

AMERICA'S NEXT MOVE: THE UNITED STATES' DOMESTIC AND INTERNATIONAL POLICIES ON GLOBAL WARMING AFTER THE KYOTO PROTOCOL

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INTRODUCTION

As the 2008 presidential election draws near, the top issue on voters' minds is the state of the economy. While the current economic downturn has an immediate impact on consumer confidence and financial stability, there is one unavoidable issue threatening a more serious fiscal impact: global climate change. As greenhouse gases accumulate in the atmosphere, temperatures are rising faster than the unemployment rate. Unfortunately, the international [Kyoto Protocol](#) to combat global warming—negotiated in 1997 and ratified by nearly all signatory countries except the United States and Kazakhstan—will expire in 2012, at the end of the upcoming presidential term. Whichever candidate the American people select to lead our nation for the next four years will face two great challenges to confront global climate change: what direction to take the country within the international community as the world decides how to replace Kyoto, and what policies to implement domestically to help curb this impending crisis.

I. POST-KYOTO INTERNATIONAL STRATEGIES

The prospect of confronting climate change often seems as though it will cause a global meltdown—both figuratively and literally—and yet, with these threats come great opportunities to foster solutions through collective action and cooperation. One primary area of division that has plagued Kyoto is the role that developing nations should play relative to the world's wealthiest countries. The [present protocol](#) exempts developing countries from its strict emissions caps, requiring them only to monitor and report their pollution output. India and China are included in this exemption, despite the rapid growth of their economies and the commensurate increases in pollution. Indeed, China is now the world's second-largest polluter after the United States. President Bush decried

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† Suggested citation: Joshua Van der Ploeg, Comment, *America's Next Move: The United States' Domestic and International Policies on Global Warming After the Kyoto Protocol*, 107 MICH. L. REV. FIRST IMPRESSIONS 85 (2008), <http://www.michiganlawreview.org/firstimpressions/vol107/vanderploeg.pdf>.

the exemption of India and China in his June 2001 [statement](#) on climate change because the size of their economies demonstrates that they have sufficient resources to share the costs of capping emissions.

Any post-Kyoto agreement will need to include more participation from developing nations to win over the United States' support. As President Bush [stated](#), "These and other developing countries that are experiencing rapid growth face challenges in reducing their emissions without harming their economies. We want to work cooperatively with these countries in their efforts to reduce greenhouse emissions and maintain economic growth." Though the next president may not oppose Kyoto solely because of its exemption of developing countries, the emergence of China, India, Russia, and Brazil will require him to pay increased attention to the role developing countries play.

The European Union's statement on how to address climate change after Kyoto suggests that the next President's area of focus should be a multi-stage approach based on countries' different levels of economic development. The report, *Towards a Post-2012 Climate Change Regime*, explains:

[I]n the early stage of development, countries can increase their emissions per capita due to industrialization. In a second phase, countries that have reached a certain development needed to stabilize emissions per capita as industrialization is completed and/or efficiency gains are made on par with growth in production. Finally, countries at the highest level of development need to reduce their per capita emissions by making the economy more energy and emission efficient. The threshold for participation can decline with time as technology becomes more efficient. Such a decline is necessary to reach climate stabilization targets.

Mitigation of future climatic damage should continue to be a priority predominantly for developed nations. However, developing countries in particular should invest in additional methods to adapt to the current level of global warming already past the point of possible correction. While mitigation efforts will require wealthy nations to take proactive steps to prevent future damage, methods of adapting to the effects of global warming will allow poorer nations to expand their economies in environmentally friendly industries that recognize the changing world climate. Under this plan, the poorest countries (i.e., those with a per capita GDP of less than US \$4,000) initially would still be allowed to increase emissions per capita to facilitate industrialization. Countries of middle-level economic development would have to stabilize emission levels per capita, with exceptions for certain sectors. Finally, the most developed countries would have to reduce their per capita emission levels by increasing energy efficiency.

Concerned international groups have already begun to propose solutions. Most recently, the [UN Climate Change Conference in Bali](#), Indonesia, attempted to devise a successor plan to the Kyoto Protocol

that would include techniques to mitigate further climate change, reduce deforestation in developing countries, and expand ways to adapt to the damage that has already occurred. However, the conference ultimately resulted in a predictable row between the United States and the European Union on emissions limits. In his article *Climate Change: Beyond Bali*, David B. Sandalow of the Brookings Institution commented, “The EU deserves enormous credit for beginning to implement a serious domestic program to cut emissions of heat-trapping gases. Yet its Bali proposal repeated a well-worn formula unlikely to produce broader breakthroughs in the fight against global warming.” Still, by increasing the role of developing countries, the [Bali Action Plan](#) succeeded where Kyoto had failed.

Many developing countries stand to gain economically from steps to ease dangerous smog and air pollution levels. A *New York Times* article from 2007, *Poor Nations to Bear Brunt as World Warms*, reported that poor countries—disproportionately located in tropical and equatorial regions—will likely receive less rainfall and experience more frequent droughts as a result of global warming, while northern nations with higher standards of living will collect more precipitation. The article continues: “Scientists say it has become increasingly clear that worldwide precipitation is shifting away from the equator and toward the poles. That will nourish crops in warming regions like Canada and Siberia while parching countries—like Malawi in sub-Saharan Africa—which are already prone to drought.” Reducing carbon dioxide levels in equatorial regions by building better roads and improving access to mass transit will ease the potentially devastating consequences on weather patterns, improve public health, and create further economic opportunities for the most impoverished inhabitants.

But the most impoverished countries should not be forced to pay for the misdeeds of those developed countries that have contributed most to this problem. In 1992, many of the world's wealthiest countries signed the [UN Framework Convention on Climate Change](#) and pledged their support to the most vulnerable developing nations. The Convention states:

The Parties should cooperate to promote a supportive and open international economic system that would lead to sustainable economic growth and development in all Parties, particularly developing country Parties, thus enabling them better to address the problems of climate change. Measures taken to combat climate change, including unilateral ones, should not constitute a means of arbitrary or unjustifiable discrimination or a disguised restriction on international trade.

The next President should support that international commitment in two ways: (1) by unilaterally providing foreign aid to help poor countries adapt to the dangers of climate change—specifically flood prevention, drinking water access, and infrastructure development—and (2) by negotiating a post-Kyoto international accord that includes a commitment

to providing economic assistance to developing countries along with global cuts in emissions levels.

II. THE UNITED STATES' DOMESTIC APPROACH

Though both presidential candidates recognize the need to address climate change at an international level, the next President will have to win the support of Congress to ratify such an agreement. Since the Senate [voted](#) unanimously in 1997 against agreements that do not require developing countries to work alongside developed nations, the next administration must work to convince U.S. legislators to go along with any post-Kyoto plan. Legislators may be willing to take action, but disagree substantially on how best to achieve their goals.

Granted, the debate over global warming is in a different place now than it was in 1997. [Virtual unanimity](#) within the scientific community that global warming is here and here to stay makes the remaining climate skeptics' jobs more difficult. But the continuing uncertainties of economic impact fuel the debate about how much action is appropriate. Many lawmakers are reluctant to take substantial action based on largely speculative conjectures about the effects regulation could have on either domestic or international economies. The ability to weave discussions of environmental protection into equally pressing concerns like the presently faltering economy, then, is both pragmatic and good politics. Conservative skeptics and representatives of states that are still dependent on the dwindling manufacturing sector can take comfort in the fact that investment in energy infrastructure will reduce our reliance on foreign oil, curb inflation, and improve the outlook on economic growth while simultaneously decreasing carbon emissions.

This economic approach will need to focus on improving production efficiency. The [Joint Statement on the Path to Climate Sustainability](#), released by the Global Roundtable on Climate Change ("GROCC"), presents a broad array of goals cooperating with allies in both the public and private sectors to work to achieve energy production efficiency. Various industries—particularly the power generation, transportation, manufacturing, and service sectors—contribute to pollution, and any solution will need to include economy-wide participation. Their joint statement reports, "There will be no single solution—many changes in energy efficiency and energy technology will play a role. Moreover, no single economic sector or group of countries can solve the problem alone." The GROCC is optimistic because lowered carbon dioxide levels are a function of increased energy efficiency (lower energy requirement per unit of output) coupled with "de-carbonization" (decreased carbon emissions per unit of energy). The next President would likely gain broad political support with this approach by achieving positive environmental results at minimal cost to business. With increased technology, many of the initial costs of adopting energy efficient practices would be recuperated in the long run.

With this in mind, the next President should support binding emissions levels and implement a “cap and trade” system that encourages U.S. businesses to mitigate future damage, adapt to unavoidable consequences, and preserve forests within the United States and around the world. In the Environmental Protection Agency’s market-based cap and trade [proposal](#), the government would set a maximum carbon output level for the entire country. It would then issue initial credits to provide industries with a carbon allowance based on their historical carbon output. If a business had more carbon credits than it needed, it could sell its remaining credits to another business that needed more. Companies lacking carbon credits would either buy more or choose to invest in more efficient technologies, whichever is cheaper. [According to the EPA](#),

[a]llowance trading enables sources to design their own compliance strategy based on their individual circumstances while still achieving the overall emissions reductions required by the cap. Affected units can tailor their compliance plans to each source. Compliance strategies in well-designed cap and trade programs require no prior approval, allowing sources to respond quickly to market conditions and government regulators to remain focused on results.

Such a program would likely receive widespread support across industries. Environmental groups would be able to buy credits to reduce the number available to other organizations, and businesses would rely on a carbon market instead of alternative carbon taxes or regulations.

CONCLUSION

In many ways, whoever is fortunate (or unfortunate) enough to inherit the presidency will have an easier time implementing climate change initiatives than any prior President. The next President will be entering the Oval Office with broader support in the international and domestic arenas than before, and he will have multiple options to succeed. The only thing that stands in the way at this point would be an unwillingness to proceed. Since both Senators Obama and McCain have acknowledged the immense risks of global climate change, voters can have confidence in the next President’s commitment to working to solve the crisis.