

G8 talks offer Japanese PM a chance to improve his ratings Fukuda counts on summit to save Earth – and his job

G8 SUMMIT
Bloomberg in Tokyo

Yasuo Fukuda's welcome message to world leaders in Japan this week is that saving the planet is a huge challenge with no time to lose. The same may be true for his job. Japan's prime minister, hosting 20 governments at the Group of Eight summit in Hokkaido, is counting on statesmanship to deflect attention from a series of domestic setbacks. Mr Fukuda was censured by the opposition-controlled upper house of parliament last month, the first time in post-war history for a prime minister. His popularity has dropped by half since he took office in September, prompting criticism from within his ruling Liberal Democratic Party that he lacks a vision for the world's second-largest economy.

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Yasunori Sone, Tokyo's Keio University political scientist

"Japan is a country struggling to find its identity, and the public will welcome Fukuda's presence on an international stage," Yasunori Sone, a political science professor at Tokyo's Keio University. "The G8 summit is one of the best opportunities Fukuda will have." Mr Fukuda's diplomatic efforts are those most appreciated by the public. His popularity rose to 26 per cent ahead of the G8 summit in a Nikkei survey published last Monday, after hitting a low of 21 per cent in May following standoffs with the opposition Democratic Party of Japan. Shortly after his term began, Mr Fukuda had 59 per cent approval in a poll by the same newspaper. Now, those levels of support are reserved for his top summit priority, climate change. The prime minister got a 67 per cent favourable mark for his plan to curb greenhouse gases, exceeding the G8's targets, according to a separate Nikkei newspaper poll

published July 1. Neither survey gave an error margin.

His rising popularity also followed several diplomatic ventures, including the visit of Hu Jintao (胡锦涛) in May, the first by a mainland president in a decade.

"The opposition couldn't force him out and he survived an awful session of parliament," Gerald Curtis, a professor of political science at Columbia University in New York who specialises in Japanese politics, said. "You can't make the mistake of writing Fukuda off."

Mr Fukuda's photo opportunities at the G8 include meetings with US President George W. Bush, German Chancellor Angela Merkel and Russian President Dmitry Medvedev, as well as Mr Hu.

He has invited the most countries ever to the gathering, and will hold talks with heads of state from South Africa, Mexico and South Korea.

"It would be nice if the summit were to cause Fukuda's approval rating to climb," the government's top spokesman, Chief Cabinet Secretary Nobutaka Machimura, said in an interview last Monday in Tokyo. But "we're not hosting the event on the expectation of [such] a boost."

Japan's former foreign minister, Taro Aso, whom Mr Fukuda defeated in the LDP's leadership election in September, said in a speech on June 2 that the country had lost its "competitive edge".

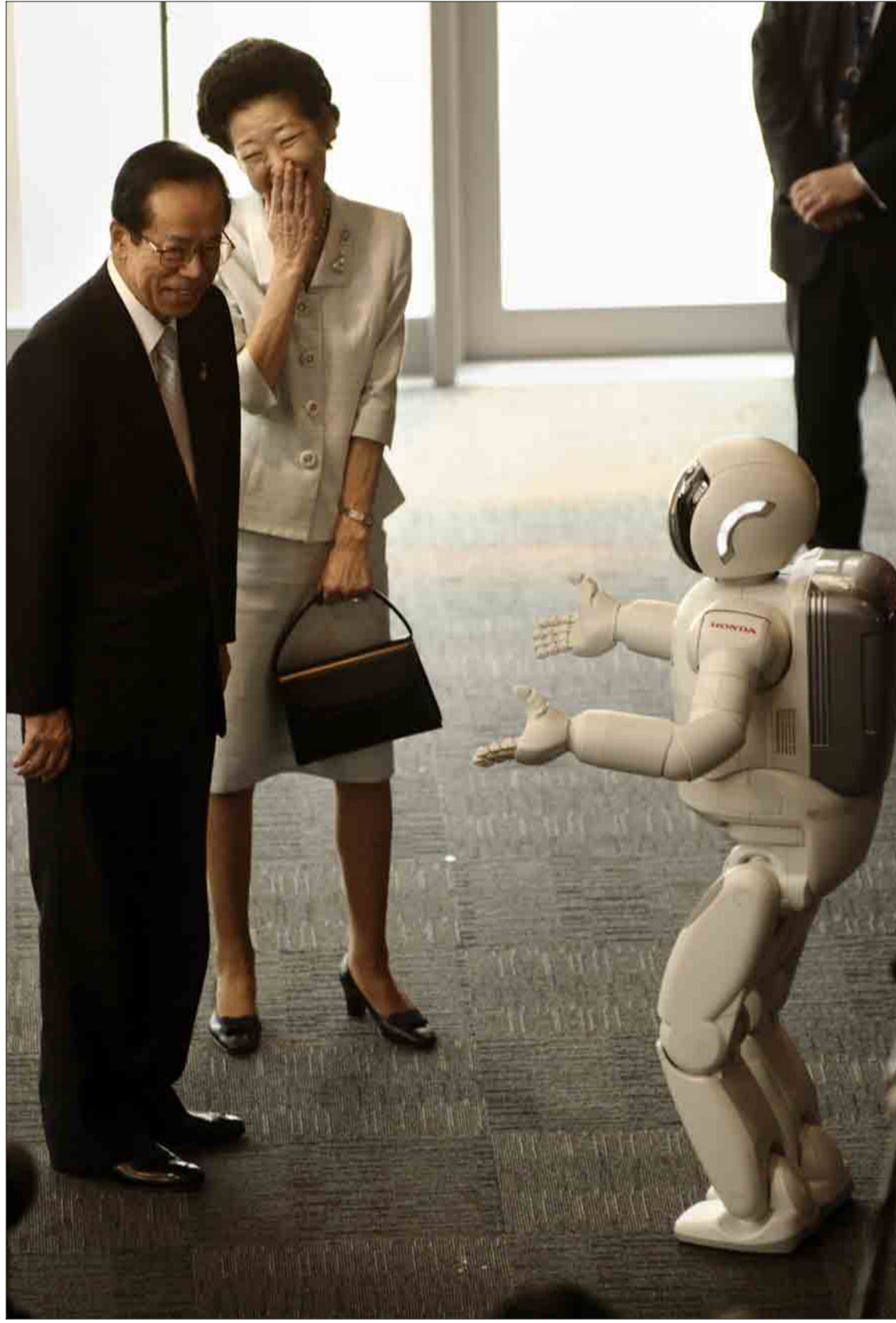
Lower house lawmaker Yuriko Koike said in an interview on April 15 that Mr Fukuda needed to "lead more assertively".

Even at the summit, on the northern island of Hokkaido, Mr Fukuda may struggle to build a consensus on such subjects as surging food prices and climate change. Japan itself fully satisfied just 10 of 23 commitments made at the last G8 meeting in Heiligendamm, Germany, in June last year, according to a report by the University of Toronto.

The country scored poorly in ratifying a United Nations treaty to combat corruption and providing debt relief to indebted countries, among other goals. It was Japan's worst showing in five years, tying it with Italy for second-worst in the grouping, the university's G8 Research Group said on June 26.

Yet even without major progress, the summit may boost Mr Fukuda, said Koichi Kato, an LDP lawmaker and former secretary general.

"Nobody is hoping to have new achievements or concrete results regarding crude oil prices or the shortage of food or global warming," Mr Kato said. However, "playing the role of chairman is good for his approval rating".



A robot welcomes Yasuo Fukuda and his wife Kiyoko to the G8 Summit Media Centre yesterday. Photo: AFP

Neither Beijing nor G8 ready for China to be full member: analysts

Ng Tze-wei in Hokkaido

French President Nicolas Sarkozy might be eager to include China and other emerging economies in the Group of Eight, but experts say China's membership is unlikely to happen any time soon.

Before he took off for this year's G8 summit, Mr Sarkozy said in Paris that the group should be expanded to include China and India.

"I think it is not reasonable to continue to meet as eight to solve the big questions of the world, forgetting China – 1.3 billion people – and not inviting India – 1 billion people."

However, G8 watchers say neither the group's member states nor Beijing have made up their minds about China becoming a full member.

This year marks China's sixth participation in a G8 summit since 2003 as a developing nation entering dialogue with the member states. Since last year, China has belonged to a group of five developing nations known as O5 – the "outreach five" – which also includes Brazil, India, Mexico and South Africa. Shanghai International Studies

University's Zhu Jiejun (朱杰君) said that over the years China has moved on from criticism to reluctance to a more open attitude towards participating in the G8. However, Beijing has not yet said whether it would like to join, and it is unlikely it will become a full member in the near future.

"Both the G8 and China are undergoing transitions that will last a while," Dr Zhu said.

He said the G8 was aspiring to metamorphose from a mere "co-ordinating tool" of the policies of the industrialised nations – Canada, France, Germany, Italy, Japan, Russia, Britain and the United States – to an "effective centre for global governance". Meanwhile, China is going through transformations of its own.

The voices within the G8 vary greatly on the idea of China or other developing nations becoming members. France and Britain are supportive; Japan has said it favours the current format of the G8.

Some analysts say Japan is the most reluctant to open up G8 membership because it is currently the only Asian country in the "big boys' club". If some of the G8 countries in-

cluded "open democracy", one of the group's founding principles, as a membership criterion instead of focusing on the practical needs to resolve global issues, it would take even longer for China to join, Dr Zhu said.

Gregory T. Chin, a senior fellow of the Canada-based Centre for International Governance Innovation, said China "wants to be seen as a responsible participant, but it does not want to join too quickly. Some of the G8 issues are quite sensitive".

For example, China would prefer to resolve the climate-change challenge through the UN framework, and macroeconomic and currency issues through the more controlled structures of the International Monetary Fund and World Bank.

Mr Chin said "cultural differences" probably accounted for some of China's reluctance. "It is questionable how comfortable China is with the G8 style of informal leaders' diplomacy." "China will continue to do everything it can to co-operate" and use G8 as a platform to advance its own and the O5's interests, but otherwise, it would prefer to remain an observer for the next few years.

Bush weakness could impede climate action

Associated Press in Washington

The problems do not get any easier as US President George W. Bush attends his final summit with leaders of industrialised democracies.

Disputes over global warming, worries about soaring oil prices, and uncertainty about Iran and North Korea's nuclear ambitions pose daunting challenges for Mr Bush when he sits down with other leaders today.

There are fewer than 200 days left in his term, and Mr Bush's presidency is a major factor hanging over the Group of Eight summit.

Atop the agenda is reaching a deal that would set targets for reducing the pollution that causes global warming. But few expect major headway or concessions from Mr Bush. He insists on holding China and India, among the world's biggest polluters, to the same emission-reduction standards as older, developed economies.

Japanese Prime Minister Yasuo Fukuda would like to emerge with an agreement on 50 per cent overall reductions in greenhouse gases by 2050.

Some European countries and developing nations favour establishing targets for cutting emissions by 2020.

Scientists say those targets are needed to avoid the worst effects of global warming.

Michael Levy, director of energy security and climate change at the Council on Foreign Relations, a New York-based think-tank, said he did not expect breakthroughs on global warming, in part because other G8 members realise that Mr Bush's days in office were dwindling.

The Japanese, who are driving the agenda and favour strong emission-reduction targets, "acutely understand there is going to be a different American approach to climate change in a year", Mr Levy said.

Both presidential candidates, Democrat Barack Obama and Republican John McCain, have argued for stronger standards for reducing greenhouse gas emissions than those advocated by Mr Bush.

"We'll have a new US president in office. The expectation is that either McCain or Obama would be a little bit more forward-leaning and we could make some more headway," said Julianne Smith, director of the Europe programme at the Centre for Strategic and International Studies.

Mr Bush has urged a halt in the growth of carbon dioxide and other greenhouse gases by 2025, but has not offered a strategy for pollution re-

ductions or backed mandatory emission cuts.

He has supported an increase in vehicle fuel economy, a requirement for a huge increase in use of ethanol and other biofuels, and for developing clean energy technologies.

Mr Bush says a priority of the summit is not advancing new initiatives but making good on ones from previous summits, especially promises for health aid for countries in Africa and other underdeveloped nations.

"We need to show the world that the G8 can be accountable for its promises and deliver results," Mr Bush said ahead of the summit.

"America is on track to meet our commitments. And in Japan, I'll urge other leaders to fulfil their commitments, as well."

Mr Bush's trip comes amid fresh questions on the makeup of the G8 and its relevance to today's global economy. When the gathering was first set up in the 1970s it consisted of five nations that were the world's undisputed economic powerhouses, which were all democracies: the US, Britain, Japan, France and Germany.

The annual meetings were expected to focus on global economic issues. Canada, Italy and Russia were added later.

China, the world's third largest economy, after the US and Japan, is not a member. Neither is India, the world's most populous democracy and fourth-largest economy, according to a World Bank update last week that ranks countries according to their GDP in terms of purchasing power.

Brazil has a bigger economy than that of Italy and Canada, according to the World Bank report.

The economies of Spain, Mexico and South Korea are bigger than that of Canada.

Mr Bush has pushed for a wider role for these growing economies that are not G8 members, and they were invited on Wednesday to join a "major economies meeting".

The US was expected to push for statements on government suppression in Myanmar; the increasing violence in Afghanistan from Taliban insurgents; the Middle East peace process; terrorism; and developments on nuclear programmes in North Korea and Iran, including North Korea's recent destruction of a nuclear facility that had produced plutonium.

Surging global oil prices and slumping economies in most of the G8 countries were also expected to be discussed, although options for action seemed to be limited.

It's the greenest gathering ever

In what is being touted as the greenest Group of Eight summit ever, the leaders will be ferried about in fuel-cell buses and electric cars, while the press corps uses a state-of-the-art media centre kept cool by 7,000 tonnes of snow retrieved during Hokkaido's notoriously bitter winter.

The melted snow will be fed into the centre's air-conditioning system and used to flush the building's "ultra-low-flow" toilets. Solar panels cover the roof, plants adorn the outer walls, and every effort has been made to let in natural light and ventilation.

But for most of the time, journalists will be kept at a comfortable distance from the people they are writing about. The international media centre, which can accommodate 4,000 people, is on a car park at the Rusutsu ski resort, 30 minutes from the summit venue.

Foreign delegations will be driven around in hybrid and electric cars that will be refuelled at temporary hydrogen and compressed-natural-gas stations, or by high-speed battery chargers.

The media centre's designers have clearly heeded the eco-mantra of "recycle and reduce", but not, apparently, "reuse": as soon as the last



An exhibitor shows an electric car to the G8 media centre. Photo: AFP

journalist has left the building, it will be demolished.

Japanese leaders promised to offset the summit's carbon dioxide emissions with reductions elsewhere.

Today, the day of Japan's Tanabata star festival, the owners of more than 70,000 shops, offices and tourist attractions will switch off their lights, look skywards, and it is hoped, discover a new reverence for their environment.

The Guardian

Oil prices, climate change top the agenda

Global economy Record crude oil prices and the skyrocketing cost of food that are threatening world economic growth top the agenda, with leaders pledging to come up with concrete steps to help alleviate the crisis that is fuelling global inflation and also aggravating poverty.

Climate change After agreeing at the last G8 summit in Germany to "consider seriously" at least halving greenhouse gas emissions by 2050, the leaders are under pressure from Japan to make strides in creating a post-2012 climate change framework, but disagreements on setting gas emission targets are likely to hamper real progress.

Development and Africa With leaders of emerging nations, including South Africa, invited to a special summit session today, leaders are under pressure to make good on their aid commitments to Africa made in 2005. G8 leaders, meeting in the Scottish town of Gleneagles, pledged to increase their aid to Africa by more than US\$25 billion by 2010.

Iran The G8 leaders are expected to discuss Tehran's response, made last week but not yet disclosed publicly, to a plan from six world powers offering Iran technology and talks if it suspends uranium enrichment. Iranian

President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad says Iran's nuclear programme is peaceful.

Zimbabwe G8 leaders are expected to discuss Zimbabwe's widely condemned June 27 election and question the legitimacy of President Robert Mugabe's government.

North Korea Leaders of the countries that brokered an accord aimed at dismantling communist state's nuclear programme – South Korea, the US, Russia, China and Japan – are expected to discuss how to verify Pyongyang's disabling of its nuclear installations.

Agence France-Presse

In Brief

Suu Kyi's poll win 'nullified'
YANGON – The election victory by Aung San Suu Kyi's party in 1990 has been nullified by the approval of a military-backed constitution, and her National League for Democracy party should prepare for a new vote in 2010, Myanmar's state-run newspaper said. Ms Suu Kyi's party won 392 of 485 seats in the poll, but the ruling military refused to hand over power. AP

Gaza crossings reopened
JERUSALEM – Israel has reopened border crossings to the Gaza Strip

after closing them last week when a rocket was fired from the Hamas-ruled territory in defiance of a two-week-old truce. Hamas said earlier it was suspending talks over the release of an Israeli soldier captured in a deadly cross-border raid in June 2006 because of the closures, which it said were a violation of the Egyptian-brokered truce. AFP

Former Nauru leader dies at 61
WELLINGTON – Former Nauruan president Rene Harris, who helped broker the controversial "Pacific solution" to deal with asylum

seekers bound for Australia, has died aged 61. Harris, the longest-serving politician on the tiny Pacific island nation of just 13,000 people, suffered a heart attack on Friday afternoon and died on Saturday morning. AFP

Canada's biggest mosque opens
OTTAWA – Canadian Prime Minister Stephen Harper has opened the country's largest mosque. It was built in Calgary, Alberta, by the Ahmadiyya Muslim community of Pakistan. The 4,500-square-metre, C\$15 million (HK\$114.7 million) structure bears the 99 names of God

in Arabic on one of its facades, and boasts a 1,500-capacity prayer hall. AFP

Progress in fighting bush fires
LOS ANGELES – Firefighters have reported progress in their fight against two large bush fires that threatened thousands of homes along California's coastline. More than 330 bush fires were active across the state, and an army of 1,186 firefighters were tackling blazes near the tourist haven of Big Sur and the town of Goleta, near Santa Barbara, 165km north of Los

Angeles, where 2,663 homes have been evacuated. AFP

US salmonella tally rises
WASHINGTON – The US government has increased to 943 its tally of the number of people reported being made ill in a record salmonella outbreak, in which tomatoes are the leading suspect. Health authorities said they had also begun looking at jalapeno peppers as a possible cause of the outbreak of bacterial illness, as well as ingredients used to make salsa such as cilantro (also known as coriander) and serrano peppers. AP

More monsoon deaths in India
LUCKNOW – Flooding, house collapses and lightning strikes caused by heavy rains killed at least 14 people in northern India, taking the reported death toll in the annual monsoon season to 79, officials said. The 14 people died on Saturday in a variety of rain-related incidents, officials said. AP

Blasts rock Abkhazia border
TBILISI – Georgian officials said there were five explosions near the de facto border between Georgia proper and its breakaway region of

Abkhazia, in the latest sign of growing tensions between Tbilisi and separatists. No injuries were reported from the explosions. Reuters

UAE cancels Iraq debt
ABU DHABI – The oil-rich United Arab Emirates has waived Iraq's debt of nearly US\$7 billion. Earlier, the US State Department said Iraq's debt has been reduced by US\$66.5 billion over the past three years, including a total of US\$42.3 billion that had been cancelled by Paris Club members. AFP