

U.S. Climate Policy: Toward a Sensible Center

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MR. DIRINGER: Hi, my name's Elliot Diringer. I'm Director of International Strategies at the Pew Center. Most of our discussion yesterday and today has focused on how the United States can and should act here at home to address the risks of global climate change, and we just had a very compelling presentation from Stephen Timms on the how the U.K. is attacking this issue on the homefront.

We'd now like to turn to another question, and that is how countries can work together to meet what is, after all, a quintessentially global challenge. In my few minutes up here, I'd like to tell you where I think the international climate effort stands today, and I'd like to offer you some thoughts on how it can be broadened and strengthened in the years ahead.

Earlier this month I was in Brussels where I spoke at a conference sponsored by the European Commission, and my topic was "Looking Beyond Kyoto." That's how I'd like to frame my remarks today as well. But when I looked back at what I had said in Brussels, I realized that for this audience I probably have to put forward a different set of arguments, and that's because here in Washington, before we can really look beyond Kyoto, I think we first have to come to terms with Kyoto.

What do I mean by that? I think it's safe to say that there is virtually no change the United States will ever be a party to the Kyoto Protocol. Kyoto is a dead issue here in Washington. Yet Kyoto continues to haunt the climate change debate here in the United States. It seems that any meaningful proposal to limit or reduce U.S. emissions is in variably greeted by the refrain, "Oh, that's just Kyoto through the back door."

I for one think it's time that we lay that argument to rest. I think it's time we exorcise Kyoto from our debate, time we get past it, and time we move on.

But coming to terms with Kyoto also means recognizing that outside the United States it is not dead. Vladimir Putin's reaffirmation last month of Russia's intent to ratify the treaty suggests that its entry into force is now more likely than not. I think that is a good thing. The protocol's entry into force would at the very least mean that Europe and the other industrialized countries that have ratified it deliver on the commitments they made in Kyoto. And in so doing, they would demonstrate that this is a challenge that can be met.

Kyoto's entry into force also would set in motion the diplomatic machinery that could lead us to a new stage in the international climate effort. Under Kyoto, negotiations are to begin next year toward a new round of commitments. In Europe and elsewhere, there is growing recognition that these talks will go nowhere if the goal is simply extending Kyoto. There is growing recognition that if the international effort is to move forward and if it is to engage the United States and the major developing countries, we will need something other than the Kyoto Protocol.

What is it we need? In broad terms, I think we need strategies that can engage all the world's major emitters in a long-term effort that fairly and effectively mobilizes the technology and resources we need to steadily and substantially reduce global greenhouse gas emissions.

Over the past year, we at the Pew Center have engaged in wide-ranging discussions with experts, policymakers, and stakeholders from around the world on how this might be done. And while we're not yet prepared to offer specific prescriptions, I'd like to share with you some of the broad points that have emerged from these discussions. These and other points, by the way, are elaborated in our Beyond Kyoto report, which you'll find on the table outside.

The first point is that the basic challenge we face is building political will. In material terms, of course, the challenge is technological, as Eileen and others said yesterday, nothing less than a global technological revolution. This revolution has to be carried out in the marketplace because only markets can mobilize the resources and ingenuity that are needed. But the markets won't do this on their own. The direction, the imperative, must come from governments, and that requires political will.

When and how it materializes depends on a host of factors: public awareness, media attention, elections, even the weather. But it depends as well on our resourcefulness in creating common approaches.

For the United States, Kyoto did not help generate political will. Quite the opposite. So we have to ask ourselves what types of international arrangements can best capture and motivate political will and achieve the broadest possible participation.

A second and related point is that there is no getting around national interest. Climate change is often described as a common challenge that can be met only through collective action. But the political reality is that nations will engage in collective action only if they perceive it to be in their national interest. This is in part a matter of recognizing the climate is not simply an environmental issue but fundamentally one of economics and development. We need to address competitiveness concerns, and for developing countries, we need approaches that help advance not undermine core priorities like economic growth and poverty reduction.

Also, we must recognize that a multilateral approach cannot succeed solely by trying to remold countries' behavior from the top down. It must at the same time recognize and reflect national circumstances from the bottom up.

This leads to a third point. We need a more flexible architecture, one that can accommodate a broader range of national strategies. We need what might be described as a more variable geometry. The Kyoto Protocol provides a certain degree of flexibility, but it employs only one form of mitigation commitment--fixed targets and timetables. Other approaches are needed. We need different strategies for developed and for developing countries and possibly within those groupings as well.

A fourth point is that in considering alternative approaches, we should think about targeting action, not only emissions. The climate effort so far has sought to drive mitigation by mandating specific environmental outcomes, in other

words, through fixed emission targets. An alternative or complementary approach might instead frame goals or commitments in terms of the kinds of actions that are required.

For instance, rather than trying to negotiate a long-term concentration target, an exercise that would likely be fruitless and potentially even counterproductive, why not instead agree on the types of actions needed to move economies toward the goal of climate stabilization? For instance, replacing gasoline with hydrogen or achieving zero net emissions from the power sector by 2050.

A fifth and final point is that we must consider the right forum and the right quorum for future international efforts. There are strong rationales for a global approach, from an environmental perspective, from an economic perspective, and from an equity perspective. But the reality at the moment is more one of fragmentation.

One possibility, at least for the near term, is a series of parallel regimes which could be undertaken within any number of regional or multilateral forums. It's also possible to envision a different grouping of countries within the existing global framework, perhaps transcending the present division between developed and developing countries. An agreement among just 12 parties, counting Europe as one party, would capture nearly 80 percent of global CO₂ emissions.

In the long run, some type of global approach may not only be preferred but necessary. The question is whether at this stage something less than global approach might better deliver the political will that is needed.

So what does all this imply for the United States and the role it can or should play in advancing the international climate effort? At the end of the day, the United States must be not only a full partner but a leader in the international effort. That will only be possible, though, once we have our own house in order.

In Kyoto, we made the mistake of promising what we could not deliver. We cannot afford to make that mistake again. The United States will be in a position to take on a binding international commitment only once we have achieved a national consensus on just how we are prepared to address this issue at home. That must be our first order of business.

In the meantime, we should signal to the international community our willingness to explore workable approaches so that, in time, and together, we can move beyond Kyoto and build a truly effective framework for action.

I thank you very much for listening, and now I'd like to turn it over to my partner in organizing this conference, Nigel Purvis. Thank you.

[Applause.]