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Japan's Climate Change Policy

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Introduction

Japan, alongside fellow developed countries, has constantly been called upon to address global warming and climate change since the 1980s, when these issues first began to prompt discussion on an international level. Yet unlike the European countries, Japan's approach to tackling these issues has not been entirely proactive. In October 2020, however, following then-Prime Minister Minister Yoshihide Suga's declaration of the government goal to achieve carbon neutrality by 2050, Japan took a significant change of course toward decarbonization and rapidly launched efforts to that end. This article explains the stance that has thus far been adopted in Japan toward climate change, as well as the ways of thinking behind it, and suggests what factors may have prompted the change of course in 2020. It also offers insights on potential future developments.

Of the total greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions globally, carbon dioxide (CO_2) emissions from energy combustion account for around 70%, while the remainder is due to CO_2 emissions resulting from deforestation and other land-used changes, and GHGs other than CO_2 such as methane and nitrous oxide. In Japan, in contrast, CO_2 emissions from energy combustion account for around 90% of GHG emissions. Recognizing that Japan's climate change policy is therefore inseparably linked with its energy policy is an important prerequisite to understanding the developments described below.

Background

From the 1980s onward, global society followed the approach that the relatively wealthier developed countries should take the lead in working toward reducing GHG emissions. This formed the basis for the adoption of the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change in 1992 and the Kyoto Protocol in 1997. While recognizing climate change as a legitimate issue, Japan has argued that, given the greater progress it has achieved in improving energy efficiency in contrast with other countries, those major GHG emitters that are behind in energy efficiency improvements—specifically, the US and China—should ensure greater reduction in emissions than Japan. Japan also planned to increase the share of nuclear power generation, as an initiative to decrease the carbon intensity of energy supply. Renewable energy has been less than popular on the grounds of excessive costs. However, the March 2011 Great East Japan Earthquake and the consequent Fukushima Daiichi Nuclear Power Plant accident saw stronger public opposition to nuclear power, and a decline in its share of the power generation sector. While this finally allowed for the introduction of policy toward the widespread use of renewable energy, by this point Japan had already fallen significantly behind other nations in terms of the extent to which it had introduced renewable energy sources.

By the adoption of the Paris Agreement in 2015, there had been sufficient growth in industries drawing on emissions reduction to develop new business, such as renewable energy, electric cars, and IT-related industry, largely in Europe and America. Backing from such industries could also be said to have helped bring about the adoption of the Paris Agreement. On the other hand, Japan in 2015 was still clinging tightly to the stance it had always adopted—namely, that for the sake of Japan's economic activity, reducing emissions should be avoided as far as possible due to the costs it poses for enterprises in terms of the additional investments that need to be made in energy conservation. The goal Japan set itself in July 2015 was therefore 26% reduction in emissions in comparison with 2013 by 2030, a target that could be achieved without considerable effort.

Decarbonization efforts did, however, subsequently gain further momentum across the globe with the growing popular concern that was prompted as the public began to recognize the increase in extreme weather events. Since 2019, there has been a rise in the number of countries declaring their aims to reduce emissions to net zero by 2050. A number of groups formed between enterprises in the financial and other sectors have in turn announced independent goals for net-zero emissions. It was Japanese enterprises that were taken aback by this development. As they sought to catch up with this rapid change of approach among enterprises overseas, Japanese enterprises also launched their own commitments to reducing emissions, as well as calling for the government to establish similar goals and create systems to support enterprises. This prompted the Japanese government declaration of October 2020 that was touched on at the beginning of this commentary. In April 2021, Japan also responded to calls from the US under the newly inaugurated Biden administration by changing its target for 2030 to reduce GHG emissions by 46% in comparison with 2013, and further seeking to push the reduction as high as 50%. Proclaiming decarbonization as part of the new strategy for growth, Japan strives to develop and ensure the widespread adoption of innovative technology that draws on energy career such as hydrogen and ammonia.

Current developments and future challenges

Why did Japan fall behind other nations in its climate change strategy until around 2015? Possible causes were Japan's overestimation of its role as a leader in energy efficiency, and the lack of interest among the public. With respect to energy efficiency, there are indeed a vast number of products that have achieved world-class energy efficiency, including hybrid cars or household appliances such as air conditioners and refrigerators, which represent the culmination of ceaseless efforts by

Japanese enterprises. At the same time, the thermal insulation performance of Japanese houses, for instance, is not of a standard to be proud of. Until the relevant legal reform in April 2022, measures to ensure improvements in the thermal insulation of buildings were repeatedly shelved because of the large initial investment costs and the gradual nature of the results, which require a period of over 30 years to present themselves. Moreover, with attention focused exclusively on energy efficiency, efforts toward the decarbonization of energy have, as noted above, only recently entailed the introduction of policies to promote the use of renewable energy, since the 2011 nuclear power plant disaster. The use of electric cars is not yet widespread. Japan's resolve was also dampened by the US declaration of withdrawal from the Paris Agreement and other such setbacks brought about in US climate change policy by the Republican Trump administration between 2017 and 2020. While investment in reducing emissions continued to pick up speed in the US, at the state and industry level, this was overlooked by Japanese policy decision-makers.

The lack of public interest is perhaps the more serious issue. It seems that ideas that have been drummed into the Japanese public over the years—that Japan is a leader in energy conservation and that the US and China should be the first to reduce emissions—have become ingrained beliefs. Although Japan is also experiencing increased climate damage, such as severe rainstorms and strong typhoons, the Japanese media has avoided linking such phenomena with climate change. The lack of public interest also precludes climate change from becoming a talking point at election time. The results of a recent project to compare international public opinion polls show that Japanese respondents generally demonstrate a lower awareness than respondents from other countries across the surveys.

While Japan and Germany are similar in many respects, Japan has a lot to learn from Germany in terms of public awareness towards climate change. Japan needs to learn from Germany regarding education on climate change in schools, means of disseminating information, and improving people's capacity to identify the impending crisis as an issue that directly affects them.

Due in part to the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, Japan's emissions have already declined around 20% in comparison with 2013. With just six years to go until 2030, it will be far from easy to continue to reduce emissions at the same pace. At the same time, there is hope that those measures that could not be undertaken until now will be promptly put in motion, and further momentum will gather toward achieving the goal.

Reference material

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Her background is international relations, and her main research themes are; international institution on climate change, climate policy assessment, global environmental agreements, and sustainability studies. She has more than 200 publications, mainly in Japanese and fewer in English. A list of her single-authored books includes *Climate Change Policy in Japan: From the 1980s to 2015* (Routledge, 2017). She serves as a member of a number of governmental as well as academic councils and committees, including Central Environmental Council of the Japanese national government, Environmental Council of Tokyo Metropolitan Government, and Science Council of Japan.