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Article

The Roles of Four Important Contexts in Japan's Carbon Neutrality Policy and Politics, 1990–2020

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Abstract: This study contextualises the background of Japan's "carbon neutrality and net-zero" (CNN) policy announced in October 2020, thereby identifying important changes in the country's climate policy between 1990 and 2020. Using four research questions, four main findings were extracted from a narrative technique-based analysis of Japan's policy documents related to CNN. The following are the findings: [i] the framing of climate change as a "climate crisis" by influential Japanese climate stakeholders was a key motivation for Japan to formally announce its CNN policy in October 2020, [ii] pressure from the international community and the political leadership of the Yoshihide Suga administration are essential factors that led the Japanese government to change its stance and announced this policy, [iii] Japan unintentionally delayed announcement of the policy until 2020 due to the concern among Japanese climate stakeholders about the problem of fairness in Kyoto Protocol's emission reduction targets, and [iv] this delay was also due to Keidanren's (or business sector) consistent opposition to the introduction of regulatory schemes. These results emerge for the first time in a study of Japan's CNN politics, particularly in terms of the broader context of climate politics. Finally, we offer a possible explanation for Suga's deliberate announcement of the CNN policy. This opens up space for future research to complement our study by providing important indicators on the trajectory of this important policy.

Keywords: carbon neutrality; climate policy; climate politics; fairness under the Kyoto Protocol; Keidanren; Japan

1. Introduction

At the global level, coordination on global warming has been established with regard to the political nature of the "carbon neutrality and net-zero" (CNN) agenda and its intersection with the "Kyoto Protocol's emission reduction targets" (henceforth Kyoto targets) and national climate policies worldwide. The main feature of the Kyoto Protocol is that it sets binding targets for the European Union (EU) and industrialised countries (e.g., New Zealand, Russian Federation, Ukraine ± 0 ; Iceland $+10$; Australia $+8$; Norway $+1$; EU -8 ; United States [US] -7 ; Poland, Hungary, Canada and Japan -6).

At the national level, Japan, together with New Zealand, the Russian Federation and Ukraine, rejected new targets for the Protocol's second commitment period (2013–2020), although these four countries participated in the first commitment period (2008–2012). The rejection is not entirely surprising, but it is noteworthy. Canada withdrew from the Protocol in 2012 and subsequently announced a 30% emission reduction by 2030 as part of its preparations for the 2015 Paris Agreement. It is to be expected that Japan cannot afford to muddy their commitments by contemplating something like a withdrawal from the Kyoto Protocol.

Afterwards, the CNN policy announced by the Japanese government in October 2020 was broadly consistent with the basic expectations of the Kyoto Protocol, which aims to curb greenhouse gases (GHGs) emissions.

As most research on greenhouse gases (GHGs) and "carbon neutrality" has so far focused on the global level, it seems more fruitful and policy-relevant to focus on the national level (van Soest et al. 2021, p. 2). In other words, it seems new to draw direct or indirect conclusions about the main factors behind the policy context that led Japan to announce its CNN policy in October 2020. This novelty is particularly important because Japan is a country where the business sector has exerted influence by providing certain alternatives to the government's stance on CNN targets (Kameyama 2021;

InfluenceMap 2020). Furthermore, with explicit references to Japan, climate policies and responses have been discussed from various perspectives (e.g., Kameyama 2017; Ohta 2020, 2021; Kameyama 2021a; Tetsuji 2021; Asaoka 2022; Odeyemi & Sekiyama 2022; Sekiyama 2020, 2022; Uiko 2022). While some of these perspectives are similar, Yamada (2021) and Ohta and Barrett (2023) deserve special mention with regard to Japan's announcement of CNN policy and its changing but contentious climate politics/policymaking. However, in the absence of a common understanding of the origins of this policy, it is difficult to draw clear conclusions about the main factors that contributed to the policy announcement. Moreover, despite the strengths of these papers, none of them can be said to have provided complete knowledge. The same can be said about our study, but we complement previous research by focusing on key events in the two decades leading up to the CNN policy announcement.

The aim of this study is therefore to provide valuable insights into the politics and background of the important policy shift that characterised the administration of former Prime Minister Yoshihide Suga, namely the announcement of Japan's ambitious CNN policy. The objective is to analyse key changes in Japan's climate policy between 1990 and 2020 by answering four questions. What is the link between the problem of fairness under the Kyoto targets and the Japanese government's initial reluctance to ambitious carbon emission reductions? Why did the Japanese business sector initially resist the possibility of ambitious carbon emission reductions? How has the term climate crisis contributed to the need for CNN policy? Why did the Japanese government changed its reluctant stance and announced CNN policy in October 2020? The answers to these questions emerge for the first time in a study of Japan's CNN politics, particularly in terms of the broader context of climate politics. Also, this study is the first attempt to integrate several existing (and largely competing) perspectives on the reasons for the CNN policy announcement. It proceeds as follows. Section 2 describes the methodology. Section 3 is divided into four sections and provides answers to the four research questions. Section 4 collates these answers offers discussion. Section 5 is the conclusion.

2. Materials and Methods

Data was collected from databases (such as the CiNii research platform provided by the National Institute of Informatics in Japan) and open-source policy documents, including press releases, issued by the Ministry of Economy, Trade and Industry (METI), the Ministry of the Environment (MoE), Keidanren and others. A search of the CiNii database for "Japan and carbon neutrality policy" within the 1990–2023 timeframe returned 67 papers, 53 of which were published in Japanese. One of the latter is the paper by Nakano et al. (2023), who participated in formulating the CNN policy of a municipality in Japan. Such participation means a lot of original information that is unlikely to be available in papers published elsewhere. In any case the open-source policy documents were read using Google and DeepL translators because the documents are not always written in English and one of the current authors is a foreigner who does not directly understand Japanese.

This study relies on narrative analysis to contextually understand the background of the CNN policy announcement and integrates information from the related literature provided as part of the discussion section. Narrative analysis is a genre of analytical frames for presenting diverse – but equally meaningful and substantial – interpretations and conclusions by focusing on different contexts and factors (Parcell & Baker 2017). These include, but are not limited to, how existing works have structured their explanations, as well as the functions and key messages of such explanations.

3. Results

As a starting point for this section, it is useful to mention the relationships between the four main stakeholders deeply involved in climate policymaking in Japan. These are the METI, the MoE, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MoFA) and Keidanren – an umbrella economic organisation comprising 47 regional economic associations in 47 prefectures, 109 industry associations across Japan and nearly 1,400 leading Japanese companies. In contrast to the MoE's position, the overall stance of Keidanren and the METI appears to favour energy-intensive industries, especially when seen in light of the so-called iron triangle phenomenon, comprising Keidanren, the METI and the Liberal Democratic Party. It is important not to separate this overall stance from Japan's opposition to making compliance

measures under the Kyoto Protocol legally binding because, according to the METI, strict measures could be counterproductive to progress under the Protocol. Indeed, it is up to future climate negotiations to decide whether to make compliance measures legally binding (METI 2003).

3.1. What Is the Link Between the Problem of Fairness Under the Kyoto Targets and the Japanese Government's Initial Reluctance to Ambitious Carbon Emission Reductions?

The “problem of fairness in Kyoto Protocol’s emission reduction targets” (henceforth problem of fairness) has been an enduring challenge since the Kyoto Protocol targets were set in 1997, and was a major reason why Japan unintentionally delayed the announcement of CNN policy until October 2020. It refers to the current situation where the Kyoto Protocol requires certain countries to comply with emission reduction targets, while some industrialised economies, such as the US and China, have not made legally binding commitments.

Since the early 2000s, influential stakeholders in Japanese climate policymaking (notably the METI, the MoE and Keidanren) have been raising concerns about the problem of fairness, with increasing coherence and consistency. In 2003, the METI released a comprehensive report on sustainable future under the United Nations Framework on Climate Change Convention (UNFCCC), stating that insufficient attention was given to this problem during climate negotiations. In 2004, the MoE published a 116-page report, asserting that this problem was a high-profile topic in the drafting of the Kyoto targets and in UNFCCC negotiations. Despite the divergence between these statements, there are points of convergence between METI (2003) and MoE (2004). For example, the Kyoto Protocol places unnecessary costs on Japan alone and, in the words of METI’s Environmental Committee, while it is essential to maintain “the fairness in burden-sharing within Japan,” the Protocol should avoid placing unnecessary costs on Japan in the future (METI 2003, p. 32). In particular, Keidanren’s position in this regard is no different, calling for increased attention to major concerns such as the problem of fairness and how to ensure that large industrialised emitters make a genuine and unequivocal commitment to the Kyoto Protocol.

Therefore, in several climate negotiations, one of Japan’s key negotiating positions was that large industrialised emitters (especially China and the US) should make a clear and fair commitment to the Kyoto Protocol. Add this position to the problem of fairness and one of the reasons for the Japanese government’s initial resistance to ambitious carbon emission reductions becomes obvious. Japanese negotiators made this resolute position clear in a surprising way at a meeting of environment ministers and senior officials during one of the opening plenary sessions of the 16th session of the Conference of the Parties (COP16 or Cancun 2010). Echoing what Sakihito Ozawa (Japan’s Environment Minister) told reporters before leaving for the 2009 Copenhagen climate talks (Reuters 2009), Japanese negotiators made clear beyond doubt what Tokyo had emphasising in the months leading to COP16. Without relegating Japan’s basic negotiating position, and thus its immediate future position, these negotiators emphasised that Japan would not ratify Kyoto Protocol’s second commitment period unless big industrialised emitters, notably China and the US, made clear commitments to numerical targets (MoFA 2010, 2010a; UNFCCC 2010).

Japanese negotiators advocated for establishing a new, fair and effective framework that is binding on all major economies, citing the Kyoto Protocol as an ineffective emission reduction instrument because it only covered 27% of global emissions in 2008 (MoFA 2010, 2010a; UNFCCC 2010). In the words of Jun Arima (METI representative), “Japan will not inscribe its target under the Kyoto protocol on any conditions or under any circumstances” (The Guardian 2010, para. 5). Akira Yamada (MoFA representative) therefore suggested the need for “a form of words” that is unsatisfactory but “not unacceptable” to all (The Guardian 2010a, para. 7). About a year later, Takehiro Kano (Director of Climate Change Division within the MoFA), dismissing as unfounded a report in the Nikkei newspaper that Tokyo urged other signatories to support its desire to be exempted from this commitment, insisted on Japan’s commitment to cut emissions by 6% during the first commitment period (Reuters 2011).

Reflecting Keidanren’s longstanding insistence, the Japanese negotiators’ advocacy ultimately contributed to Japan’s announcement at COP18 (Doha 2012). In the announcement, Japan clearly

stated its withdrawal from the second commitment period of the Kyoto Protocol, but not from the Protocol itself. Japanese negotiators affirmed that Japan “aims to establish a fair and effective framework” involving all countries, but will not participate in the second commitment period – if it “does not lead to the establishment of such a new framework” (MoFA 2012, p. 9). Keidanren (2012, paras. 3-4), recalled its longstanding call for “an equitable and truly effective international framework” that requires responsible participation by major emitters, emphasising this point in its “policy proposal towards COP18” and noted that COP18 “presents the first COP opportunity to discuss the new framework.” Put simply, in line with Keidanren’s advocacy, Japanese negotiators reaffirmed Japan’s commitment to continue its ambitious emission reduction efforts beyond 2012.

3.2. Why Did the Japanese Business Sector Initially Resist the Possibility of Ambitious Carbon Emission Reductions?

The Japanese business sector initially resisted the possibility of CNN policy or ambitious carbon emission reductions at any point before October 2020, partly because Keidanren, which represents the business sector comprising climate-forcing assets owners and climate-vulnerable assets owners, had consistently opposed the introduction of regulatory schemes such as the Emissions Trading Scheme (ETS), carbon tax and voluntary ETS, fearing that they would become mandatory. Despite the importance of regulatory schemes for achieving carbon neutrality, Keidanren argued that these schemes would not only hinder impose a direct economic burden on businesses, but also discourage important innovations needed for rapid emission reductions (Keidanren 2017, p. 13). Keidanren also emphasised that the schemes should be fundamentally reviewed in a way that view opposition not as an obstacle but as a constructive option towards a low-carbon society.

Nevertheless, in 2005, the MoE launched the Japan’s Voluntary Emissions Trading Scheme (JVETS). With the JVETS in sight, together with the Kyoto Protocol Target Achievement Plan, the Japanese government approved financial incentives for business operators in March 2008. The financial incentives specifically benefit business operators that can demonstrate voluntary emissions reduction activities because one of JVETS’s goals is accumulation of knowledge and experience on voluntary participation in GHG reduction activities (MoE 2009). Note that the term business operation refers to business entities that have developed a voluntary action plan and subject to evaluation and verification by a government-accredited body (MoE 2008). Furthermore, given the importance of establishing a new international legally binding framework that is “fair and effective,” the Japanese government’s position is not based on narrow national interests or business calculations (MoFA 2010, para. 3). But due to the government’s concern that imposing new regulations on large emitters could lead to “excessive interference” in business operations and investments (MoE 2012, p. 6), this position appeared to be closely linked to its stance on domestic ETS as of 2010.

In 2010, the MoE Committee and the METI Committee separately discussed the potential of regulatory schemes, focusing on the pros and cons of the ETS. The MoE wanted to introduce the ETS, but the METI opposed this particular scheme and ultimately the government was unable to introduce the scheme on a national basis. In his presentation at a virtual seminar held in January 2022, Professor Toshi Arimura (a member of the MoE Committee in 2010) told attendees that he was invited by the Japanese government to clarify how Japan can address key concerns expressed by the business sector. According to Arimura (2022), regarding the fact that “we faced opposition from the Japanese Industries,” “my voice was not heard” by the government. This statement can be read from several perspectives. For example, one would be inclined to think that Arimura conveyed this statement to a parliament less enthusiastic about what he has to say. However, it is clear that this is not the case, as the Japanese government actually invited Arimura for advice.

3.3. How Has the Term Climate Crisis Contributed to the Need for CNN Policy?

The framing of climate change as a climate crisis was an important motivation for Japan to announce its CNN policy. The 2006 MoE white paper clearly suggested for the first time that Japanese decisionmakers should raise their understanding of climate change to the level of a climate crisis if they are to further substantiate their commitment to combating global warming. Less than two

decades later, one reading of the MoE's position on the climate crisis framing is clearly clear. In fact, since the biodiversity crisis is a consequence of climate change and "may be called a climate crisis" (p. 6), it is essential to recognise that "crisis conditions such as climate change" and "loss of biodiversity" are "inseparably connected to our own lifestyles" in the pursuit of convenience (MoE 2020, p. 17). Meanwhile, while inadequate response to species extinction – one of today's climate change problems – has implications for food and health security (United Nations Environment Program 2019), CNN policies and global warming countermeasures should be approached as real economic growth opportunities. Since these framings are no longer a cost for companies but a source of competitiveness (Council on Global Warming [CGW] 2008; Prime Minister's Office of Japan [PMOJ] 2008; Government of Japan 2019; MoE 2008, 2022), they have apparently replaced the former hegemonic METI-led framing of ambitious climate action as an economic burden (Koppenborg & Hanssen 2021).

As of June 2023, a search for the term "climate crisis" in the METI search box yielded 135 documents in which various combinations of climate change, crisis and this phrase were used or implied (see <https://t.ly/dYNX>). Nevertheless, the number of times climate crisis is mentioned on the MoE website far exceeds the number of times the phrase is mentioned on the websites of Keidanren, the METI and the MoFA. We believe that the framing of climate change as a climate crisis may have contributed greatly to the announcement of the CNN policy. Even before the topic of setting CNN as a policy issue became front-page news in Japan and abroad, key stakeholders (e.g., Keidanren, the MoE, the METI, the MoFA) have resorted to using the term climate crisis as a tactic to draw attention to the issue of setting ambitious CNN targets as a national priority. Meanwhile, unlike the METI and the MoFA, the MoE adopted the term climate crisis in some of its white papers, but these ministries did not identify specific ways in which they articulate different discourses on climate change (Koppenborg & Hanssen 2021).

The climate crisis framing reminds us of Prime Minister Yasuo Fukuda's statement at the CGW inaugural meeting, a notable milestone in the history of climate crisis framing in Japan. Like the comment by UN Secretary-General António Guterres, at the 2019 Climate Action Summit, emphasising the need to move closer to a state of carbon neutrality by stopping "the climate crisis before it stops us," Fukuda recalled the growing "sense of crisis" about global warming at home and abroad (PMOJ 2008a, para. 3). Indeed, the international community "must share the sense of crisis caused by global warming" and a sense of urgency that a low-carbon society must be established as soon as possible as the only way out of this crisis (CGW 2008, p. 2). Because how people think and talk about climate change influences public attitudes and policies, this framing of climate crisis should be seen as one of the early efforts in Japan to present a unified position and resolve that climate change is a climate crisis. It should also be seen as one of the precursors to the announcement of the CNN policy.

This framing has also attracted attention at bilateral meetings and multilateral fora. In May 2022, the US Secretary of Energy and Japan's Minister of Economy, Trade and Industry held a meeting and acknowledged the need for bilateral cooperation as one way to address the climate crisis, now an existential crisis for the entire international community. Exactly one year later, the G7 Hiroshima Summit in Japan was the latest high-level gathering where the term climate crisis was mentioned in relation to achieving a carbon-neutral state by 2050. Prime Minister Fumio Kishida attended the Summit where participants agreed on the importance of deepening interstate cooperation, not only for an integrated "understanding of energy security, climate crisis and geopolitical risks" but also as a practical "response to climate crisis" (MoFA 2023, para. 3). He expressed his intention to lead discussions on climate crisis at future climate negotiations such as COP28. There are important constructs to this intention, which may be described as objective but are not necessarily based on empirical evidence. Of particular importance among these constructs is the concern expressed by eminent scientists (such as Japanese-born Nobel Prize winner in Physics Dr. Syukuro Manabe) about "the world crisis, which is climate" (The Economist 2021, para. 1). Related to this, many parliamentarians have presumably embraced the climate crisis framing (Koppenborg & Hanssen 2021) with a view to playing a leading role in matters of global CNN initiatives and this facilitated

the Japanese government's symbolic declaration of a climate emergency in November 2020. In this light, the CNN policy should help to restore Japan's early leadership in climate governance, especially now that the country is forging ahead with technology innovation to lead the energy transition.

3.4. Why Did the Japanese Government Changed Its Reluctant Stance and Announced CNN Policy in October 2020?

In no particular order, the political leadership of former Prime Minister Yoshihide Suga and pressure from the international community are two important factors that must be considered when seeking answers to this question. A high-ranked METI official (in charge of CNN policy) affirmed as much in an informal interview/conversation conducted by one of the authors of this study (a native Japanese) in December 2022. This official is clearly well-versed in the latest developments in Japan's CNN policy world. Ohta (2021) argues that the interaction of domestic and international factors can explain the announcement of Japan's CNN policy, and our study contextualises these factors in terms of climate politics, vis-à-vis the problem of fairness, the business sector's stance and the climate crisis framing.

When it comes to getting serious about political leadership at a time when it is becoming increasingly important, both Yoshihide Suga and the late Shinzo Abe admittedly did their best during their tenure, at least with regard to CNN as an important political agenda. Five weeks and a few days after Suga took office as prime minister, he officially informed the Japanese public of Japan's ambitious CNN policy. Similarly, one month after his re-election in 2012, Abe promised that his administration will achieve two key targets before COP19 in November 2013 and that Japan will once again contribute to global warming countermeasures, especially by fully utilising Japanese climate technology innovation. These targets are a zero-based review of the 25% emission reduction target and the pursuit of a proactive diplomatic climate strategy. At COP19, Environment Minister Mr. Ishihara reported that the government had already initiated the zero-base review and that work on a diplomatic climate strategy was underway. Keidanren (2013) hopes that the proactive diplomatic strategy will be organically linked to its "Commitment to a Low Carbon Society" and makes several recommendations on global warming countermeasures from a long-term perspective, taking full account of economic growth and Japan's advanced technologies into full consideration.

With regard to pressure from the international community, it may be related to a variety of important international policy initiatives (e.g., 2015 Paris Agreement, 2015 Task Force on Climate-related Financial Disclosures and 2018 Intergovernmental Panel for Climate Change special report). Taking a cue from these initiatives, businesses and local governments in the West started taking voluntary emission reduction actions; thereafter, their Japanese peers emulated this voluntary behaviour (Kameyama, 2021, 2021b).

Several authors have pointed out that in the past, and in the face of global pressure, the Japanese government has generally tended to emulate US policy behaviour in key policy areas such as climate policymaking (see, e.g., Kameyama 2021a, 2021b; Koppenborg & Hanssen 2021). For these authors, the announcement of CNN policy is more a reflection of normative pressure from the US and the wider international community than a reflection of strong voices within Japan seeking to pursue ambitious climate policy. This normative pressure is one possible decipherment of the possibility that the Suga administration was diplomatically pressured to announce the CNN policy. Indeed, whenever Environment Minister Shinjiro Koizumi met with John Kerry (currently serving as the first-ever US Special Presidential Envoy for Climate), the message from Washington was clear: Japan needs to reduce its emissions by at least 50% by 2030" in order to meet the 1.5°C target required by the Paris Agreement. For experts familiar with the situation in the US, it is true that Washington demanded the 50% reduction target very forcefully and put "strong pressure on Japan" because it expects Tokyo to play a benchmark role (Kanechi & Komoda 2021).

While we would like to believe that Japan's tendency to emulate US climate policy action is true, such a tendency cannot and should not be taken at face value. Indeed, it is crucial to acknowledge that Japan no longer takes unnecessary cues from US policy action and is now a leading advocate of

CNN in its own right. In this regard, Japanese generally believe that the terms “sense of leadership” and “leadership attributes” are not only culturally defined but also high context matters that are absolutely inseparable from consensus-building, a key decision-making process that is traditional and of paramount importance in Japan. In short, recent developments in several aspects of global warming countermeasures suggest that Japan’s commitment to leadership remain on a par with those of peer countries. For example, in addition to Japan’s impressive track record in energy efficiency and its potential to become a leader in the global energy transition (Ohta & Barrett 2023), innovative research and development programmes have been commissioned to support the advancement of climate technologies with the aim of achieving CNN by 2050 (see, e.g., the websites of National Institute for Environmental Studies, Institute for Global Environmental Strategies, Research Institute of Innovative Technology for the Earth, Japan Climate Initiative, METI, MoE and especially Global Zero Emission Research Center in Japan).

4. Discussion

To begin with, any future analysis focusing on Japan’s CNN policy announcement as an important policy shift would be incomplete without a closer consideration of the key contexts discussed in the previous pages, namely Keidanren or the business sector’s stance on the problem of fairness, CGW’s sense of climate crisis and the reasons why the Japanese government initially resisted announcing a CNN policy but ultimately promulgated this policy in October 2020.

In their news-style coverage of the CNN policy, Kanechi and Komoda (2020, 2021, 2021a) open up the policy shift in a way that has not been done before. They do so after following the “behind-the-scenes” politics of CNN policymaking in the months leading up to October 2020. Kanechi and Komoda, citing a source familiar with the inner workings of the Suga administration, are careful to insightfully point out that senior officials close to the administration have indicated that setting a clear and ambitious CNN policy would not only impress Washington, but would also serve as an integral part of climate diplomacy. These authors mention that Suga’s willingness to recourse to diplomacy “in times of trouble” is good for the implementation of climate policy, especially given the interagency tensions between the METI and the MoE. What Kanechi and Komoda (and other authors, e.g., Maltais 2014; Yamada 2021) do not explain is the role of climate politics (when interpreted in terms of the problem of fairness, the business sector’s stance, the climate crisis framing and the timing of CNN policy), including how the first two contributed to the delay in promulgating this policy in Japan. Climate politics can be explained in particular in relation to the timing of the CNN announcement in October 2020.

Suga’s announcement of the CNN policy (or an ambitious carbon emission reduction policy) in October 2020 was deliberately timed. With the exception of Ohta (2021), this particular timing has not yet received sufficient attention in the literature. Nevertheless, it is reasonable to view the timing as a landmark effort to properly align Japan’s climate concerns (and/or interests) with the global CNN agenda. This is to say that political leadership and pressure from the international community complement Japan’s intent to further contribute to the broader vision of a global CNN society. This perspective reinforces the peculiarity of the timing of Suga’s surprising policy shift, which may be simultaneously viewed as not so surprising given Japan’s penchant for taking a leading role in matters of CNN. This penchant fits well with the UNFCCC’s call for signatory countries to join the second commitment period, especially before COP26 in October 2021 and of course afterwards, in order to maintain the momentum to achieve a carbon-neutral society by 2050. That said, Suga’s policy shift should be seen as compensating for the Japanese government’s decision not to participate in the Kyoto Protocol’s second commitment period – as discussed in Section 3.1.

The timing of this policy shift was no coincidence. It was clearly necessary, given the Liberal Democratic Party’s (LDP) flagging approval ratings, and one of its objectives would have been to strengthen Suga’s political leadership and boost his political visibility within the LDP. Coupled with criticism of Suga’s response to the coronavirus crisis (an unfortunate [political] crisis he inherited from his predecessor), the timing is all the more urgent and compelling.

This policy shift can also be interpreted against the backdrop of Suga's political profile. While there is no evidence of Suga's track record of active engagement on climate change issues during the Abe administration, he promoted the export of Japanese coal-fired power plants during the same period (Kanechi & Komoda 2020; Uiko 2022). Unsurprisingly, coming from a pro-fossil fuel political background, such promotional advocacy suggests that the CNN policy announcement was intended as the centerpiece of Suga's first policy statement, but also a perfect strategy to project a positive image of his administration both at home and abroad. On the other hand, claims that Suga lacked a track record should be taken with a grain of salt, as he served as Chief Cabinet Secretary and government spokesman in the Abe administration from 2012 to 2020. Suga likely had privileged access to and/or knowledge of climate policy-related documents produced by the relevant ministries, even before such documents became public knowledge.

Still, important questions remain about the policy shift. Ohta and Barrett (2023) question why Japan has not taken a leadership role in curbing global warming, noting that Japan has demonstrated a degree of intransigence around deep decarbonisation. In some respects, these questions reflect long-term factors that preceded Abe (Victor et al. 2017) and *further complicated by inter-ministry conflict and the often-rotating prime ministership* (Cothorn & Hasegawa 2023). Even taking these factors into account, it is clear that Abe has made robust climate mitigation a low priority, coupled with his administration's policy of lowering domestic energy prices at the expense of an ambitious climate policy (Incerti & Lipsy 2018). Incerti and Lipsy go on to argue that between 2012 and 2020, various administrations prioritised economic growth over environmental issues and as a result prioritised the bureaucratic influence of the METI over the MoE. During this period, Abe was cautious about making certain statements about CNN because business leaders may become impatient in situations where such statements could politically undermine business decisions; hence, it is not news that Abe consulted with business executives in advance (Bartlett 2021).

While we hope that our discussion in the previous pages (section 3.1 to 3.4) answers some of these questions, Ohta and Barrett's evidence regarding Japan's intransigence is at best partial. Before discussing this further, it is worth mentioning that Japan has long been reluctant to set significant emission reduction targets (Kameyama 2021, 2021a). It is thus not at all surprising that Japan's decarbonisation effort has been identified with the Fossil of the Day Award at almost every UN Climate Change Conference (Asahi Shimbun 2021), and the most recent one was "awarded" at COP27 in Egypt for Japan's role as a major funder of oil, gas and coal projects (Climate Action Network 2022). Nevertheless, despite the reputation of Japan, and indeed other major countries, for not doing enough in terms of rapid decarbonisation, Japan's announcement of CNN policy is still commendable. Looking back, among major industrialised countries and interstate institutions, the EU, the United Kingdom, Japan and the US announced their CNN policies in November 2019, December 2019, October 2020 and January 2021 respectively.

Since at least 2008, Japan's efforts to implement a CNN policy have been anything but intransigent. In fact, if the government had followed the advice of Prime Minister Fukuda, who chaired the inaugural meeting of the CGW (also known as the Panel on Low Carbon Society – established in 2008 to discuss how to achieve a low-carbon society), criticisms like the "fossil award" could have been avoided. In attendance at the meeting were experts such as Junko Edahiro (a CGW member and one of Japan's leading environmental journalists), Nobutaka Machimura and Ichiro Kamoshita (Chief Cabinet Secretary and Minister of the Environment, respectively). At the meeting, several verbal "battles" were fought between "representatives of the business and industry" and "our side – the representatives of citizens" (Edahiro 2017, para. 16). Supporting Fukuda's proposal that Japan should aim to attain a 60-80% emission reduction target, as a long-term goal, by the year 2050, the representatives of citizens advocated setting emission reduction targets necessary to achieve a low-carbon society (CGW 2008). But business advocates, concerned about the potential negative impacts on economic competitiveness, sought to set the lowest possible target. Although the 80% emission reduction has been supported by successive governments since 2008, it was only in May 2016 that the government approved strategic action towards achieving this particular goal. It took another four years and few months for Japan to formally communicate this goal to the UNFCCC in

the form of the October 2020 CNN policy. In other words, Suga's formal declaration of this policy can be considered an updated version of the 80% emission reductions target.

However, it is not difficult to find complaints of intransigence in the discourse on Japan's CNN vision, most notably in relation to taking responsibility for leading roles. To further strengthen our argument against this complaint, we would like to highlight the MoE and the CGW, which have made preliminary but pioneering contributions along the lines of CNN by 2050. In particular, CGW (2008, p. 4) states: as an environmentally advanced country, Japan should exercise "leadership" by establishing "a foothold for a low-carbon society faster than any other country". The keywords here are leadership and low-carbon society, but in terms of socio-political and public responsibility or burden, the CNN policy announcement and efforts to achieve carbon neutrality are not without cost to the business sector and, in effect, Japan as a country. In this reasoning, Keidanren has traditionally resisted, and to some extent still resists, national climate policies that are deemed too ambitious (Kameyama 2017; 2021; 2021a; InfluenceMap 2020). At the same time, Keidanren managed to turn from an outspoken opponent to an ardent supporter of the CNN policy, in parallel with Japan's turn from decades of resistance to enthusiastic supporter. That development is not too surprising. Keidanren skilfully practices two-pronged advocacy on behalf of climate-forcing assets and owners of climate-vulnerable assets. This is a matter of prioritising the interests of each group of owners, depending on the prevailing circumstances at a given time.

Equally important is to counter this complaint with an important observation. The CNN policy line was a predetermined strategy that slowly but steadily gained momentum during the Abe administration (Kanechi & Komoda 2020; Ohta 2021). One example is the fifth meeting on Japan's long-term strategy under the Paris Agreement, held at Abe's office in April 2019. At this meeting, Abe stated that global warming countermeasures are no longer a cost for companies but a source of competitiveness, and insisted on the need for Japan to work resolutely to realise "the ultimate vision of a carbon-free society" (Government of Japan 2019, para. 5). He also added that Japan should take the lead in making a global commitment and pass on this characteristic to the next generation and the generations after that.

5. Conclusions

While the vision of CNN by 2050 has been high on the political agenda for a number of years, it was not until around 2019/20 that a strong commitment to CNN became a serious candidate for further policy action. For several important reasons, the Japanese government changed its stance and announced an ambitious CNN policy in October 2020. Our curiosity about this policy shift led us to analyse Japan's climate policy documents and we found four key findings.

On the one hand, pressure from the international community and the political leadership of former Prime Minister Yoshihide Suga are two important factors that contributed to the process leading to CNN policy announcement. The framing of climate change as a climate crisis by the CGW and in particular the MoE was also an important motivation for Japan to formally announce this policy.

On the other hand, one reason why Japan unintentionally delayed the announcement of CNN policy until October 2020 was the concern of Japanese climate stakeholders about the problem of fairness in Kyoto Protocol's emission reduction targets. This delay was also due to Keidanren's (or business sector) consistent opposition to the introduction of regulatory schemes such as the ETS.

In retrospect, it must be pointed out that the business community and government agencies were increasingly receptive to CNN during the Abe administration, which was replaced by the Suga administration in September 2020. If Suga had approached CNN as a political item requiring urgent policy change, but refused to make the important policy changes, the Japanese government would not have declared CNN as an ambitious policy in October 2020. In short, Abe and Suga, in our opinion, are "prime ministers of action" in that they have shown leadership in making CNN as an important political agenda for Japan.

Reflecting Keidanren's stance, Japan insists that major emitters (notably China and the US) should clearly and fairly express their commitment to the Kyoto Protocol. In some respects, this

insistence was unavoidable due to the problem of fairness. It was also due to the alignment of interests between Keidanren and the Japanese government with regard to CNN-focused business calculations. In other words, Japan's delayed response to CNN policymaking cannot and should not be separated from Keidanren's earlier resistance to potential CNN policy on the grounds that it was too ambitious.

More to the point, as the CNN policy shift that characterised the Suga administration, the four key findings could prove to be an integral part of the debate to further elucidate the politics behind the carbon neutrality and net zero policies in Japan and internationally. At the same time, future researchers should not overlook important issues. For example, they should delve deeper into the reasons why successive prime ministers (a total of nine since the 1997 Kyoto Protocol) were cautious about promulgating CNN as a formal policy agenda until Suga boldly changed the policy narrative. In this context, Japan had six prime ministers between 2006 and 2012 (Abe 2006; Yasuo Fukuda 2007; Tarō Asō 2008; Yukio Hatoyama 2009; Naoto Kan 2010; Yoshihiko Noda 2011; Abe 2012). With the exception of Abe, who held office from 2012 to 2020, each prime minister was in office for about one year. Given that there is therefore room for future research to significantly contribute in terms of the effects of short-term administrations (which are by no means favourable to policy concretisation), readers will find this study innovative, fascinating and insightful. In conclusion, future researchers studying the 2050 global decarbonisation agenda should be able to easily replicate our work.

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