

POST-2012 FRAMEWORK ON CLIMATE CHANGE

Frank A. Verrastro
and Sarah O. Ladislaw

More than 10 years ago, the international community set forth an international framework for global action through the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) and its Kyoto Protocol. The United States did not ratify the Kyoto Protocol because of the widely held belief that the system would cause global economic harm while contributing little to the fight against global warming. Now the clock is ticking on the international negotiation of a post-2012 agreement governing international commitments to reduce global greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions. The notional deadline is to complete negotiations by December 2009 to avoid a gap after the first Kyoto commitment period ends in 2012. Although the world will not reach agreement on the post-2012 climate change framework in 2008, much of what happens in 2008 will set the stage for what kind of an agreement can be reached in 2009.

Many of the countries that did sign on to the Kyoto Protocol are not on track to meet their emissions reductions, and the view is now widespread that any post-Kyoto agreement will have to be significantly different from the current Kyoto framework. However, disagreements over burden sharing, the economic effect of mandatory emissions caps, and the urgent nature of the climate threat have split the global community in their approach to global action. On the flip side, there is also growing recognition that the economic cost of delayed and fragmented action will far outweigh the cost of early action. Recently, pressure to take a more aggressive global stance to fight climate change has come from a number of new players. International organizations, local governments, and private companies are all taking actions to establish and anticipate the existence of a carbon-constrained future and are calling on the U.S. government to provide long-term policy direction to enable investment in low-carbon technology options. It is widely accepted that whatever climate treaty emerges next must have the participation of all major emitters, most notably the United States and China, to have any meaningful impact. The world is therefore anxiously watching as momentum appears to be building within the United States for mandatory measures to limit GHG emissions.

Despite a great deal of activity and dialogue on climate change in other international forums—for example, the International Energy Agency, the Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation forum, the Security and Prosperity Partnership, and the Asia Pacific Partnership—the vehicle for negotiating a post-2012 agreement continues to be the UNFCCC, which is set to kick off negotiations on a post-Kyoto agreement at its Conference of Parties (COP) meeting in December 2007 in Bali. However, because U.S. participation is viewed as essential to a lasting global framework for dealing with climate change, the evolution of climate policy within the United States will be of increasing interest in 2008. There are three major areas to watch:



The Bush administration's Major Economies Meeting on Energy Security and Climate Change: At the Group of Eight Leaders meeting in June 2007, the United States proposed to host a series of meetings among major global emitters to discuss common objectives for reducing GHG emissions. On September 27–28, 2007, the United States hosted an inaugural meeting of the so-called major economies with the goal of agreeing upon a post-2012 framework that could include a long-term global emissions reduction goal, nationally defined mid-term goals and strategies, and sector-based approaches for improving energy security and reducing GHG emissions. There will be a series of meetings over the course of the year, with plans to conclude negotiations by the end of 2008. Administration officials have stated that the process will be complementary to the ongoing UNFCCC negotiations. The meetings do not appear to signal a departure from the administration's long-held position against mandatory emission reduction targets and in favor of a technology-based approach to emissions reduction. Parties remain hopeful, however, that engagement in this forum will be able to bring China and India on board in a way that creates more room politically for aggressive climate action within U.S. policy circles.

U.S. congressional action: No less than 15 legislative proposals have been put forth within the 110th Congress to limit GHG emissions through a carbon tax or cap-and-trade system. Although initial pieces of legislation are quite timid in their cuts and conservative with their safety valve provisions, some pieces of bipartisan legislation advocate emissions reductions of 60 percent to 80 percent by 2050—the levels broadly accepted as necessary to stabilize

the earth's atmosphere. There is both optimism and concern that both the Senate and House Democratic leadership have promised to pass climate change legislation. On one hand, it is encouraging to see the Congress actively debating climate change issues and beginning to think about and test ideas for U.S. mitigation and adaptation plans. On the other hand, it is important that Congress not act hastily or inadvertently tie the hands of the next administration.

Presidential campaign: Presumably, it is the next administration that will ultimately decide whether the United States signs onto a post-2012 international climate change agreement and that will be responsible for implementing whatever domestic and international obligations are encompassed in that agreement. As the presidential campaigns heat up over the course of 2008, the candidates' platforms on energy and climate change will become increasingly important not only to determining the outcome of the election (as both climate change and energy are thought to be major issues for voters in 2008) but also to shaping international opinion about how to most effectively engage the next administration on climate change negotiations.

It is highly unlikely that the world will reach agreement on the post-2012 climate change framework in 2008. Much of what happens in 2008, however, will influence what kind of an agreement can be reached in 2009—if an agreement can be reached at all. The big question for 2008 is whether the United States can muster the type of leadership and public support that the long-term fight against climate change will require, in 2009 and for many years beyond. ■