

Stage set for COP15 climate talks

Japan's obligations should be weighed vis-à-vis U.S., China

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The United Nations Climate Change Conference, known as COP15, opened Dec. 7 in Copenhagen, bringing together representatives of 194 countries and regions. Prime Minister Yukio Hatoyama is expected to participate in a meeting to be held on Dec. 18.

With the Kyoto Protocol having set targets for the reduction of greenhouse-gas output from 2008 to 2012, the COP15 summit

will revolve around a framework for 2013 and later. Prior to the conference, the U.S. announced its aim to cut emissions by 17% from the 2005 level, while China said it would target a 40-45% cut in carbon dioxide emissions per unit of gross domestic product compared with the 2005 level.

It is significant that the two leading emitting countries — which did not join the Kyoto accord and thus are not committed to cutting emissions in spite of the fact that they combine to account for about 40% of the world's total CO₂ output — have publicly announced reduction goals. That said, the U.S. target figure is only a 3% cut when com-

pared to the 1990 level. As for China, calculating the emissions per unit of GDP shows that if the country's economy continues to grow at a robust pace, its CO₂ emissions will actually increase rather than decrease. Some reckon that if the Chinese economy were to keep expanding at an annual pace of 5%, its emissions would swell by more than 60%.

Meanwhile, Japan has set an aggressive target of slashing warming emissions by 25% from the 1990 level. But with the country's emissions representing a mere 4% of the world's total, its contribution to the worldwide reduction of CO₂ would be small even if it

achieved the target.

The question is how to interpret the basic philosophy of the Kyoto Protocol — that every country should assume a common but different level of responsibility. Unless the degree of Japan's final emissions obligation is regarded as fair and relevant by its people, the country's high target as an international pledge will not be achievable.

It is unrealistic to expect that key emitting countries, including the U.S. and China, will quickly reach an agreement to substantially cut CO₂. If that is indeed the case, Japan may not need to impose such a high hurdle on itself. It is important to closely monitor the course of international talks on climate change.

