

Weakness on Warming

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IN LAST year's talks on implementing the Kyoto climate-change treaty, Europeans refused to compromise with the Clinton administration's negotiators. This time around the Bush administration virtually boycotted the talks, which spurred the Europeans to prove their flexibility with concessions to Japan, Canada and Australia. The tweak-America impulse in Europe has left the world with a deal on global warming that, while impressive, excludes the United States, which emits a quarter of the world's greenhouse gases. But European irresponsibility is rivaled by the attitude of the Bush administration.

That attitude wobbles, but its consistent feature is a desire to avoid action. At times the administration has said that the scientific evidence on global warming is not conclusive, even though study after study has found otherwise. At times the administration has emphasized the high cost of action, as though the costs of inaction -- floods, diseases and drought -- were trivial. And at times the administration has seemed to accept that something must be done, but then played clumsily for time -- even though postponement drives up the ultimate cost of action.

The past few days have featured an extreme version of the equivocation strategy. At the weekend summit of industrialized nations in Genoa, Italy, President Bush gave his fellow leaders the impression that he would come up with a global-warming proposal by October, in time for the next international meeting on the issue. But administration officials have since accused the Canadian and French leaders of making up the October target out of "thin air," and have even quibbled about whether U.S. ideas on the subject will amount to a "proposal." It is nine years since the president's father first committed the United States to controlling greenhouse gases. But this administration would have us believe that it's still too soon to expect a coherent position on the subject.

The Kyoto treaty is flawed -- the targets set for the United States are tougher than for other industrialized countries -- and stands no chance of Senate passage in its current form. The Bush administration, nonetheless, could seek to negotiate concessions, as Japan did successfully this week. Alternatively, it could come up with a serious national strategy, which would include tougher fuel standards for sport-utility vehicles and light trucks, caps on carbon emissions at power plants and a system to allow companies that reduce emissions sharply to sell "credits" to others that cannot find a way of doing so at a reasonable cost.

But the administration needs to understand that doing nothing is not an option. Congressional pressure for action on climate change is growing. U.S. companies, which regard some form of legislation as inevitable, want regulatory clarity. And the world's biggest emitter of greenhouse gases cannot stick its head in the sand on this issue without compromising its capacity for international leadership.

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