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Seven Questions: Can Climate Change Be Stopped?

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A vast rift yawns between the three players that matter most when it comes to stopping climate change: Europe, China, and the United States. The efforts of German Chancellor Angela Merkel to move the debate forward seem doomed to failure. Is there any hope? To get some answers, **FP** turned to Eileen Claussen of the Pew Center on Global Climate Change for this week's Seven Questions.

FOREIGN POLICY: This year, we've learned from the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change that climate change is accelerating more rapidly than we previously thought. Is it too late to stop climate change, or at least reverse the trend?

Eileen Claussen: If you are looking at a particular goal, then yes, it might be a little late to get started. On the other hand, if you don't get started, it just continues to get worse and worse. So perhaps it's never too late.

FP: How would you rate the world's efforts to stop climate change thus far? Have we made any real progress?

EC: We've made a little progress. The [1992 U.N. Framework Convention on Climate Change] laid out the issue, and then [the 1997 Kyoto Protocol] did a couple of things. For one, it really raised awareness on a global basis. And second, it gave those countries that decided to ratify Kyoto some ability to experiment with different kinds of measures and see what kinds of results they could get. So yes, we've made some progress, but certainly not enough.

FP: In an ideal world, what would a replacement for the Kyoto Protocol look like?

EC: It would be probably similar to Kyoto in that, in an ideal world, all major emitting countries at least would have targets of some kind that were binding. They would be different for different kinds of countries. Developing countries, for example, might have growth targets. But in an ideal world, everyone would have a target, and you would have the ability to do emissions trading.

FP: Under Kyoto, the Europeans have, on average, reduced their emissions slightly, but only because of the deindustrialization of Eastern Europe after the collapse of communism. Given

that, and given the collapse of prices for emissions credits in Europe, haven't these experiments with Kyoto-style emissions trading been disappointing?

EC: I don't think so. Keep in mind that we are still in an experimental phase, and that the first budget period of Kyoto doesn't actually start until 2008. When Europe attempted to implement the Kyoto Protocol with an emissions trading scheme, they allocated too many emission credits, and you didn't get serious reductions. They didn't have a very clear idea of where the emissions were coming from; they didn't require any reporting in advance, so they just overallocated. They learned quite a bit from that. And as we start to approach the first real budget period, the Europeans are going to be much tougher on how they allocate emissions, and you will see some genuine reductions.

FP: But in U.S. President George W. Bush's speech on climate change last Wednesday, he rejected cap-and-trade in favor of voluntary goals for reducing emissions. Do you believe that Bush introduced his plan in order to undermine Angela Merkel's efforts at the Group of Eight (G8) summit?

EC: From the very beginning, the Bush administration has opposed any form of mandatory control, whether it is emissions trading or anything else. They are still saying the same thing. The Bush administration simply isn't serious about this, because voluntary goals actually do not reduce emissions. The rest of the world, and many people here in the United States, are just waiting for the next president and also waiting for the Congress to act. I think there will be a serious effort underway in the Congress over the next year or so to actually try to put in place a mandatory emissions control scheme that probably will include emissions trading.

There's no question the Bush administration was feeling an enormous amount of pressure from the other countries in the G8 to agree to something that the White House had gone on record as opposing. They felt the need to put something else out there that would at least deflect some of the pushback they were getting. That said, the proposal they put on the table, while still voluntary, is a step forward because at least it is clear that the administration is thinking that we are actually going to have to reduce emissions.

FP: Another country that came forward before the G8 summit with its own plan is China, which may soon be the largest emitter of greenhouse gases in the world. You said in a recent statement that "much stronger action is needed" from China. But is it realistic to expect that the Chinese would sign on to mandatory emissions caps, or "binding commitments" like you talk about? What incentive would they have to do that?

EC: I don't see China signing on to emission caps, but there is room for what I would call binding policy commitments. The Chinese have in place a renewable energy requirement, some energy efficiency requirements, some auto standards. It's not impossible that they would be willing to make those a bit more ambitious and make them part of an international agreement.

You ask what would be the incentive for them to do that. There are a few. Right now it is possible for China to hide behind the United States, because we have no mandatory commitments in place and we're not major constructive players in the dialogue to consider what should come after Kyoto. But if the United States does go forward with mandatory emission reductions, that cover will be eliminated for China. Because they wish to be a world leader and they certainly wish to lead in technology, it is very possible the Chinese will agree to binding commitments of some sort that would at least start to seriously slow their emissions growth.

FP: Climate change is very high up on the agenda at the G8 summit. What can we expect from this meeting on this issue? And beyond the G8 summit, what needs to happen to reach agreement on a replacement for Kyoto?

EC: The G8 process always works by consensus. It will be very hard to get the United States even close to the same page as most of the other countries within the G8. You might end up with a serious attempt and maybe some improvements over the last G8 summit. But there aren't going to be any major breakthroughs, because President Bush won't agree to any.

In order to successfully address climate change, you really need the United States, China, and Europe to participate [in talks]. So while we [at Pew] often say it should be the 15, 20, or 25 largest emitters, you absolutely have to have those three players. Some small discussions that start with those people at the table could result in a breakthrough, but not until 2009 [when the next U.S. administration takes office].

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