France eager to actualize Paris climate agreement

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French Foreign Minister Laurent Fabius, center, celebrates after the adoption of the Paris agreement in December. © Reuters

PARIS -- In December 2015, world leaders agreed on a new international framework for tackling climate change from 2020. France successfully led the U.N. conference because of rigorous preparation and carefully arranged under-the-table negotiations. But with just over a month since the adoption of the agreement, the host country is wasting no time to make sure that it actually takes effect.

On Jan. 25, French President Francois Hollande visited India and met with Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi in New Delhi. The two leaders agreed "to continue to work with each other ... toward the realization of the goals of the Paris agreement."

Hollande did not just come to deliver a tribute. He pledged 300 million euros ($326 million) in support for India's solar power development project
in developing countries. Hollande thanked Modi for playing "an important role" in the climate negotiations, formally known as the 21st Conference of the Parties to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change.

The visit was a carefully calibrated move to make the agreement duly take effect. In early January, Hollande and Laurent Fabius, France's foreign minister and president of the conference, had face-to-face talks on post-conference steps at the Elysee Palace. They agreed that France will continue to lead the world on climate issues as a model nation.

**Emotional appeal**

Had it not been for France, an agreement was unlikely to see fruition. On Dec. 12, when the conference was running short on time before the deadline, Fabius, with tears in his eyes, called on participants to come together, saying that nobody wants a repeat of the Copenhagen conference. Afterwards, conference attendees unanimously praised the French government.

On the final day of the 15th conference in December 2009, world leaders, including U.S. President Barack Obama and China's then-Premier Wen Jiabao, gathered for a summit meeting but let the conference close without a major outcome. The failure was blamed on the rift between the U.S. and China as well as one between rich and poor nations.

France made every effort not to make the same mistakes again. In 2013, immediately after it was chosen to lead the 21st conference, France set up a special task force to study what went wrong at the 15th conference. It drew up detailed plans for each of the three main time frames: before, during and after the conference.

In the first phase, France focused on warming up relationships with the U.S., China, and developing countries. On the first night of the Paris conference on Nov. 30, Hollande was at a three-star restaurant in the city with Obama. On the previous night, he had dinner with Chinese President Xi Jinping. The U.S. and China are particularly important for the new accord because they emit 40% of the world's greenhouse gases. Over the course of a year before the conference, France used every possible channel to court their support.
The two countries were cooperative throughout the conference. On Dec. 8, when talks were about to hit an impasse because of a disagreement between India and developed countries, Obama made a swift move, speaking with Modi by phone to "emphasize their personal commitment to secure a strong climate change agreement." China voiced no major concerns.

**Avoiding Japan's footsteps**

Careful calculations were also visible during the conference. The French government insisted that the summit meeting be held at the beginning of the conference rather than on the final day. The Copenhagen conference collapsed partly due to head-to-head confrontations between Obama and Wen over the wording of the draft agreement at the last meeting.

Now that the Paris agreement has been agreed upon, the French government is looking to the signing process that starts from April 22. For the agreement to take effect, it must be signed by at least 55 member countries accounting for an estimated 55% of the global greenhouse gas emissions. Hollande chose India as his first destination outside the European Union after the conference apparently to ensure that India signs the agreement.

France's passionate commitment to enforce the agreement shows that it wants to avoid following in Japan's footsteps. The Kyoto Protocol, a 1997 accord that came out of the third conference in Kyoto, Japan, virtually lost its teeth partly because the U.S. later dropped out. Japan has since played no major role in international climate negotiations.

France will hold the presidency of the climate conference until the next one starts in the Moroccan city of Marrakesh on Nov. 7.