are willing to get behind this government campaign against climate change. It is now important for the government to make the benefits visible by explaining how tackling climate change can help clean the air, reduce waste, stimulate local economies, boost corporate profits, and save money at the cash register.

We must do more with regard to energy efficiency. Japan is the world leader in this field, having boosted its energy efficiency by 37% over the last 30 years. During the same period, Japan has also succeeded in doubling its GDP while cutting its petroleum consumption by 8%. Right now, to produce a single unit of GDP, Japan uses roughly half the amount of energy that the United States and the European Union do and about one-ninth of what India and China do.

Not surprisingly, a large part of this results from market-driven innovation. As is well known, Japan has very few energy resources. This has only encouraged the industry and average consumers to seek the most energy-efficient options available. What is less well-known is the Japanese government has been pushing this along still further with its “Top Runner Program.” Covering various items such as TVs, rice cookers, microwave ovens, and refrigerators, this program obliges manufacturers to produce items more energy-efficient than the most energy-efficient ones currently available on the market (the “top runner”) within the subsequent five or so years. To date, the average improvement in energy consumption efficiency achieved through this program is beyond expectations in every product category. For example, the energy efficiency of cooler-heater air conditioners has improved roughly by 70% and that of refrigerators by 55%.


The “Cool Earth Promotion Programme” is another example of the Japanese government’s initiative in tackling climate change. Proposed by Prime Minister Fukuda, this program is designed to advance the “Cool Earth 50” initiative that Japan put forth at the G8 Summit last year aiming to cut global emissions of GHG in half by 2050.

Japan now calls for a fair and equitable quantified national target to

reduce its GHG emissions. It also calls for setting a global target of improving energy efficiency by 30% by 2020. Japan is prepared to assist developing countries in this endeavor by increasing technology transfer and offering financial aid of US\$10 billion in what is called the “Cool Earth Partnership.” Japan will invest more in research and development in energy- and environment-related fields and will promote an international framework to accelerate the development and sharing of technology.

In June, Prime Minister Fukuda announced more measures for Japan and the world to combat climate change. First, Japan will reduce emissions by 60 to 80% of the present level by 2050, and this will be our long-term target. Second, Japan will commit US\$1.2 billion as our contribution for the US\$10 billion “Cool Earth Partnership” fund, which Prime Minister Fukuda proposed in Davos this January. Third, he will propose an “Environment Energy International Cooperation Partnership” at the G8 summit to accelerate work on innovative technologies. Fourth, Japan will experiment with emissions trading domestically this autumn. The private sector will implement reductions, and putting prices on carbon and using market mechanisms will help reduce emissions efficiently. In addition, Japan will work on green taxes this fall.

There are many other challenges. We will have to increase the supply of renewable energy and raise the energy efficiency level of housing, to name a couple. Our aim is creating a low carbon society in which natural resources and energy are used most efficiently.

Japan will work in concert with other countries to reach a comprehensive post-2012 climate agreement and will exercise leadership in winning the global battle against climate change. 

Yoriko Kawaguchi is a member of the House of Councilors. She served as Minister for Foreign Affairs from February 2002 through September 2004, and Minister of the Environment from July 2000 through February 2002.