

China's Offer to Achieve Carbon Neutrality before 2060 and Its Background

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In a speech via video link at the annual General Debate of the United Nations General Assembly on September 22, Chinese President Xi Jinping announced that China aims to have CO₂ emissions peak before 2030 and achieve carbon neutrality before 2060. Carbon neutrality means net zero CO₂ emissions or an equilibrium between emission and absorption (removal). President Xi in the speech gave priority to the Paris Agreement as an international framework for climate change initiatives and urged that all countries enhance climate change countermeasures based on the agreement. He then offered the targets of emission peak before 2030 and carbon neutrality before 2060 under China's voluntary initiative.

Based on the Paris Agreement, China had submitted its voluntary emission reduction target in the form of the so-called Nationally Determined Contribution in 2015. The target is to cut China's CO₂ emissions per GDP in 2030 by 60-65% from 2005 and achieve an emission peak as early as possible around 2030. President Xi in the U.N. speech thus vowed to enhance China's climate change countermeasures by accelerating the CO₂ emission peak and setting the target year of 2060 for carbon neutrality.

China is the world's largest CO₂ emitter. Its energy-related CO₂ emissions in 2019 totaled 9.83 billion tons, accounting for 29% of the global total. The second largest emitter was the United States with 4.96 billion tons and a 15% share. The largest emitter's pledge to enhance climate change countermeasures has the potential to exert great influence on climate change talks. Just before the Xi speech, the European Union announced that it would expand its target reduction of greenhouse gas emissions at 2030 from 40% to at least 55% (as compared with 1990 level). The upward target revision may be designed to meet the EU plan to achieve carbon neutrality by 2050. The EU was the third largest CO₂ emitter with 3.33 billion tons in 2019, following China and the United States. The latest Chinese offer to pursue carbon neutrality effectively responded to the EU move, attracting global attention.

Various factors are conceivable behind the Chinese and EU offers to enhance climate change countermeasures. The impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic might be an interesting key word regarding the factors. The first point is how the pandemic would influence decarbonization initiatives in the world. Even under the serious COVID-19 disaster, the enhancement of climate change countermeasures for low-carbonization and decarbonization remains important. All countries in the world share the determination to tackle climate change as a global long-term challenge or crisis. As the COVID-19 disaster endangers citizens' lives, health and safety and dramatically deteriorates economic conditions, however, the significance of climate change countermeasures could decline relatively. Amid concern about such potential decline, it is significant to ambitiously raise emission reduction targets and emphasize such ambitious targets to keep the momentum for

enhancing climate change countermeasures. In this sense, China and the EU have demonstrated their willingness to lead the world in tackling climate change. There is an idea that the enhancement of climate change countermeasures would contribute to post-COVID-19 economic reconstruction through a transition to clean energy sources. The EU Green Deal initiative symbolizes such idea, indicating that the EU believes that the enhancement of the GHG emission reduction target would accelerate the transition to clean energy sources, contributing to overcoming the enormous adverse economic impact of the COVID-19 disaster.

Another COVID-19 impact, which should attract more attention, is related to geopolitical issues. It is linked particularly to China, which has been strategically responding to the current situation where the international community, including Western countries, has become more critical of China amid the growing COVID-19 disaster. As indicated by the exchange of harsh criticisms over the COVID-19 disaster between Chinese President Xi and U.S. President Donald Trump in their U.N. speeches, the U.S.-China confrontation or tensions have grown serious. By emphasizing the Paris Agreement and enhancing its climate change countermeasures to contribute to addressing the global issue of climate change, China can demonstrate to the world its difference with the U.S. Trump administration that has withdrawn from the Paris Agreement. Through the enhancement of climate change countermeasures, Beijing may attempt to distinguish China as a responsible major power from the United States distancing itself from cooperation with the international community under the Trump administration.

The Chinese announcement to enhance climate change countermeasures can also be taken as a strategic action linked to the forthcoming U.S. presidential election. If Democratic challenger Joseph Biden defeats incumbent Republican President Trump and becomes the new U.S. leader, he would give greater priority to environmental issues than Trump, as indicated by his campaign promises. Given the Biden promises including a target of cutting the U.S. power generation sector's carbon emissions to net zero by 2035, Washington would enhance U.S. climate change countermeasures. Even if Biden becomes president, however, the United States would remain critical of China instead of becoming conciliatory. Nevertheless, it could try to cooperate with China in dealing with such issues as climate change. The announcement to enhance climate change countermeasures just before the U.S. presidential election could pave the way for China to explore potential cooperation with the United States regarding climate change.

The Chinese offer to enhance climate change countermeasures came as it was pointed out that the EU should reconsider its relations with China in view of the Hong Kong issue under the COVID-19 disaster after trying to develop closer ties with China while giving priority to bilateral economic ties. By making the offer following the EU announcement to expand its target GHG emission cut, China may hope that it could maintain and deepen its relations with the EU in the climate change field. The Chinese offer may thus contribute to increasing China's presence in the international community and preserving its relations with Europe in consideration of its difficult ties with the United States.

A Chinese bid to enhance climate change countermeasures to demonstrate its responses to global issues and its global contributions might have played a key role in making the decision to beef up climate change initiatives. In this sense, we will have to closely watch specific actions China would take to enhance climate change countermeasures. Even the target of achieving carbon neutrality by the faraway year of 2060 may be challenging for China that depended on coal for 58%

IEEJ : September 2020 © IEEJ 2020

of its primary energy supply in 2019. I would like to continue paying much attention to future climate change countermeasures and domestic and external energy strategies of China that is the world's largest energy and coal consumer and CO₂ emitter.

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