

***Kyoto Treaty Takes Effect Today...
...Impact on Global Warming May Be Largely Symbolic***

By Shankar Vedantam

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ELEMENTS OF THE TREATY:

- **Greenhouse gases**: Controls emissions of carbon dioxide, methane, nitrous oxide, hydrofluorocarbons, perfluorocarbons and sulphur hexafluoride.
- **Targets**: Assigns targets for reducing or limiting emissions to 35 industrialized countries.
- **Trading**: Allows emissions trading among countries: Industrial plants that do not use up allocations can sell "credits" to those who overshoot allowances.
- **Joint implementation**: Countries can develop an emissions-reduction project in another country to gain emissions credits.

The Kyoto treaty to reduce global warming goes into effect today [**16 February 2005**] after seven years of wrangling, harangues, and dramatic entrances and exits by Russia and the United States.

The global environmental movement calls it a historic victory, but critics in the industry and elsewhere say the bang could end in a whimper: Emissions of carbon dioxide will continue to rise, many of the cuts in greenhouse gases claimed under Kyoto probably would have happened anyway, and its future could be derailed by the stony opposition of the Bush administration.

Supporters acknowledge those realities but argue that the real impact of the treaty is not tangible.

"The greatest value is symbolic," said Eileen Claussen, president of the Pew Center on Global Climate Change, an independent research and advocacy organization that works with many large companies interested in addressing the risks of global warming.

With the United States on the sidelines, the Kyoto treaty could end up as ineffectual as the post-World War I League of Nations. But by uniting the vast majority of the world's nations, Kyoto could equally be the harbinger of an international model that rewards pollution-cutting innovation and pushes countries and companies to pursue cleaner forms of growth.

The treaty is aimed at controlling global warming linked to carbon dioxide and other greenhouse gases. It was negotiated in Kyoto, Japan, in 1997. Although the United States helped shape it, President Bush pulled the United States out as soon as he took office.

The pact, ratified by 141 nations, limits emissions from 35 industrialized countries. Developing countries were exempted from limits to give them a chance to catch up with the economic development of the industrialized world.

Australia and the United States have refused to join. Bush administration officials said the treaty would hurt the economy and is ineffective and discriminatory because large, rapidly industrializing countries such as China and India escape the limits. Moreover, they say, many countries, including Japan and several in the European Union, are unlikely to meet their emission-control targets and will have to buy "credits" -- most likely from Russia, which will have plenty to sell because many of its industrial plants shut down during the economic meltdown in the 1990s.

"They are going to take credit for sagging economies and flat populations," said James L. Connaughton, chairman of the White House Council on Environmental Quality. Bush's proposals for voluntary emission controls and incentives to develop clean technologies would have as much impact on American emissions as Europe would achieve under Kyoto, he said.

Claussen disputed Connaughton's claim. And Robert Donkers, an environment counselor for the European Union in Washington, said binding limits are needed for countries and companies to make the investments needed to cut emissions.

"It is not just the European Union versus the United States," he said. "This is Australia and the United States against the rest of the world."

Mountains of paper and oceans of ink have been expended debating Kyoto, but the ultimate fate of the treaty may be determined by what happens not within the Beltway but under the polar ice caps.

Global temperatures are indisputably rising -- and, while there are persistent skeptics, the vast majority of scientists say human activity is to blame.

Rising temperatures have already been linked to impacts on agriculture, coastal areas and public health. Melting ice caps could raise sea levels and inundate coastal areas, scientists say. Changes in ocean temperature could disrupt the Gulf Stream and make Europe much colder, said Annie Petsonk, international counsel at Environmental Defense, an advocacy organization. Tropical diseases such as malaria are spreading into new areas as a result of climate change in Africa, said Ken

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Newcombe, a senior manager at the World Bank, which has been setting up a system to help developing countries invest in clean technologies and sell credits to wealthy nations under the Kyoto accord.

It is no coincidence that as the treaty takes effect, a slew of bipartisan legislative proposals to control greenhouse gases are being introduced in Congress. And some states are taking matters into their own hands. California is demanding steep reductions in vehicle emissions. Several northeastern states are banding together to limit greenhouse emissions and set up the kind of trading system that could easily blend into the Kyoto model.

"Arizona is moving forward because they see droughts, wildfires," said Pew's Claussen. "North Carolina is considering a comprehensive policy because they are concerned about the barrier islands."

No one expects the Bush administration to change course, but dealing with a hodgepodge system might eventually prove more expensive to American industry than outright participation in a global system, said Robert W. Fri, a board member at American Electric Power Co., which burns more coal than any other utility in the United States.

The treaty's activation this week will intensify a debate in corporate boardrooms over the cost of doing nothing vs. the cost of doing something, said Fri, who formerly headed the environmental advocacy group Resources for the Future. He and Claussen said most American companies acknowledge -- at least in private -- that global controls on greenhouse gas emissions are inevitable. Farsighted companies, they said, want a seat at the bargaining table and are investing in cleaner technologies.

Both sides agree on one thing: The most contentious battles over controlling greenhouse emissions lie ahead.

Under the treaty, the European Union committed to reducing its emissions 8 percent below 1990 levels; Japan and Canada committed to a 6 percent cut; and Russia, whose entry three months ago provided the quorum needed to put the treaty into effect, committed to limit emissions right at 1990 levels. The United States would have had to limit emissions at 7 percent below 1990 levels, Petsonk said.

That would have been a prescription for disaster, said the White House's Connaughton, adding that it would have cost 5 million jobs and \$400 billion annually. "The problem with Kyoto is it tried to reverse before we had put the brakes on and come to a stop," he said.

Connaughton and Frank Maisano, an energy lobbyist and former spokesman for a defunct industry coalition on climate change, said that rather than limit emissions, the United States should help spread clean technology in the developing world.

By 2010, said William O'Keefe, a former oil industry executive who now works at the Marshall Institute, an advocacy organization, developing countries will account for the bulk of greenhouse emissions. Maisano endorsed a recent proposal by Sen. Chuck Hagel (R-Neb.) to develop and spread clean technology. Rather than set limits on emissions, the proposal seeks to set efficiency standards.

Environmentalists dispute Connaughton's estimate of the costs and say the administration is ignoring a fundamental reality: Improving efficiency, while necessary, will never suffice to lower greenhouse gas levels.

"You can't solve global warming by increasing emissions," said Jeremy Symons, manager of the global warming program at the National Wildlife Federation, an advocacy group. "That is what we are doing now. That is what President Bush is doing. You can't stop an environmental problem by increasing pollution."

The countries that ratified Kyoto believe that wealthy countries need to demonstrate a commitment to reducing emission levels in the first phase of the treaty, from 2008 to 2012, before the developing world can be asked to make cuts.

"You can't expect developing countries to waive their right to grow because the industrialized countries for the last 100 years have eaten all the cake," said Donkers of the European Union delegation in Washington.

Many environmentalists are getting behind a proposal by Sens. John McCain (R-Ariz.) and Joseph I. Lieberman (D-Conn.) that would impose modest emission limits in the United States and establish a trading system analogous to Kyoto to give American companies a financial incentive to develop technologies that lower emissions.

McCain said Thursday that it is time to end the wrangling over global warming. If scientists are wrong about the catastrophic consequences of greenhouse gases, efforts to limit emissions would still result in cleaner air and a more competitive industrial base, he said.

"Given the high stakes involved -- the future of our children and our grandchildren, not to mention the future of the planet as we inherited it -- which approach are you willing to bet on?" he asked.