

Addressing Climate Change as an Urgent Issue

By SUZUKI Keisuke

The Working Group I of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) has released the Sixth Assessment Report (Natural Science Basis). This is an extremely important report as this year is said to be a pivotal year in the fight against climate change with the G7, G20, COP26 and a series of other international conferences taking place. The report, which is based on various scientific verifications and analyses, makes it clear that climate change is caused by human activities, and that anthropogenic climate change is having a substantial impact on various areas. About 15 years ago, when I was in my first term as a member of the House of Representatives, I published a book on climate change. Since then, as I have said in various places, I believe that we must always keep three points in mind when we think about the problem of climate change and how to deal with it.

First of all, we need to realize that the effects of climate change are not simply a 1.5- or 2-degree Celsius increase in temperature, but also an increase in the extremes of various event that could cause wide-range of consequences. We are all aware of the fact that an intense rainfall is caused by the rise in sea temperature. However, there is a high possibility that abnormal weather events such as droughts and heavy rains will become more frequent, and that some regions will become colder than others, or that changes in ocean currents will cause major changes in the existing climate. In addition, summer daytime temperatures in inland areas are naturally likely to rise above the global average. If this happens, changes in vegetation will not be able to keep up with the climate changes, and food production will be greatly affected. If the Earth's system of mild climate modulation is altered, even by a small scale, it could disrupt the delicate equilibrium that is suitable for human survival.

And the next thing we should be aware of is that climate change will accelerate. The amount of greenhouse gases that can be absorbed by seawater and other sources is likely to become ever smaller as seawater temperature rises and more of the gases blend in. Then, if we exceed a certain critical point due to various factors, the global warming will become ever more serious at an accelerated rate. This can be observed, for instance, as the ice in Arctic and Greenland melts and the Earth's surface turns black and starts absorb more heat.

The third point is that even if we reduce greenhouse gas emissions by changing human behavior, there will be a time lag before it leads to a halt on temperature increase. We need to keep this time lag in mind.

In light of the above-mentioned points, it is no longer a choice but a reality that we must drastically reduce greenhouse gas emissions across the globe. On the other hand, it cannot be denied

that the sense of crisis and the timeline vary among the government ministries and the business community. This is evident in the newly revised Basic Energy Plan.

In addition, as the former Trump administration had argued and some others are still arguing, it is not 100% proven that human activities are correlated with global warming and climate change. One needs to bear in mind that this argument is done despite the fact that there exist evidences with extremely high probability of such correlation. As a politician who is responsible for the future, it is not a rational manner to delay or not be proactive on the issue. Of course, what follows after the scientific debate on how much the planet as a whole must reduce is a "political" debate, where each country and each sector will decide how much to actually reduce. And it is also true that the political game has so far led to a situation where measures have been taken in favour of reducing the gas in general, but its details are yet to be agreed.

However, considering the current situation, we need to realize that it is the future of the world as a whole that will suffer a great burden from the delay by focusing too much on measures to reduce a negative impact on our own country (of course, it is natural for any nations to negotiate for their national interests, but that should not legitimize the prevention of the overall progress). The sooner the measures are taken, the less the burden will be. Moreover, the early indication of appropriate regulations and the direction we should take will create the right market, the right price mechanism and flow of funds, and an ecosystem in which the necessary innovation can proceed. I believe that the release of this report should be an opportunity to reiterate this recognition both internationally and domestically, and to accelerate discussions on specific measures and regulations.

It is with this in mind that I have argued for a radical reduction of coal power generation within my own party and the Japanese government. I have also submitted a proposal on sustainable finance to the prime minister. I would like to reaffirm my belief that the responsibility of a politician is not to adjust current vested interests, but to maximize future profits. This is what I always keep in mind as I formulate future policies.

(This is an English translation of the article written by SUZUKI Keisuke, Former State Minister for Foreign Affairs, which originally appeared on the e-forum “Hyakka-Somei (Hundred Ducks in Full Voice)” of CEAC on August 31.)