

G8 Hokkaido Toyako Summit 2008 and the Global Warming Issue

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In Japan, there were some who entertained excessive expectations for the G8 Hokkaido Toyako Summit 2008 but it should be emphasized that the G8 summit is actually a discussion forum, not a council that decides on international efforts to address climate change. Such misunderstanding could result in overestimation or underestimation of the results of the latest summit. Nevertheless, the Hokkaido Toyako Summit was a crucial milestone toward the Copenhagen Conference (COP15) next year in order to forge a post-Kyoto international framework, and a major result of the summit was the G8 leaders' shared intention to seek to reach an agreement before COP15. In addition, the summit made the major achievement of announcing an official summit declaration on climate change, joined by the leaders of developing countries such as China, India and Brazil, three of the world's major greenhouse gas emitters.

Prior to the summit, discussions had focused on what reductions in greenhouse gas emissions were required in about 40 years from now. Japan first announced its long-term greenhouse gas reduction target in its plan of "Cool Earth 50", an initiative that the former Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe advocated to the world a year ago. The chairman's summary published at last year's G8 summit in Heiligendamm, Germany, suggested serious consideration of the decisions made by the European Union, Canada and Japan which include at least a halving of global emissions by 2050. The mass media were interested almost exclusively in whether the Toyako Summit could move these decisions a step forward toward making them the G8's decision.

This year's summit ended with a declaration that sounds like a political compromise, stating "we seek to share with all Parties to the UNFCCC the vision of, and together with them to consider and adopt in the UNFCCC negotiations, the goal of achieving at least 50% reduction of global emissions by 2050". This phrase can be interpreted in many ways, as it is restricted by the four terms of: "(i) seeking to (ii) share and adopt (iii) a vision for achieving (iv) the goal." It can be construed either as a step forward from the Heiligendamm Summit or a step backward. The only major difference is that, rather than intending to share a long-term target among developed countries, the Toyako Summit's declaration seeks to reach an agreement among all participating countries, substantially reflecting the United States' view that any commitment to reducing greenhouse gas emissions is meaningless

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without the participation of major emitters like China and India.

A statement adopted at the Major Economies Meeting (MEM) held on the last day of the summit, does not refer to the goal of achieving 50% reductions of global emissions by 2050 but merely expresses the view that “deep cuts in global emissions will be necessary”. In regard to mid-term goals, while industrialized countries refer to efforts by nations to achieve greenhouse gas reductions, major developing economies only refer to a deviation from the business-as-usual scenario. The summit’s statement suggests that major developing economies appear to be obstinately sticking to their positions, making it very difficult for developed countries to win them over to their side.

Developed countries consider that since developing countries’ emissions now already account for nearly half of total global emissions, major developing economies must achieve certain reductions in greenhouse gas emissions, but developing countries are firmly opposed, for the clear reason that emissions produced by developed countries since the Industrial Revolution far exceed those of developing countries. In terms of per capita emissions, inter alia, even China, a relatively large emitter, accounts for no more than one-fifth of Japan’s emissions and less than one-fifteenth of those of the United States and Great Britain. Emissions by India are as low as one-fourteenth of Japan’s and one-fortieth of those of the U.S. and U.K. From their point of view, restricting developing countries’ rights to emit greenhouse gases while developed countries have already emitted huge amounts of greenhouse gases during their economic growth process is totally unacceptable. India contends that developing countries will not succumb to any binding obligation to reduce their greenhouse gas emissions until their total per capita historical emissions become equal to those of developed countries. Because India is unlikely to reach this level of greenhouse gas emissions by the end of the current century, the nation will not take action to reduce its greenhouse gas emissions.

Meanwhile, developing countries cannot easily agree on the goal of halving global greenhouse gas emissions by 2050. If they were to do so, since their annual emissions are already equivalent to those of developed countries, even if developed countries reduced their emissions to zero, developing countries would also be required to reduce their emissions from the current levels. This year’s MEM reached only a very lax agreement to reduce greenhouse gas emissions from normal levels, clouding the outlook for such reductions.

The statements of both the G8 Summit and MEM express the intention of reaching an agreement on a new framework from 2013 onward before next year’s COP15 in Copenhagen but it is reasonable to doubt whether such an agreement will be reached in 18 months from now. In Japan, there is growing concern that the greenhouse gas emissions reduction target under the Kyoto Protocol is unfair for the

country. Viewed from developing countries' argument on the cumulative greenhouse gas emissions produced since the Industrial Revolution, Japan's cumulative emissions account for not more than one-third of those of the United States and Great Britain and a little over one-half of those of advanced EU nations, so naturally Japan should not readily compromise this time around. This view is sure to strengthen in the years ahead. If the new U.S. administration next year comes up with a new policy on climate change, probably next summer or later, it will be difficult to coordinate views among developed countries alone by the end of next year. Already some country negotiators expect any decision to be postponed until COP16 in two years' time in Kingston, Jamaica. Judging from the outcome of this year's Toyako Summit, any argument that assumes a halving of global greenhouse gas emissions by 2050 is unlikely to reach a compromise between industrialized countries and major developing economies for a while.

Under these circumstances, the European Union has set an ambitious goal of reducing greenhouse gas emissions by 20% from the 1990 level by 2020, or substantially by 30% if other developed countries take similar steps. But is this possible? Given that efforts being made by advanced EU nations like Germany and Great Britain to reduce greenhouse gas emissions have already tapered off in the 2000s and that large-scale introduction of nuclear power and carbon capture and storage (CCS) technologies is difficult to achieve in a short time, this goal is unrealistic. If the European Union sticks to its unrealistic argument of similar to that of environmental fundamentalism, climate change will be submerged by more serious face short-term problems such as rising crude oil prices and serious food shortages.

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