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

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Abstract: This study answers four research questions by contextualising the background to Japan's "carbon neutrality and net-zero" (CNN) policy, which was announced in October 2020, and identifying important changes in Japanese climate policy between 1990 and 2020. What is the link between the problem of fairness under the Kyoto targets and the Japanese government's initial reluctance towards 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 change its reluctant stance and announce the CNN policy in October 2020? 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] it is possible that the policy could have been announced sooner, but concern among Japanese climate stakeholders about the problem of fairness in the Kyoto Protocol's emission reduction targets likely impeded such an announcement; and [iv] this concern underpinned Keidanren's (or the business sector's) consistent opposition to the introduction of regulatory schemes. These results emerge for the first time in a study of Japan's carbon neutrality, 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



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1. Introduction

Global warming is recognised on a global scale, especially with regard to the political character of the "carbon neutrality and net-zero" (CNN) agenda and its intersection with the Kyoto Protocol's emission reduction targets (henceforth, the Kyoto targets) [1–3]. The Kyoto Protocol aims to curb emissions of greenhouse gases (GHGs), and its central feature is a set of binding emission targets for industrialised countries to reduce their emissions of carbon dioxide and other GHGs during the first commitment period (2008–2012) compared to their respective 1990 emission levels [3]. The following countries, for example, are required to reduce their emissions in accordance with the agreed targets: 8% for the European Union (EU), 7% for the United States (US) and 6% for Poland, Hungary, Canada and Japan, respectively.

On a national scale, Japan, along with New Zealand, the Russian Federation and Ukraine, rejected new targets for the Kyoto Protocol's second commitment period (2013–2020), despite the fact that these countries participated in the first commitment period [3]. On the other

hand, 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.

Afterwards, the CNN policy announced by the Japanese government in October 2020 was broadly consistent with the basic expectations of the Kyoto Protocol. There is a need to focus on the national level in this context because most research on GHGs and carbon neutrality has so far focused on the global level [4]. With this in mind, Japan is a case in point because the business sector, for example, has influenced policy by presenting alternatives to the government's position on CNN targets [2,5]. Furthermore, various perspectives on climate policies and responses have been discussed with explicit references to Japan (e.g., [1,6–14]). Yamada [15] and Ohta and Barrett [3] deserve special mention in relation to Japan's announcement of its CNN policy. 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 earlier 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 towards 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 change its reluctant stance and announce its 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 and offers discussion. Section 5 is the conclusion.

2. Materials and Methods

We focus on four key climate policy stakeholders in Japan in order to extract publicly available documents. These four are the Ministry of Economy, Trade and Industry (METI); the Ministry of the Environment (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 1400 leading Japanese companies. These stakeholders have had a significant impact on Japanese climate policymaking, and their websites contain important information regarding key terms, particularly the climate crisis, the CNN policy and Japan's decarbonisation agenda. As a result, these terms were used as search queries to retrieve relevant materials.

This focus aided us in compiling a list of policy-related documents pertinent to answering the four aforementioned research questions. The number of times the term “climate crisis” is mentioned on the MoE website, for example, is much greater than the number of times this term is mentioned on the websites of Keidanren, the METI and the MoFA. A search for the term “climate crisis” in the METI search box as of June 2023 yielded 135 documents with various combinations of “climate change” and “climate crisis”. For an overview of documents that were analysed, the reader is encouraged to visit the websites of the MoE (<https://shorturl.at/amwyI>, accessed on 15 July 2023), the METI (<https://t.ly/dYNX>, accessed on 15 July 2023), the MoFA (<https://t.ly/ngCZ4>, accessed on 15 July 2023) and Keidanren (<https://t.ly/Bx7ct>, accessed on 15 July 2023).

Also, data was collected from databases (such as the CiNii research platform provided by Japan's National Institute of Informatics) and other open-source policy documents. 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 a paper by Nakano et al. [16], who participated in formulating the CNN policy of a municipality in Japan. Such participation indicates the presence of a great deal 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.

The selected documents were initially scanned to eliminate those that did not meet the main document inclusion criterion, namely the four research questions. The documents that appeared to satisfy this criterion were then thoroughly read.

This study uses narrative analysis to contextually understand the background of the CNN policy announcement and to integrate information from related literature, which it provides in the discussion section. In the narrative analysis of documents, the study did not predetermine patterns by categorising or coding major themes, as is commonly done, but rather allowed patterns to emerge on their own, taking into account the relationships between the four stakeholders that formed the basis of the analysis. Narrative analysis is a genre of analytical frames for providing diverse—but equally meaningful and substantial—interpretations and conclusions by focusing on distinct situations and circumstances [17]. These include, but are not limited to, how existing works have arranged their explanations, as well as the functions and key messages they provide.

3. Results

As a starting point for this section, it should be noted that, in contrast to the MoE, Keidanren and the METI appear to favour the interests of energy-intensive industries, especially when the so-called iron triangle phenomenon (comprising Keidanren, the METI and the Liberal Democratic Party) is taken into account. This position is largely based on economic interest and appears to parallel an argument made by METI [18]: while Japan opposed making Kyoto Protocol compliance measures legally binding because such a measure could be counterproductive to the protocol's progress, it is up to those engaged in future climate negotiations to decide on this measure.

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 the problem of fairness) has been an enduring challenge since the Kyoto Protocol targets were set in 1997 and was a major reason why Japan delayed the announcement of its CNN policy until October 2020. Noting that we are talking about fairness at the international level, the problem of fairness refers to the current situation, in which 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.

In the case of Japanese climate policymaking, pressure from influential stakeholders (the METI, the MoE and Keidanren, in particular) played an important role, given that these stakeholders have been raising concerns about the problem of fairness since the early 2000s. In 2003, the METI released a comprehensive report on a 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 the METI [18] and the MoE [19]. For example, according to the METI's Environmental Committee, even though the Kyoto Protocol imposes unnecessary costs on Japan, it is not only vital to maintain fairness in

burden-sharing within Japan, but the protocol should also avoid imposing unnecessary costs on Japan in the future [18]. 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 [20], Japanese negotiators made clear beyond doubt what Tokyo had been emphasising in the months leading up to COP16. Without relinquishing Japan's basic negotiating position, and thus its immediate future position, these negotiators emphasised that Japan would not ratify the Kyoto Protocol's second commitment period unless large industrialised emitters, notably China and the US, made clear commitments to numerical targets [21–23].

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 [21–23]. 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 [24]. Therefore, Akira Yamada (the MoFA's representative) suggested the need for a form of words that is unsatisfactory but not unacceptable to all [25]. About a year later, Takehiro Kano (Director of Climate Change Division within the MoFA) insisted on Japan's commitment to cutting emissions by 6% during the first commitment period [26].

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 [27]. Similarly, Keidanren [28] highlighted this point in its policy proposal for COP18, the first COP opportunity to consider a new framework, emphasising its long-standing support for an equitable and truly effective international system requiring responsible participation by large emitters. 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 opposed the notion of CNN policy or ambitious carbon emission reductions before October 2020. The opposition was fuelled in part by Keidanren's stance. Keidanren has 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 [29] argued that these schemes would not only impose a direct economic burden on businesses, but also discourage important innovations needed for rapid emission reductions. 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 Japan's Voluntary Emissions Trading Scheme (JVETS). In light of this scheme, in March 2008, the Japanese government announced financial incentives for business owners. Because one of JVETS's purposes is to accumulate knowledge and experience on voluntary participation in GHG reduction activities, the financial incentives specifically assist business owners who can demonstrate voluntary emission reduction actions [30]. The key point here is that the Japanese government's stance, which emphasised the need to establish a new framework that is fair, effective and legally enforceable on a global scale, is not predicated on limited national interests or business considerations [21]. However, due to the government's concern that imposing new regulations on large emitters could lead to excessive interference in business operations and investments [31], this stance appeared to be closely linked to its stance on the domestic ETS as of 2010. Note that the term "business operation" refers to business entities that have developed a voluntary action plan and are being assessed and verified by a government-accredited agency [32]. 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 [33].

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. In 2006, the MoE white paper stated for the first time that Japanese decisionmakers need to raise their understanding of climate change to the level of a climate crisis if they are to further demonstrate their commitment to tackling global warming. By 2020, the MoE's position on the climate crisis framing is clearer. To be more specific, the MoE [34] (pp. 6, 17) states that because the biodiversity crisis is a result of climate change and "may be called a climate crisis," it is essential to recognise that "crisis conditions such as climate change" and loss of biodiversity are inextricably linked to our own lifestyles in pursuit of convenience. Meanwhile, while an inadequate response to species extinction—one of today's climate change problems—has implications for food and health security [35], 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 [32,36–39], they have apparently replaced the former hegemonic METI-led framing of ambitious climate action as an economic burden [40].

There is a credible basis for this study's claim that framing climate change as a climate crisis may have aided the CNN policy announced in October 2020. Even before the term "climate crisis" became front-page news in Japan and overseas, key stakeholders (e.g., Keidanren, the MoE, the METI, the MoFA) were using this term to draw attention to the subject of setting ambitious CNN targets as a national priority. The term climate crisis was cited significantly more frequently by the MoE than by Keidanren, the METI or the MoFA. The MoE, unlike the METI and the MoFA, adopted "climate crisis" in some of its white papers. However, none of these ministries indicate specific ways in which they articulate various climate change discourses [40].

The climate crisis framing reminds us of Prime Minister Yasuo Fukuda's statement at the inaugural meeting of the Council on Global Warming (CGW). Established in 2008, the CGW, also known as the Panel on Low-Carbon Society, is a key organisation in Japan. Its primary goal is to discuss a range of issues that need to be resolved if Japan is to make a significant contribution to the global decarbonisation agenda. That said, just as UN Secretary-General António Guterres emphasised at the 2019 Climate Action Summit, the need to move closer to a state of carbon neutrality by stopping the climate crisis before it stops us, Fukuda emphasised a growing sense of crisis regarding global warming, both at home and abroad [37]. Indeed, the international community must share the sense of crisis caused by global warming, as well as the necessity to quickly work towards achieving a low-carbon society as the only route out of this crisis [36]. This framing of the climate

crisis should be viewed as one of Japan's early efforts to portray a unified position and perspective that climate change is a climate crisis. It should also be viewed as one of the precursors to the announcement of the CNN policy.

This framing is gaining 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 the climate crisis [41]. He expressed his intention to lead discussions on climate crisis at future climate negotiations such as COP28. There are various important elements to this intention, which may be described as objective but are not necessarily based on empirical evidence. Of particular importance among these elements 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 [42]. In relation to this, many parliamentarians presumably embraced the climate crisis framing, which facilitated the Japanese government's symbolic declaration of a climate emergency in November 2020 [40]. 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 technological innovations 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-ranking METI official (in charge of the CNN policy and well-versed in the latest developments) corroborated this during an informal interview/conversation conducted with one of the authors of this study in December 2022. Ohta [7] 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.

Both Yoshihide Suga and the late Shinzo Abe administrations addressed CNN as an important political agenda. As a point of reflection, between 2006 and 2012, Japan had six prime ministers (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 served from 2012 to 2020, each prime minister served for about a year. Having said that, shortly 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 would achieve two key targets before COP19 in November 2013 and that Japan would once again contribute to global warming countermeasures, especially by fully utilising Japanese climate technology innovation. Focused on achieving carbon neutrality, these targets included a 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 [43] made several long-term recommendations on global warming countermeasures, taking full account of economic growth and Japan's advanced technologies, with the expectation that the proactive diplomatic strategy would be organically linked to Keidanren's policy on commitment to a low carbon society.

With regard to pressure from the international community, it may be related to a variety of important international policy initiatives (e.g., the 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 [2,44].

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., [8,40,44]). For these authors, the announcement of the 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 diplomatic pressure is one possible interpretation of the Suga administration's announcement of its 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 [45].

While we would like to believe that Japan's tendency to emulate US climate policy action is real, such a tendency cannot and should not be taken at face value. Indeed, it is crucial to acknowledge that Japan no longer takes cues from US policy action and is now a leading advocate of CNN in its own right. In this regard, the 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 decisionmaking 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 global energy transition [3], innovative research and development programmes have been commissioned to support the advancement of climate technologies with the aim of achieving CNN by 2050 (e.g., the websites of the National Institute for Environmental Studies, the Institute for Global Environmental Strategies, the Research Institute of Innovative Technology for the Earth, the Japan Climate Initiative, the METI, the MoE and especially the Global Zero Emission Research Centre in Japan).

4. Discussion

To begin, a study 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 preceding pages, namely Keidanren's, 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 eventually promulgated it in October 2020.

Citing a source familiar with the inner workings of the Suga administration, Kanechi and Komoda [45–47] highlighted the fact that senior officials in the administration believed that an ambitious CNN policy would impress Washington and become essential to Japan's climate action. These authors argued that Suga's willingness to use diplomacy in times of trouble was beneficial for climate policy implementation, particularly given interagency disputes between the METI and the MoE. However, Kanechi and Komoda (and other authors, such as Yamada [15] and Maltais [48]) did not explain the role of climate politics (in terms of the problem of fairness, the business sector's stance, the climate crisis framing and the timing of the CNN policy), including how the first two factors contributed to the delay in announcing this policy in Japan.

In other words, both the desire for political leadership and pressure from the international community compelled Suga to announce a CNN policy (or an ambitious carbon emission reduction policy) in October 2020, which nevertheless complemented Japan's

intention to further contribute to the broader vision of a global carbon-neutral society. This announcement is not surprising given Japan's interest in playing a leading role in the global decarbonisation agenda. It 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 needed 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 flagging approval ratings, and one of its objectives would have been to strengthen Suga's political leadership and boost his political visibility within the party. 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 [14,46]. 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 [3] 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 the Abe administration [49] and are further complicated by interagency disputes and the often-rotating prime ministership [50]. 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 [51]. Between 2012 and 2020, various administrations prioritised economic growth over environmental issues, resulting in the METI's increased bureaucratic influence over that of the MoE [51]. During this period, Abe was cautious about making certain statements about CNN because business leaders could 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 [52].

While this study attempts to answer some of these questions (see Sections 3.1–3.4), Ohta and Barrett's [3] evidence regarding Japan's intransigence is at best partial. Before discussing this further, it is worth mentioning that the majority of Japanese citizens, according to a 2020 International Social Survey Programme survey, are unwilling to shoulder the possible socio-economic costs associated with emission reduction [53]. In another separate survey, only the results from Japan revealed a considerable (−8 point) decline in the number of people who are extremely concerned about climate change [54]. On a related note, the Japanese government closed its nuclear reactors following the Fukushima nuclear accidents in 2011 despite maintaining that these facilities helped lower carbon emissions and provide a sufficient supply of energy for the country. Carbon emissions increased during the shutdown, coupled with a reliance on fossil fuels, although they hit a record low in the financial year of 2021. Seven consecutive years of reduction in emissions were highlighted in 2021 by the 5.1% decrease, which partly resulted from the triple factors of the pandemic, slower industrial operations and increased use of renewable energy [2].

However, in practically every UN Climate Change Conference, Japan's decarbonisation efforts have been recognised with the Fossil of the Day Award [55]. The most recent one was "awarded" during COP27 in Egypt in recognition of Japan's considerable investment in coal, gas and oil projects [56], despite the fact that Japan announced its CNN policy in October 2020. However, despite criticisms that major industrialised countries have not acted swiftly enough to decarbonise, Japan's CNN policy was announced at a reasonable time in comparison to these countries. As an illustration, the EU, the United Kingdom, Japan and the US announced CNN policies in November 2019, December 2019, October 2020 and January 2021, respectively.

Japan's efforts to implement a CNN policy have been anything but intransigent since at least 2008; in fact, if the government had followed the recommendations of Prime Minister Fukuda, who chaired the CGW's inaugural meeting, critiques such as 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" [57] (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 [36]. However, 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 a 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 criticism of intransigence in the discourse about Japan's CNN vision, particularly in relation to accepting responsibility for leadership roles. To bolster our case against this critique, we would like to point to the MoE and the CGW, both of which have made preliminary but pioneering contributions towards the goal of CNN by 2050. In particular, CGW [36] (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. Following this reasoning, Keidanren has traditionally resisted, and to some extent still resists, national climate policies that are deemed too ambitious [2,5,6,8]. 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 support.

It is also vital to respond to this critique with an important insight. The CNN policy line was a predetermined strategy that slowly but steadily gained momentum during the Abe administration [7,46]. One example is the fifth meeting regarding 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" [38] (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, it is possible that the policy could have been announced sooner, but concern among Japanese climate stakeholders about the problem of fairness in the Kyoto Protocol's emission reduction targets likely impeded such an announcement. This concern underpinned Keidanren's (or the business sector's) 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 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 carbon neutrality and net zero policies both in Japan and internationally. At the same time, future researchers should not overlook important issues. For example, given Japan's initial reluctance to set significant emission reduction targets (Kameyama 2021, 2021a), researchers 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 conclusion, researchers studying the 2050 global decarbonisation agenda should be able to easily replicate our work.

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