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Sound environmental policy to come back

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This July is the 50th anniversary of the establishment of the Ministry of the Environment of Japan (inaugurated as Environment Agency in 1971). It also marks the 30th year since the inauguration of the Global Environmental Department of the ministry. As the first Director of the department, I was interviewed for the compilation of the anniversary publication. To prepare for the interview, I pulled out my old notes to call up my memories of the early days of the ministry.

Currently, the environmental policy of Japan has fallen far behind the other leading countries. Its backward-looking attitude has been criticized at COP meetings and awarded the “Fossils of the Day” twice! However, until the 1980s, Japan was a top runner in this field. On this occasion, let me list up some of the most important environmental events related to the government of Japan.

(1) Combat and win over serious industrial pollutions

As the result of the high-speed economic development after WWII, Japan experienced decades of serious industrial pollution including Minamata disease (mercury poisoning), Itai-Itai disease (cadmium poisoning), and Yokkaichi asthma. The government of Japan enacted the Basic Act for Environmental Pollution Control in 1967 and established the Environmental Agency in 1971, launching full-scale efforts to combat serious pollutions. By the mid-1970s, Japan was able to retrieve clean air and water, and in 1977 OECD highly evaluated Japan’s achievement stating that Japan won the combat with public pollutions. This example showed that massive anti-pollution measures did not interfere with favorable economic growth.

(2) Strongly supported the east and southeast Asian countries in the form of environmental cooperation

Based on the successful anti-pollution experience and backed by financial power in those days, Japan implemented extensive environmental cooperation to China and Southeast Asian countries. Especially to China, Japan provided a huge amount of support, far larger than one trillion yen promised at the Earth Summit in 1972. At the same time, Japan sent out experienced local government officials to developing countries as part of environmental cooperation in human resources.

(3) Champion the establishment of the SD concept

Japan made a great contribution in establishing the concept of sustainable development which is the most important philosophical pillar of today's world. The World Commission on Environment and Development, chaired by Gro Harlem Brundtland of Norway, publicized the report entitled "Our common future" (Brundtland Report) in 1987 in Tokyo. The government of Japan proposed the establishment of the commission in 1982 and funded it. It is the honor of the Japanese people that Japan's contribution opened a path to today's SDGs.

(4) Establishment of the Kyoto Protocol

The Kyoto Protocol was adopted in 1997 at COP3 held in Kyoto, Japan. The government of Japan made an utmost effort to wrap up UNFCCC negotiations setting up numerical targets while introducing the Kyoto mechanisms (emission trading, CDM, JI) to achieve the targets. The Kyoto Protocol provided the first concrete step toward emission reduction to prevent global warming.

I am very proud of these Japan's contributions to progress global climate negotiations, starting from the establishment of the Brundtland Committee in 1984, down to the adoption of SDGs in 2015.

However, Japan's environment policy went into a dark ages from 2012 when the second Abe administration started. Abenomics, overly emphasizing economic development, did not pay any attention to climate change issues even after the Paris Agreement in 2015. During the 7 years and 8 months of the second Abe administration, Japan's environmental and energy policy did not make a

progress in the right direction, inviting criticism from NGOs and sensible business persons.

It was the Suga administration (succeeding the Abe administration in 2020) that made a breakthrough by declaring that Japan will achieve carbon-neutral by 2050. The declaration drastically changed Japan's energy policy, and a domino phenomenon toward decarbonization started in local communities as well as in business entities.

The actual impact of this domino phenomenon is yet to be determined but there is hope. Prime Minister Suga promised at the Leaders Summit on Climate convened by President Biden in April 2021 that Japan will reduce GHGs to 46% by 2030, making additional efforts to 50% below the 2013 level. Now that the international commitment was made, Japan's environmental policy will head in this direction. Then Japan's business community as a whole will become serious about the decarbonizing economy. I believe Japan will resume sound environmental policies in due course.