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BIG CHALLENGES TO CLIMATE CHANGE

What to Expect from the New US Administration #6

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Many people committed to combating climate change are placing high expectations on the new Obama administration. The reason for these high expectations lies in the history of climate change policy, in which we have continuously been disappointed by Washington for more than 20 years since the international community began tackling the issue of climate change.

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.

The United States is the world's largest emitter of greenhouse gases (GHGs), both in terms of the total volume of emissions and per capita. The US is also the world's sole political and economic superpower. Because climate change is closely linked to energy security and the problem of the North-South divide, how Washington responds to this issue greatly affects international efforts to counter global warming. The US, however, has not exercised leadership in climate change negotiations so far, resulting in the slow response of the international community. "Why do we have to cut back on emissions when the rich, bigger emitter is sitting back?" was the honest feeling of many countries.


Due to the lack of substantial measures, the volume of the world's GHG emissions has been increasing. At the same time, the effects of climate change have been observed in recent years: ice sheets and glaciers in polar regions are melting, and extreme weather events such as hurricanes are increasing. These are the impacts caused by the rise of global mean temperatures by merely 0.7°C over the past 100 years. The Earth is expected to plunge into unknown territory as the global temperature rises further.

In the absence of the US, major countries have been making utmost efforts to stave off global warming. The Kyoto Protocol took effect in 2005, but it set emissions targets only for the years between 2008 and 2012. Negotiations began last year on a new international framework for the period after 2013. The participants hope to reach an agreement at the 15th Conference of the Parties to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (COP 15), scheduled for December 2009 in Copenhagen, Denmark. The time left is short. To get the most out of the limited time, President Obama has already sent out a series of important messages on climate change proposing to (a) set US targets for reducing GHG emissions, (b) return to multilateral negotiations under the UN, and (c) realize a Green New Deal.

- A) Obama has stated that he will reduce the US' GHG emissions to their 1990 levels by 2020 and reduce them an additional 80% by 2050.

These are ambitious targets given that the current levels of US GHG emissions are much higher than the targets set by the Kyoto Protocol, although they are still modest compared with the standards proposed by the EU.

- B) Washington has not necessarily been cooperative with the UN climate system so far. When most countries preferred negotiations under the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC), the Bush administration created a new framework called the Major Economies Meeting on Energy Security and Climate Change (MEM), hoping to get its own way. Obama's pledge of returning to the UNFCCC forum will mean Washington's reappearance at the world's negotiating table.
- C) The US has been in serious financial straits, triggered by the subprime loan problem, since 2008. Under such circumstances, the Green New Deal was proposed as a measure to achieve both economic growth and environmental sustainability. The concept is to create new jobs and encourage public investment and urban redevelopment by assisting environment-friendly industries such as renewable energy. If the US succeeds in achieving an economic recovery through its environmental policy, it will serve as a model for developing countries as well.

If Obama succeeds in changing the US' climate change policy, the world's climate change policy will also change. Such a "change" is what we are looking for. 

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