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Considering Climate Realism

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Ongoing policy debates surrounding climate change have brought heightened attention to the concept of "climate realism." While this term is now widely used among various think tanks and experts in the western world, one of its leading proponents, Varun Sivaram of the Council on Foreign Relations, acknowledges the significant negative impacts of climate change but argues that, in reality, the temperature targets set under the Paris Agreement are unlikely to be achieved. He further contends that countries should prioritize realistic climate measures—such as investing in advanced decarbonization technologies like geoengineering, rather than relying solely on renewable energy where they lack a competitive advantage, and strengthening adaptation strategies to rising temperatures—so long as these measures prevent catastrophic damage to their own nations. This way of thinking, known as climate realism, has gradually been spreading even in Europe, which has traditionally led to stringent climate policies, and can be seen as a concept symbolizing a shift in the global direction of climate action.

The term "realism" in climate realism carries a nuance of resistance to, or counterbalance against, the previously dominant "ideal" of achieving net-zero greenhouse gas emissions globally by the middle of this century. Moreover, since countries face diverse political, economic, and social conditions, it is not realistic for all of them to adopt identical clean energy sources or pursue emissions reductions along the same timeline. Thus, climate realism also reflects the reality of international climate politics: that each country should pursue climate policies aligned with its own circumstances and interests.

Several factors have contributed to the growing prominence of climate realism. One major factor is the weakening of the foundations that have traditionally supported international climate action. For example, the withdrawal of the United States under the Donald Trump administration from the Paris Agreement and the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change serves as a symbolic case. Such developments have diminished the importance of international frameworks, leading countries to place greater emphasis on climate policies that prioritize national interests over international cooperation.

A second factor is the rise in energy prices and the accompanying global inflation. This trend has been driven by events such as Russia's invasion of Ukraine, the economic recovery from the

COVID-19 pandemic, and, more recently, the 2026 attacks on Iran by the United States and Israel. Under these circumstances, countries have become more cautious about pursuing aggressive climate measures that could further increase energy costs. This has also contributed to the spread of climate realism. As international political and economic conditions evolve, countries are increasingly prioritizing more pragmatic climate policies that take into account geopolitical interests, national security, and economic rationality, rather than strictly pursuing emission reductions based on internationally shared targets.

That said, the spread of climate realism has also faced considerable criticism. Some argue that it represents an excessive compromise with the status quo, amounting to little more than a form of procrastination that prolongs reliance on fossil fuels without offering fundamental solutions to the worsening climate crisis. Others warn that lowering emissions reduction targets to "realistic" levels could lead to continued increases in greenhouse gas emissions, ultimately exacerbating climate change and increasing economic damage. Given the undeniable reality of rising emissions, such criticisms carry a certain degree of validity.

How, then, might the current situation in the Middle East affect the spread of climate realism? One possible scenario is that it will further reinforce realist tendencies. If instability in Iran disrupts supplies of crude oil and LNG, countries will place even greater emphasis on energy security, prioritizing stable supply above all else. Moreover, if the Strait of Hormuz is effectively blockaded, rising oil and natural gas prices would drive up overall energy costs, increasing burdens on domestic economies and households. As a result, countries may adopt an even more cautious stance toward aggressive emissions reductions, making incremental approaches—i.e., climate realism—more widely accepted.

On the other hand, there is also a scenario in which the current crisis restrains the spread of climate realism. If the de facto blockade of the Strait of Hormuz reinforces the perception that fossil fuels are geopolitically risky and supply is unstable, attention may shift toward the advantages of domestically produced renewable energy. Given the unprecedented nature of this crisis, it may require innovative responses that go beyond conventional approaches. In such a case, the importance of ambitious, ideal-driven climate goals may be reemphasized, potentially leading to a retreat of climate realism.

It should be noted that these two contrasting scenarios may unfold over different time horizons. In the short term, climate realism is likely to gain influence. However, if the importance of long-term energy supply systems and climate action is re-recognized, its momentum may weaken, and climate idealism—based on ambitious goals—could experience a resurgence.

Japan, for its part, has long pursued a balanced energy and climate policy under the principle of "S+3E" (Safety + Energy Security, Economic Efficiency, and Environmental Compatibility), without adhering excessively to idealistic targets. In this sense, climate realism is a relatively

compatible concept for Japan. However, Japan has also placed importance on international cooperation in climate policy through initiatives such as the Asia Zero Emissions Community (AZEC), and thus the nation-first orientation inherent in climate realism is not entirely consistent with its approach. As noted above, the current Middle East crisis could, over the medium to long term, lead to a renewed emphasis on ambitious climate goals. Without being swayed by the current rise of climate realism, Japan should continue to steadily reduce greenhouse gas emissions based on the "S+3E" principle.

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