

## High noon at Kyoto

**An agreement between the United States and developing countries, brokered by Japan, could ensure a successful outcome for the forthcoming conference of the United Nations climate convention at Kyoto.**

Next month, the United Nations environmental bandwagon rolls into the ancient Japanese city of Kyoto for 10 days of talks that are intended to culminate in a new legally binding treaty to reduce anthropogenic greenhouse-gas emissions. If agreed, this treaty will be a tribute as much to the hard work of scientists as to the long nights put in by negotiators at Kyoto. Indeed, the prospects for the meeting would have been considerably dimmer without the 10-year efforts of the United Nations' body of climate scientists, the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, and, in particular, its statement that the balance of evidence suggests anthropogenic climate change. But agreement at Kyoto hinges not on science — whose importance will re-emerge subsequently (see pages 225–226) — but on the willingness of governments to settle their differences.

So far, most have adopted predictable positions. The Group of 77 developing states wants the richer countries to make radical cuts to their greenhouse-gas emissions. This amounts to a 15 per cent reduction from 1990 levels by 2010. The United States has responded with a decidedly unradical target (stabilization of emissions to 1990 levels between 2008 and 2012) coupled to a raft of controversial conditions including a demand for major concessions from the developing countries. Member states of the European Union, meanwhile, are on the middle ground, proposing major cuts but without seeking developing-country concessions. Between the European Union and the United States lies Japan, with its own widely derided compromise target of a 5 per cent emissions reduction from 1990 levels by between 2008 and 2012.

Inevitably, the final outcome at Kyoto will disappoint many. But it is too soon to write off the meeting. Indeed, there are at least two good reasons not to be wholly pessimistic. The first concerns the host nation, the second, US insistence on 'meaningful participation' from developing countries.

### Japan as broker

Japan has not had a good press as it prepares for its first major United Nations conference. An image has emerged of Japan as a reluctant host, eager to please, but not really up to the job of brokering an important international agreement.

Is Japan trying to please everyone? Undoubtedly to some extent. Japan's consensus-style political culture is steeped in the type of deal-making on which UN agreements are built. Its own emissions reduction proposal illustrates that it has a solid understanding of this process. Japanese officials know that there will be no deal unless the United States can be brought on board. They also know that Europe is prepared to be 'flexible' on its proposed target, as well as on its opposition to emissions trading.

Therefore, far from being a drawback, Japan's consensual approach is precisely what may salvage an agreement at Kyoto. Indeed, Japan's expertise in mediation potentially mirrors the diplomatic skills wielded in recent years by countries of Scandinavia and other 'small' north European countries. Also in Japan's favour is its choice of Britain's deputy prime minister, John Prescott, to chair informal talks between Europe and the United

States. Britain's Labour party enjoys close relations with the Clinton administration. And although Prescott may not have finger-tip command of international environment policy, his deal-making skills are beyond doubt.

What of developing-country participation? The United States wants 'meaningful participation' from major developing countries such as China, India, Brazil and Mexico. But developing countries are reluctant to reduce their greenhouse-gas emissions just yet. Many are still in the process of building an industrial base, and do not want to be forced to pay to correct a problem — anthropogenic climate change — caused mainly by others. Two scientific papers in this issue bear on the developing-country question (pages 267–270 and 270–273). They will prove controversial, and at least one is open to misinterpretation (see pages 227–228).

### Per-capita targets

To many governments, and many more environmentalists, the US requirement of developing-country participation effectively ends any hopes that remain of meaningful agreement at Kyoto. But to others it represents an opportunity, not a threat (see pages 215–220). It is no secret that when the time comes, many developing countries would much rather base emissions targets on a single per-capita calculation rather than merely a percentage increase or reduction over 1990 levels.

The idea of a per-capita level is at present viewed with some scepticism in Europe and the United States. But if the United States sticks to its insistence on early emissions reductions from developing countries, it will need to give something in return. US support for a per-capita convergence of emissions could be that something.

US officials have not so far ruled out the idea of global greenhouse-gas emissions converging to a per-capita value. But they may need more evidence that enough developing countries support the idea. They also need more evidence that developing countries will agree to early emissions reductions in return for US support for per-capita emissions convergence. Until now, only the Africa group of countries has shown any enthusiasm. There is as yet no official word from India, nor from China, despite the latter's known preference for a per-capita system. Both countries may want to wait until the final hours of Kyoto before they reveal their hand. In the meantime, support from environmentalists would not go amiss.

Most developing countries and environmentalists have so far resolutely opposed embarking on a discussion of per-capita emissions. They agree with the per-capita principle, but disagree with the idea of early developing-country participation which, they rightly point out, violates the terms of the climate convention. But if Kyoto is to be saved from turning into a damp squib, they would be well advised to change their minds.

Clearly, the host nation has much to do. As a result of domestic interministerial negotiations, Japan's own proposal incorporates the developing-country desire for emissions to be reduced to a per-capita level. If the Japanese broker an agreement on this issue between the United States and developing countries, they will have fully justified their role as host. □