



## Climate Change : Climate Politics

### The Past and Future of the Kyoto Protocol

**Ten years after the UN summit in Kyoto spawned the famous protocol on reducing greenhouse gases, nations meet again in Bali to devise a follow-up regime. What has changed?**



A Greenpeace activist dressed in a polar bear costume demonstrates in front of Parliament Hill to call on Canada's minority Conservative government to meet its commitments under the Kyoto Protocol (Photo: Reuters)

The Japanese hosts bent over backwards to ensure that the 1997 UN Summit on Climate Change would end 30 months of bickering over paragraphs and provisions. They wanted their summit to be a success – what they got was the Kyoto Protocol. The treaty, actually nothing but an amendment to the toothless United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC), gained immediate fame for its tangible stipulations.

As early as 1992, UN members had met at the so-called Earth Summit in Rio de Janeiro to reduce greenhouse gases and fight global warming. What they finally came up with – the UNFCCC – called for stabilization of greenhouse gases, but did not set any mandatory limitations on greenhouse gases.

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The Kyoto Protocol changed all this by committing industrialized countries to reducing their greenhouse gas emissions by at least five per cent below 1990 levels. After years of discussions about ratification, the treaty finally entered into force in 2005 with the signature of Russian President Vladimir Putin. The actual commitment period, however, will not start until January 2008, and will last five years, until December 2012.

#### Time is running out

The importance of the 2007 Climate Change Summit in Bali has to be measured against this background. It took more than ten years to get the first agreement on greenhouse gas reduction up and running. Now, the world community has only five years to agree on a follow-up treaty

that kicks in once the Kyoto Protocol expires. If delegates do not agree to start serious negotiations in Bali, it may not be possible to get a treaty worked out in time to avoid a gap.

As in 1997, the U.S. delegation will be in the limelight. It is the irony of history that the nation whose influence shaped the Kyoto Protocol has since remained the odd one out. During the 1990s, U.S. scientists and politicians played an important role in negotiating the terms of the Kyoto Protocol, and though the United States signed the treaty, the U.S. Senate has never ratified it.

The issue that kept U.S. politician from embracing the treaty back then is the same issue that hangs over current UN negotiations: the question of whether emerging countries like India or China will have to cut their emissions, too. Many politicians continue to believe that exempting India and China from emissions cuts would put the United States at a competitive disadvantage on the world market.

But the international scene has changed dramatically since 1997. China has surpassed the United States as the world's number-one emitter of greenhouse gases sometime during 2007. India, once a rather marginal producer of carbon emissions, will be the third-biggest source of carbon dioxide by 2015, just behind China and the U.S.

### **Renegotiating in a changing world**

These new realities bestow heightened relevance on what could well be America's key demand in Bali: strengthening the responsibilities of developing and emerging countries in any new global scheme. Ten years later, with the U.S.-Chinese trade deficit accounting for almost one-third of America's record 765-billion-dollar trade deficit, Americans are even less inclined to yield to demands that leave industrialized countries with the burden of emissions reductions.

Despite the lingering points of disagreement, Mark Kenber, policy director of The Climate Group, is still hopeful going to Bali. "There is clearly a greater sense of urgency in the international community than a year ago," says Kenber. "Factors include greater evidence that climate change is already happening, the understanding that the costs of inaction far outweigh the costs of action, and recognition that many of the solutions are already available and, in many cases, being profitably implemented."

This shift of opinion has been most radical in the United States, and has led to a bizarre situation. While President George W. Bush still opposes the Kyoto treaty, large parts of the U.S. have or will soon have adopted the treaty's stipulations voluntarily. Action is driven by policymakers in states like California or Michigan, who have set caps on their citizens' and companies' emissions. Some of have even set up regional carbon trading markets.

The final word on Kyoto will only be known around 2012, when countries tally up their emissions of over the 2008-2012 period to see if they

made enough cuts. Those who overshoot their targets in 2012 will have to make both the promised cuts and 30 percent more in a second period from 2013. That is, if delegates in Bali and later climate conferences can settle on the necessary follow-up treaty.

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