

International Policy Initiatives to Address Global Warming

As world leaders have begun to realize the grave consequences of inaction to combat global warming, the past few years have seen heightened international action to address the problem of climate change. Significant steps forward have been taken, but there are still major challenges such as securing the participation of reluctant world leaders, stemming emissions growth, and encouraging environmentally sustainable development in emerging economies like China and India. Major international initiatives to address global warming include:

The United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change

The 1992 Earth Summit in Rio de Janeiro launched the international response to climate change with the signing of the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC, or “Framework Convention”), which the U.S. Senate ratified the same year. The convention established a long-term objective of stabilizing greenhouse gas (GHG) concentrations in the atmosphere “at a level that would prevent dangerous anthropogenic [human-caused] interference with the climate system.” It also set a voluntary goal for developed countries of reducing emissions to 1990 levels by 2000—a goal that most did not meet.

The Kyoto Protocol

Recognizing that stronger action was needed, participating countries negotiated the Kyoto Protocol to the Framework Convention in 1997. This accord set binding targets to reduce global GHG emissions 5.2% below 1990 levels by 2012. More than 140 nations have ratified the Kyoto Protocol, although to date the U.S. has yet to do so. The protocol officially entered into force in February 2005, and participating countries (including all major industrialized nations except the U.S.) are implementing national plans that will enable them to meet their emission reduction targets during the first compliance period of 2008-2012. Many developing nations, such as Brazil, India, and China, are also participating in the protocol through the Clean Development Mechanism, which allows wealthy nations to finance global warming pollution mitigation projects in developing countries through the purchase of emission reduction credits.

Bali Action Plan

The 3rd meeting of the Kyoto parties, and 13th meeting of the UN Framework Convention parties, was held in Bali, Indonesia in December 2007. The Bali conference launched formal negotiations on a new international global warming agreement and set a firm deadline for its adoption of December 2009 when the 15th Conference of the Parties will meet in Copenhagen, Denmark. One of the most important developments of the “Bali Action Plan” was that for the first time, developing nations expressed willingness to take on their own emissions reductions. The United States, however, maintained its long-held rejection of binding numerical commitments for emissions reduction targets.

Other Initiatives:

The G8 Climate Dialogue

Japan is the host of the 2008 Group of 8 (or G8) Hokkaido Toyako Summit, and has made climate change the top priority, focusing discussion of world leaders on the “Cool Earth Promotion Programme,”

which builds on its proposal last year to cut world emissions in half by mid-century. The program includes the discussion of the post-Kyoto Framework, the creation of a fund to deploy clean technologies to developing countries, and investment in the development of innovative technologies to create a low carbon society. The G8 nations began devoting a significant portion of their annual meeting agenda to climate change in 2005 in Gleneagles, Scotland, under the chairmanship of then-UK Prime Minister Tony Blair. At the St. Petersburg G8 summit in 2006, participants agreed to develop an effective approach to the three interrelated challenges of energy security, economic growth, and environmental protection. In 2007, the G8 met in Heiligendamm, Germany, and agreed to “consider” decisions made by the EU, Canada, and Japan to cut global GHGs by 50% by 2050. Parties also re-committed to moving forward within the UN process as the central forum for negotiations on climate change, with a view toward reaching a new post-2012 emissions agreement involving all major emitters.

The Major Economies Meetings

President George W. Bush initiated a new series of international meetings – the Major Economies Meetings on Energy Security and Climate Change – in September of 2007 when he invited 16 nations representing some of the largest economies of the world to Washington, D.C. to discuss climate change. A second meeting of the ‘MEM,’ as it is coming to be known, took place in January 2008 in Honolulu, Hawaii. President Bush’s goal is to guide the nations with the highest emissions to come to an agreement on what each country is willing to do to reduce emissions individually. According to the White House’s Chairman’s Summary of the Washington meeting, “All [participants] underlined the central role of the UNFCCC as the global forum for addressing climate change. Speakers underlined their commitment to contribute to global efforts under the UNFCCC, reflecting their national circumstances and in line with their common but differentiated responsibilities and respective capabilities. Speakers welcomed the U.S. initiative as a contribution to these efforts.”¹ The MEM is set to conclude in July with a meeting of the participants’ Heads of State to be held at the same time as the G-8 meeting in Japan.

The Asia-Pacific Partnership

Shortly after the UN FCCC climate talks in Montreal, six Pacific nations launched a voluntary pact in January 2006 to foster sustainable development and the use of clean technology. The Asia-Pacific Partnership on Clean Development and Climate (APP) involved the only two industrialized nations yet to ratify the Kyoto Protocol at the time, the United States and Australia (which has since ratified), along with Japan, China, South Korea, and India. Canada joined the partnership in 2007. The partnership is a non-binding framework for industrialized countries to facilitate expanded energy production and improved economic growth in developing countries by sharing relatively advanced, cleaner technology. Additionally, the partnership hopes to curb growth in GHG emissions and to benefit global climate. Lacking mandatory guidelines, goals, and incentives, the APP is unlikely to achieve results similar to the Kyoto Protocol, and U.S. leaders have emphasized that APP is not a substitute for the protocol.

¹ White House Council on Environmental Quality, September 27-28, 2007, “Final Chairman’s Summary: First Major Economies Meeting On Energy Security and Climate Change,” <<http://www.state.gov/g/oes/climate/mem/93021.htm>>.

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