

New White House Policy on International Climate Talks

White House Announces Plan for Post-2012 International Framework for Climate Change

President Bush announced on May 31 a proposal for a process that would lead to “a new framework” on greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions to take effect in the post-2012 period, when binding commitments under the Kyoto Protocol expire. The announcement comes a week before the G-8 summit in Germany. G-8 President Angela Merkel of Germany has been pressing for a commitment at the Summit to a specific temperature-based target, whereby global temperatures would be allowed to increase no more than 2 degrees Celsius (3.6 degrees Fahrenheit). The German proposal amounts to a requirement to reduce global emissions to 50 percent below 1990 levels by 2050, through a continuation and deepening of the global cap-and-trade regime established under Kyoto. The White House had rejected that approach in the run-up to the G-8 meeting.

The Proposal

The President’s May 31 speech calls for the establishment of a process that will lead, by the end of 2008, to agreement on “a long-term global goal for reducing greenhouse gases.” The relevant portions of the speech are excerpted below:

The United States will work with other nations to establish a new framework on greenhouse gas emissions for when the Kyoto Protocol expires in 2012. By the end of next year, America and other nations will set a long-term global goal for reducing greenhouse gases. To help develop this goal, the United States will convene a series of meetings of nations that produce most greenhouse gas emissions, including nations with rapidly growing economies like India and China.

In addition to this long-term global goal, each country would establish midterm national targets, and programs that reflect their own mix of energy sources and future energy needs. Over the course of the next 18 months, our nations would bring together industry leaders from different sectors of our economies, such as power generation and alternative fuels and transportation. These leaders will form working groups that will cooperate on ways to share clean energy technology and best practices.

It's important to ensure that we get results, and so we will create a strong and transparent system for measuring each country's performance.

In addition, the President described a broad agenda for cooperation within

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the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change on three main areas of emphasis: adaptation to the impacts of climate change; sharing of clean and more efficient technology; and promoting sustainable forestry and agriculture.

Brief Analysis

The announcement to engage in talks on a post-2012 framework represents a shift in the Administration's approach to international climate negotiations, although it remains to be seen how much of a departure it signals. Clearly, the most significant change is the Administration's new commitment to discuss a long-term global goal for GHG reductions. An agreement on that goal could in turn set the stage for negotiations on specific targets and measures that countries would implement in the post-2012 period.

It is unclear, however, whether the proposal will serve to bridge the current gap between European and U.S. approaches to the post-2012 period. For example, the President's reference to a post-2012 "framework" rather than an agreement leaves open the possibility that the Administration will continue to oppose a binding agreement, which the European Union favors. Jim Connaughton, the Chairman of the Council on Environmental Quality, subsequently made it clear in a press briefing that the goal would be "aspirational," with no internationally binding measures, but national programs adopted that may include mandatory provisions within each participant's domestic law.

Similarly, the President's reference to a global emissions reduction goal leaves open the possibility that the United States may press for a global *intensity-based* goal (the current U.S. policy framework), rather than a goal that focuses on absolute emissions, which would be closer to the temperature increase limit proposed by the European Union. Another possibility is that the "global goal" would be constructed as a blend of both intensity-based and absolute targets. Connaughton also made reference to the possibility that the goal might be technology-based (e.g., a target for emissions from coal).

The reference to midterm targets that reflect each country's "own mix of energy sources and future energy needs" suggests that the Administration will push for a variable approach that leaves it up to each participant to determine how it can contribute to the global goal. That language, along with the reference to sectoral industry-led processes, recalls the basic

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structure of the Asia-Pacific Partnership (APP). (Jim Connaughton's press briefing explicitly drew attention to the APP as a model.) It may be, therefore, that the Administration envisions the new framework primarily as an opportunity to expand on the APP as a way to draw both developed and developing economies into a technology-focused framework for the post-2012 period.

One important question is how the White House proposal relates to the ongoing global negotiations under UN auspices that have already begun under the Kyoto Protocol and are scheduled to intensify at meetings in Bali at the end of the year. The Administration appears to contemplate a process that would run in parallel to (rather than as a part of) the ongoing UN-based talks, in which the United States has not participated. (Connaughton said it "will run in parallel with and reinforce Bali.") The speech refers to talks among "nations that produce most greenhouse gas emissions" -- a formulation that would focus discussions only among the highest emitters. It remains to be seen how those two efforts would link up under the President's proposal, if at all, or whether the Administration's proposal will effectively displace the ongoing work on a binding post-2012 framework modeled on Kyoto Protocol, particularly given the slow progress in that broader forum.

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