

COP17 Agrees on Roadmap to New International Framework after Difficult Talks

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The 17th Conference of Parties to the U.N. Framework Convention on Climate Change started in Durban, South Africa, on November 28 and ended on December 11, with agreement reached on extension of the greenhouse gas emission reduction commitment period under the Kyoto Protocol and a roadmap to a new climate change framework.

Following COP15 in Copenhagen in 2009 and COP16 in Cancun in 2010, the COP17 meeting focused on a new climate change framework after the first GHG reduction commitment period ends in 2012 under the Kyoto Protocol. Although the meeting had been scheduled to end on December 9, difficult coordination between countries with different interests forced the meeting to be extended for two days. Eventually, an expected breakdown of negotiations was avoided and agreement was reached, putting an end to the marathon negotiations that lasted for two weeks.

As summarized on the website of the Ministry for Foreign Affairs¹, the COP 17 agreed on (1) a plan to establish an ad hoc working group to produce by 2015 a new “legal” framework that will cover all major GHG emitting countries and take effect in 2020, (2) the establishment of the second commitment period under the Kyoto Protocol, and (3) more specific challenges including a basic design for the Green Climate Fund and a guideline for a measurement, reporting and verification mechanism, etc.

Before the COP17 meeting, major parties including the United States, Europe, Japan, China and India were wide apart over key issues including the new international climate change framework. Given such differences, fears about economic deterioration mainly in Europe and the United States, and the political season just before key elections and leadership changes in major countries in 2012 including the U.S. presidential election, observers doubted if the meeting could produce any significant decision or agreement on the details of global warming measures. The momentum for any new international agreement was not necessarily strong.

¹ <http://www.mofa.go.jp/mofaj/gaiko/kankyo/kiko/cop17/gaiyo.html>

Under such situation, major countries actually stuck to their respective positions throughout the two-week meeting, with negotiations losing flexibility, according to media and other reports. Even after the meeting entered the process to work out the final agreement, it was reported that Europe waged bitter disputes with China and India over how to describe the legal force of the new framework and when to effectuate the new framework. Negotiations were very tense.

The COP17 agreement fell short of specifying the length of the second commitment period under the Kyoto Protocol, leaving the matter of the period (five to eight years) pending for future talks. Furthermore, Japan, Canada and Russia vowed not to take part in the second commitment period. A document reflecting their positions was adopted, leading to a decline in the number of countries required to reduce GHG emissions. As a result, those obligated to cut GHG emissions in the second commitment period under the protocol will be limited to such parties as the European Union, covering only 15% of global GHG emissions.

Given the difficult situation, the agreement on the three major points summarized above might be appreciated as an important achievement of the COP17 meeting. This may be interpreted as indicating that the last compromise emerged from relevant parties' willingness to avoid the worst result where negotiations would break down with the momentum lost for any agreement. Virtually no international negotiation is free from compromise. On the first and second points, however, the COP17 meeting, though agreeing on specific directions, might have left all key details undecided. Particularly, details of the new framework have been left pending for future negotiations. Toward the COP18 meeting next year, tough international negotiations may be required on the fundamental issue.

The COP17 negotiations came as Japan was comprehensively reviewing its energy and environmental policies in the wake of the March 11 Great East Japan Earthquake and the subsequent Fukushima Daiichi nuclear plant accident. As noted above, Japan has vowed not to take part in the second commitment period under the Kyoto Protocol. Japan will be free from any GHG emission reduction legally binding obligation. As a matter of course, however, Japan may have to make voluntary efforts to reduce GHG emissions. The agreement on the new framework meets Japan's basic idea that a fair, effective international framework where all major GHG-emitting countries take part will be important. Therefore, Japan may have to proactively participate in the future negotiations on the new framework.

The present efforts to revise energy and environmental policies pursue the simultaneous achievement of S+3Es (safety, energy security, environmental protection and economic development) and naturally cover a long-term global warming strategy. The government is expected to revise energy and environmental policies and release a new basic energy plan by next summer. In this way, Japan will work out global warming measures meeting and linked to energy challenges and

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bring them to new international negotiations. An energy strategy for national perspective will be required to take a strategy for international perspective into account. Japan will thus have to develop a best mix of national and international energy strategies.

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