RESOLVED:
The United States and Japan Are Aligned on Climate Strategy

On April 22, President Biden will host world leaders at his Leaders Summit on Climate, where he is expected to announce an ambitious 2030 emissions target and urge other countries to do the same. As the Biden Administration puts climate at the forefront of its foreign policy strategy, Prime Minister Suga is also increasing Japan’s commitment to combat the climate crisis by setting a target for carbon neutrality by 2050.

In the twenty-first issue of the Debating Japan newsletter series, the CSIS Japan Chair invited Pete Ogden, vice president for climate and the environment at the United Nations Foundation, and Jane Nakano, senior fellow in the Energy Security and Climate Change Program at CSIS, to share their perspectives on whether Japan and the United States are aligned on climate strategy.
The priorities of the United States and Japan on climate are strategically aligned and increasingly driven by the current climate crisis. When President Biden and Prime Minister Suga meet in April, they will do so as the leaders of two countries that are already suffering from the impacts of climate change—and, unless global greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions are quickly reduced, these impacts will continue to multiply and escalate. In the United States, the toll of climate change is already being exacted in the form of more extreme weather events, flooding, wildfires, and more. Between 2017 and 2019 alone, the United States was inflicted by damages exceeding $460 billion from 44 extreme weather and climate events.

Extreme weather events have become more frequent in Japan too. In 2018, over 1,000 people died, and more than 22,000 were hospitalized after a record-breaking heatwave hit the country. Similarly, last year, unprecedented rains caused deadly floods and landslides on Kyushu. Sea level rise and coastal floods have also emerged as a significant concern, threatening around 46 percent of Japan’s population and 47 percent of its industrial output.

The damage that climate change is unleashing on the rest of the world is also intensifying, and it threatens to undo decades of development gains that Japan and the United States have invested in, fueling and fanning the forces of instability—from migration to food insecurity to the spread of disease.

Moreover, the solution to the climate crisis itself, if pursued effectively and aggressively, will advance other shared strategic priorities of the United States and Japan. One need only look to the Quad alliance’s joint leaders’ statement on March 12, in which President Biden, Prime Minister Suga, and their Indian and Australian counterparts enshrined combatting climate change as a core component of their broader Indo-Pacific strategy and launched a new working group dedicated to that purpose.

The shared prioritization of China in our
respective countries’ foreign policy and national security strategies both demands and provides an opportunity for more effective engagement with China on climate change. We cannot solve the climate crisis without China: it is the world’s largest GHG emitter, accounting for approximately 30 percent of the annual global total; it is shaping the world’s future emission trajectories through the energy and infrastructure projects it finances through its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI); and it possesses the economic and technological power to play a critical role in driving a globally sustainable, clean energy economy.

Secretary Blinken laid out the U.S. position quite plainly: “Our relationship with China will be competitive when it should be, collaborative when it can be, and adversarial when it must be.” Prime Minister Suga has also been explicit about Japan’s interest in engaging constructively with China when it can. Climate change is an area where we all can be collaborative—and, when it comes to the economic race to capture the clean energy opportunity, it is an area where we should be economically competitive.

This seems to be the understanding of the United States. While the heated exchanges in Alaska during the first encounter between top U.S. and China diplomats under the Biden administration grabbed global headlines, the quieter conversation that followed included a discussion of the climate crisis—an area where the United States has indicated it would welcome China’s cooperation. What will become of this remains to be seen, but, notably, at the first extended bilateral meeting between President Xi and President Obama in Sunnylands, California in 2013, climate was one of the few areas of concrete progress. Following that meeting, our countries were at the center of finalizing the Paris Agreement on Climate Change.

For the United States and Japan, the challenge is not recognizing the strategic alignment but realizing it. There are several near-term steps that we can take to take us down this path.

First, both countries need to move quickly to establish robust GHG reduction targets for 2030 under the Paris Agreement, ideally in time for President Biden’s Leaders’ Climate Summit of the world’s major economies on April 22. Currently, of the world’s largest economies, only the European Union and the United Kingdom have established targets that put them on a trajectory consistent with the goals of the agreement as laid out the U.S. position quite plainly: “Our relationship with China will be competitive when it should be, collaborative when it can be, and adversarial when it must be.” Prime Minister Suga has also been explicit about Japan’s interest in engaging constructively with China when it can. Climate change is an area where we all can be collaborative—and, when it comes to the economic race to capture the clean energy opportunity, it is an area where we should be economically competitive.

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Since its official announcement in 2015, Japan’s GHG emissions reduction goal for 2030 remains to be a 26 percent reduction against the 2013 levels.

Fossil fuel financing is another area where climate strategy between Washington and Tokyo has yet to fully converge. The Biden administration’s climate agenda includes striking a G20 agreement to stop public financing for overseas coal power projects and stopping China from exporting high carbon goods. In 2013, the United States officially banned financing for overseas coal projects by U.S. public financial institutions—an action which the Biden administration hopes to see replicated widely. Perspectives on coal financing in Japan are evolving, and a growing number of private banks and insurance companies have announced plans to end it in recent years. In July 2020, the Japanese government announced that it would “as a rule” no longer support coal plant exports, albeit with some caveats. For example, Japan would allow support for “high efficiency, low emissions” coal technology and where a recipient country lacks other reasonable options for energy sources. The export of coal-fired power plants is a matter of economic competitiveness to Tokyo as Japanese manufacturers of coal-fired power equipment face fierce competition from state-backed Chinese vendors.

Lastly, the strategic rivalry with China may necessitate U.S. climate strategy to be dynamic and flexible as Washington may wish to regularly review and re-calibrate its mode of engaging China, which is the largest GHG emitter in the world. In its relationship with the growingly assertive China, the Biden administration is prepared to be “competitive when it should be, collaborative when it can be, and adversarial when it must be” (Secretary Blinken, March 2021). Climate change is one area where collaborative relationships could yield the optimal pace of progress. While such strategic flexibility seems not only prudent but also necessary, it could also make it hard for anyone, including Japan, to keep its climate strategy in a constant alignment with that of the United States.

Notwithstanding the areas of possible divergence, the United States and Japan jointly have much to contribute to the energy transition. As the energy transition necessitates a combination of electrifying energy systems and decarbonizing electric power sources, innovation will play the central role in the respective climate strategy of the United States and
well as with their own individual commitments to achieve carbon neutrality by 2050. The United States and Japan should do the same, which would provide a boost to the Paris Agreement and demonstrate our commitment to living up to our roles within multilateral agreements.

Second, the United States and Japan should cease providing public support for overseas coal projects. President Biden has committed to this, and Japan has shrunk the number of such projects in its pipeline to just three. If both countries were to take this step, South Korea, which is in a similar position to Japan, would likely be able to quickly follow suit, leaving China isolated and under intense pressure to halt its own substantial support for coal under its Belt and Road Initiative.

Third, the United States and Japan should work together to ensure that the international financial institutions in which we both wield substantial influence—from the World Bank to the International Monetary Fund to the Asian Development Bank—have the resources, tools, and policies to help put countries on the path of clean, sustainable economic growth rather than the unsustainable, high polluting alternative pathway being offered through the BRI or elsewhere.

Taken together, these steps could form the basis of a robust new U.S.-Japan partnership that would advance multiple shared strategic priorities and serve as a cornerstone of global efforts to meet the climate crisis.

As leading innovators and manufacturers of clean energy technologies, the two countries will likely remain closely engaged with one another in research and innovation endeavors that will accelerate the development and deployment of clean energy technologies.
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PETE OGDEN is Vice President for Energy, Climate, and the Environment at the United Nations Foundation. Prior to joining the Foundation, he was Senior Fellow for International Energy and Climate Policy at the Center for American Progress, Senior Advisor and Fellow at the Energy Policy Institute at the University of Chicago, and Senior Advisor at the Rhodium Group.

During the Obama administration, he served in the White House as Senior Director for Energy and Climate Change on the Domestic Policy Council and Director for International Climate Change and Environmental Policy on the National Security Council, as well as at the State Department as Chief of Staff to the Special Envoy for Climate Change. Before his government roles, he was the Chief of Staff at the Center for American Progress. His writing on energy and climate issues has appeared in Foreign Affairs, the Financial Times, the Washington Post, and a variety of other outlets.

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