

The Cancun summit's focus on practical efforts to cope with global warming marks a welcome shift, writes **Lord Hunt**

Adapting to change

Far from being another unsuccessful international meeting, as some predicted, the Cancun summit is likely to be seen in years to come as a seminal moment.

The agreement reached on Saturday endorsed the various actions of countries to limit greenhouse gas emissions. However, more significantly for the long term, it accepted that preserving the global environment in its present state was probably unattainable.

The focus thus now moves to adaptation to deal with the more volatile climate that all the major centres of climate science predict for the rest of this century and beyond.

The exceptional seriousness of the warming problem was underlined by an International Energy Agency (IEA) report last month on the trend of increasing global emissions of greenhouse gases. According to the report, under the Copenhagen Accord's environmental goals and pledges, emissions will rise 21 per cent above 2008 levels by 2035 alone. The emissions growth rate of China (now the world's largest emitter of greenhouse gases) will increase at an even greater rate than this.

The IEA suggests that the increase in global temperature in these circumstances will be at least 3.5 degrees Celsius. There appears little that the incremental, non-

people are likely to be displaced by desertification, rising sea levels and mountain snowmelt. International action must now focus with equal urgency on how societies can adapt to (as well as prevent) these changes. And, with this in mind, politicians and the public would do well to follow the Netherlands' Delta Commission, the British Committee on Climate Change's Adaptation Sub-Committee, and China's scientific agencies and seriously begin to consider planning for the monumental changes that will be apparent in the decades to come.

As extreme weather becomes more frequent, countries will need to develop integrated practical policies that deal both with the full range of climate change adaptation and natural disasters. This year's weather-related disasters, ranging from the forest fires in Russia to the floods in Pakistan, will only grow in frequency, and we must be better prepared.

In this difficult context, how is the world responding?

Firstly, although the Kyoto accord will not be renewed in 2012, the (weaker and non-legally binding) Cancun deal that more than 190 countries have signed up to is nonetheless an important development. Key measures include the Green Climate Fund, which is expected to raise and disburse US\$100 billion a year by 2020 to protect poor nations against climate impacts and assist them with low-carbon development, and a new Adaptation Committee, which will support countries as they establish climate protection plans.

While the Cancun agreement has its weaknesses, it is much better than no deal at all. And, we must be realistic – given the massive range of political, economic and technical approaches to climate change policy across the world – it may now be impossible to frame a much stronger international agreement that would satisfy all governments, businesses and civil society groups.

The second key trend is the

development across the world of a wide range of approaches to tackle climate change at the local, regional and national levels. In a Mexico City symposium organised by the Global Legislators Organisation for a Balanced Environment (Globe), I heard how collaboration in such "bottom up" initiatives would be an essential part of the global effort to tackle the dangers of climate change and should be part of the Cancun accord.

For instance, in China, where a feasibility study is being concluded into a new comprehensive climate change law, financial rewards for reducing energy use provided by regional governments are making substantial improvements in efficiency. These arrangements are evolving into local carbon markets, albeit small-scale and voluntary at this stage.

European Union countries have been emphasising different kinds of low-carbon approaches, such as wind, carbon sequestration and nuclear power. The continent has also promoted its policy of carbon trading to motivate industrial efficiency. The EU and China are also planning to introduce new systems of monitoring greenhouse gas emissions, using remote sensing and ground-based instrumentation, in order to have a reliable regulatory/incentive scheme.

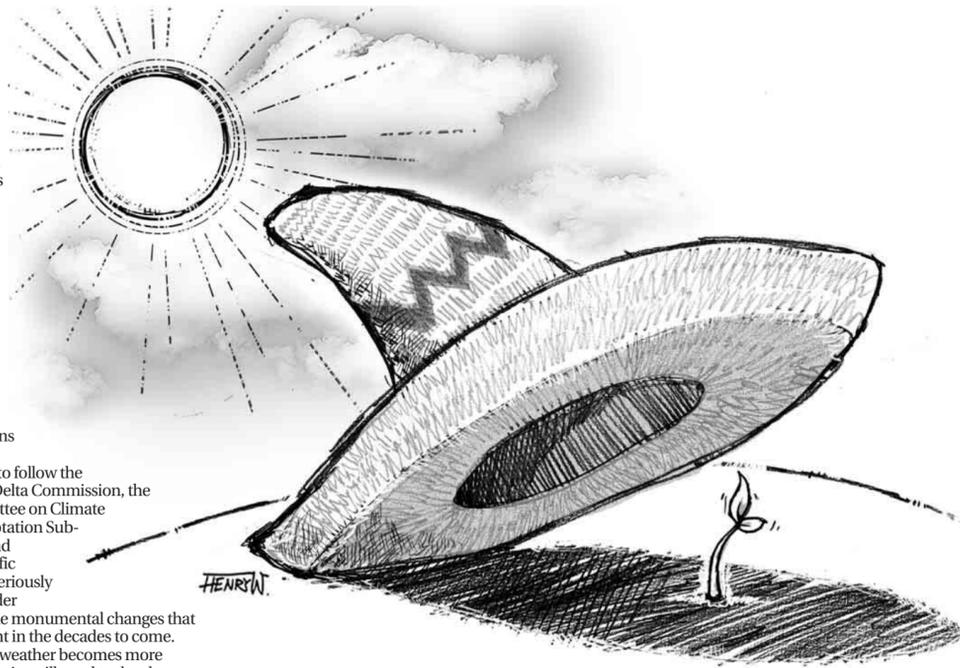
Other countries are focusing on

preventing the rise of atmospheric greenhouse gases by expanding forestry. For instance, Brazil and Mexico are introducing national legislation to minimise the loss of tropical rainforest and preserve these irreplaceable natural habitats while ensuring the vitality of the communities who live in them. Modern technology, including satellite surveillance, is ensuring that loss of rainforest can be slowed.

However, despite these initiatives, we are now at a point where preservation of our existing environment is probably unobtainable. What is urgently needed is broader agreement on a range of practical action to mitigate climate change and deal with its effects on health, business, agriculture and natural disasters.

The rising cost of dealing with these effects, such as coastal defences, reducing desertification and urban overheating, mean that preventative action has to begin right away. It would be folly of the highest order to delay this process until economies grow further, as some influential economists continue to argue.

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Hedging its bets

If Vietnam has over the last year symbolised Southeast Asia's re-engagement with the United States as a hedge against China's rise, then it also represents the limits of that trend.

While Hanoi might feel comfortable with the long-term symbolism of an emerging strategic partnership with Washington, not to mention the prospect of regular US warship visits for rest and repair, it is worth repeating that a more formal security pact the US and its allies is hardly on the cards.

Whether it is with Washington, Beijing or beyond, Hanoi's envoys repeatedly stress what is effectively a "three no's" policy at the heart of a determinedly internationalist approach born of grim decades of war and isolation as a pariah state. That policy means no foreign military bases in Vietnam, no use of Vietnamese soil to attack another nation and no joining of a military alliance.

It's a reminder that while Hanoi may want diverse relations with a balance of international powers, it does not want to be bullied or beholden to any single power – again, a symbol of a wider feeling in parts of Southeast Asia.

Can the Vietnamese pull it off? The tensions of recent months, as the long-simmering disputes with China over the South China Sea dominate the region, show just how fraught that exercise can be.

As they cautiously feel their way with their one-time bitter foes in Washington, question marks emerge on both sides.

The Pentagon fears a Vietnamese cockiness that could lead to unnecessary provocation of China on the high seas and unwittingly inflame wider tensions. In Hanoi, meanwhile, they wonder whether the US can really be trusted. Are they really around for the long term? Or will they find an excuse to back off in favour of the more important and complex Sino-US relationship?

"There is a lot of talk of mutual trust right now," one Pentagon official said recently. "We know they've come a long way in their relationship with us, and we constantly stress that we can be trusted. We also say we've got to trust them. The kind of conversations we are having now we could barely imagine just a few years ago."

The equation, of course, is complicated by another factor: China is on the border, and the US, at least geographically, is a long way away.

Even while an ever suspicious Hanoi plots ways to hold ground in various disputes with Beijing, the fraternal nature of the relationship continues apace. The number of delegations continues to rise, and Beijing and Hanoi find plenty to talk about as modernising Communist Party-ruled states, whether it is social

and political control and reform or the role of military enterprises. Those exchanges encompass government, party, military and law enforcement officials. For all their differences, for example, Hanoi was never going to send a representative to the Nobel Peace Prize ceremony for Liu Xiaobo (劉曉波) in Oslo last Friday.

While such exchanges promote co-operation and understanding, they also lead to influence and, at times, pressure. A case in point: Chinese diplomats in Hanoi have never been afraid to complain of fiercely anti-China sentiment among Vietnamese bloggers and dissidents.

Scholars are enthralled by what is one of the world's most "asymmetric" relationships, described by one observer as one where China seeks acknowledgement of its primacy and Vietnam seeks recognition of its autonomy.

In a recent study of Vietnam's developing relations with both China and the US, veteran analyst Professor Carl Thayer noted that for all of Vietnam's outward diplomacy and hedging, "no other foreign state is as assertive or influential in Hanoi [as] China".

"China asserts considerable direct and indirect influence on Vietnam," Thayer, a scholar at the Australian Defence Force Academy, wrote. "Probably no major decision of any nature is made in Hanoi without taking Chinese interests and likely responses into account."

And as the US and Hanoi courtship heats up, the point is not lost in Washington.

Greg Torode is the Post's chief Asia correspondent

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legally binding Cancun agreement (which builds upon Copenhagen) will do to alter this.

In the absence of moves towards a much stronger, global and legally binding deal, the world is thus on the path of a "business as usual" scenario. The international community has got to therefore consider unprecedented changes.

What is absolutely clear is that temperature rises of 3-4 degrees will most likely present an irreversible tipping point for continent-sized areas of changing land cover and for ice on sea and land. As a result, millions – if not tens of millions – of

Voices: Government

Job blunder exposes flaws in control system

Mike Rowse

The select committee studying the case of former housing director Leung Chin-man should have been more selective.

Reading the committee's report, three issues jump off the page. The first concerns our much vaunted system of ministerial accountability. Whether New World China Land was wise to offer a senior position to someone with whom they'd had extensive official dealings, whether that person was wise to accept the offer, we will all have our opinions. But there can be no doubt that the officer's application to take up the offer should have been rejected. The fact that it was not constitutes a major blunder. Yet the minister, Denise Yue Chung-ye, immediately ruled out resigning. What scale of political error would be required to trigger a ministerial resignation or dismissal?

The second issue is: what sort of post-service employment controls should apply to political appointees? At the moment, ministers, their deputies and assistants are only required, for one year, to consult an advisory committee. They are not obliged to take the committee's advice, just to seek it.

Contrast this with the restraints imposed on senior civil servants, who are subject to control periods of between one and three years. The select committee report suggests these should be extended. But such a proposal is irrelevant to the main problem, which brings us to the third issue: the present system of control is deeply flawed. We need to completely redesign the system and

then train people how to operate it effectively. We need to acknowledge that there are two powerful forces pulling in apparently opposite directions. The first is the community's legitimate desire to have an impartial, honest and hard-working civil service. The second is the right of former civil servants to work, a right guaranteed by the Basic Law and by the Bill of Rights. (The present controls breach both and are therefore unlawful and unconstitutional.)

So it is reasonable to institute a system to prevent abuse of power, but that system must be focused.

We need to completely redesign the system and then train people how to operate it effectively

Why do we wait to deal with applications to work only after the officer has retired? Why can't the Civil Service Bureau study the officer's recent career before he goes out the door, discuss it with his superiors and the officer himself, and agree on a schedule of employment that he cannot undertake because it would create a real or perceived conflict of interest? For a reasonable period after ceasing official duty, the officer could be required to notify the bureau of jobs he wants to accept, for publication in a register open to inspection.

For me, the biggest

disappointment has been the stream of Legco members coming out to say that senior civil servants should in effect never be allowed to work for pay after retirement. Their willingness to abandon the human rights of civil servants by playing to the public gallery is neglect of duty.

Moreover, they have failed to spot that we are dealing with a sunset situation. New generations of civil servants are not being hired on pensionable terms. Instead, they will receive a lump sum from the MPF, like private-sector workers. The pensions legislation, which is how the administration enforces its present policy, will gradually become irrelevant.

The select committee has done well to establish what happened and what went wrong. But it has let itself down in the recommendation section. By proposing to build on a flawed system, rather than rebuilding it, it risks perpetuating a situation that neither addresses public concern nor protects civil servants' rights.

After all, if the system is wrong, it doesn't matter whether the control period is 15 minutes or 15 years. It still won't work.

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Voices: Hong Kong

Part-timers left out in transport scheme cold

Wong Shek-hung

The government's decision to extend citywide the Transport Support Scheme, which enables low-income workers to travel to their jobs, is a welcome step towards addressing the problems of employed poor people.

However, unnecessary restrictions remain affixed to the scheme. According to the existing criteria, applicants must work at least 72 hours a month (18 hours a week) and earn HK\$6,500 or less a month. This excludes many part-time workers in low-paying jobs. The Census and Statistics Department reported that in the second quarter of this year, 80,800 people worked less than 18 hours a week, with monthly incomes of less than HK\$6,500. Of these, most were female (62 per cent), earned less than HK\$3,000 per month (66 per cent) and were poorly educated.

An Oxfam survey found that family responsibilities, including childcare, were the main obstacles preventing this group of people from taking up full-time work. This situation exposes the inadequacy of childcare support measures for low-income families.

Part-time workers are often subject to precarious working conditions, low wages and a lack of labour protections. They are generally excluded from social benefits granted to "standard employees", just as they are excluded from the transport subsidy scheme. All working people have the right to a decent minimum standard of living for themselves and their families. The government's proposed hourly minimum wage of HK\$28 is not enough for a single breadwinner to support a whole

family; it may force the worker or other family members to take up part-time work to supplement the family income.

To support the working poor and encourage them to stay in the workforce, the government should include part-time workers in its planned Work Incentive Transport Subsidy Scheme. Eligibility criteria should be relaxed to include those who work at least eight hours a week (32 hours a month). It is recommended that the allowance be a fixed amount up to HK\$300 per month – half the proposed rate of HK\$600 per month for a full-time worker – and without a time limit.

As for the required income declaration, the government is advised to adopt the "self-reporting mechanism" that has long been applied in programmes under the Comprehensive Social Security Assistance scheme. If an applicant conceals or falsely reports income without a reasonable explanation, he or she will be subject to criminal sanctions. Social Welfare Department says that from 2001-2009, only about 0.2 per cent of CSSA cases involved concealing or falsely reporting income.

Most poor part-time employees have basic occupations, such as jobs as cleaners or security guards. But their monthly wages might increase as the minimum wage takes effect in May next year, causing them to exceed the allowable income under the transport support scheme. The government is therefore advised to adjust the income bar upwards to align it with the income of a minimum wage earner.

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Voices: Trade

Ask what Asia can do for the US and Obama

Simon Tay

The agreement on free trade concluded this month between the United States and South Korea is important not only for the two countries; there are wider implications for the US and Asia.

Pushing the Korea-US agreement – which still has to win approval from both countries' legislatures – was seen as a test of the Obama administration's commitment to free trade. With jobless figures still high, appealing to the US voter to support free trade will be tricky. Many Americans think they do not gain from trade, as their jobs are exported to cheaper locations in Asia. To them, globalisation has an ugly face – one that is Asian.

US President Barack Obama will need to talk up the Korea-US Free Trade Agreement (FTA) as a big win for the US. He argues that annual exports of American goods will go up by up to US\$11 billion and that agreed concessions could support at least 70,000 American jobs. The Korean economy is sizeable and can help Obama in his goal to double American exports to Asia.

This comes on top of Obama warning Asians that their economic growth cannot centre on increasing exports to US markets. A fundamental change in the economic terms of US-Asian interdependence is being signalled.

Asians will need to consider anew how much they want and need the US and what price they might be willing to pay. For Seoul, the situation with North Korea has tipped it towards the FTA.

India welcomed Obama in early November and signed off on US\$10 billion in deals that could create an

estimated 54,000 jobs in the US. For Southeast Asians, an American assurance against possible Chinese assertions on contested areas of the South China Sea shows the continuing relevance of the US to the region's security. The US-Asean Summit will need to develop an economic agenda to ensure balance and continuing relevance.

What can and should Asians do for the US and Obama? This may seem a strange question when America remains the world's leading power. But the mid-term elections show a turn against trade and globalisation, and this could potentially turn against Asians.

If it does, Obama or his successor will turn inward. And, when Americans do look across the region, it will be only to assert terms to their sole benefit.

Asians would do well to make efforts to counter those negative perceptions. If trade with the US is really a win-win, Asians must not shy away from being fair and explicit in ensuring that Americans do – in fact and perception – win.

The South Koreans are tough negotiators who have pushed through trade deals with almost all major economies, including the European Union.

They should do their part to ensure the FTA is approved by both sides, for mutual and equitable benefit. This would be good not only for the US and South Korea but others in Asia.

Simon Tay is chairman of the Singapore Institute of International Affairs and author of Asia Alone: The Dangerous Post-Crisis Divide from America. This is an edited version of comments published in Singapore's Today newspaper