

MARTIN LEES

Redoubled efforts imperative

Greater actions needed to avert the risks and impacts of intensifying global heating and ecological destruction

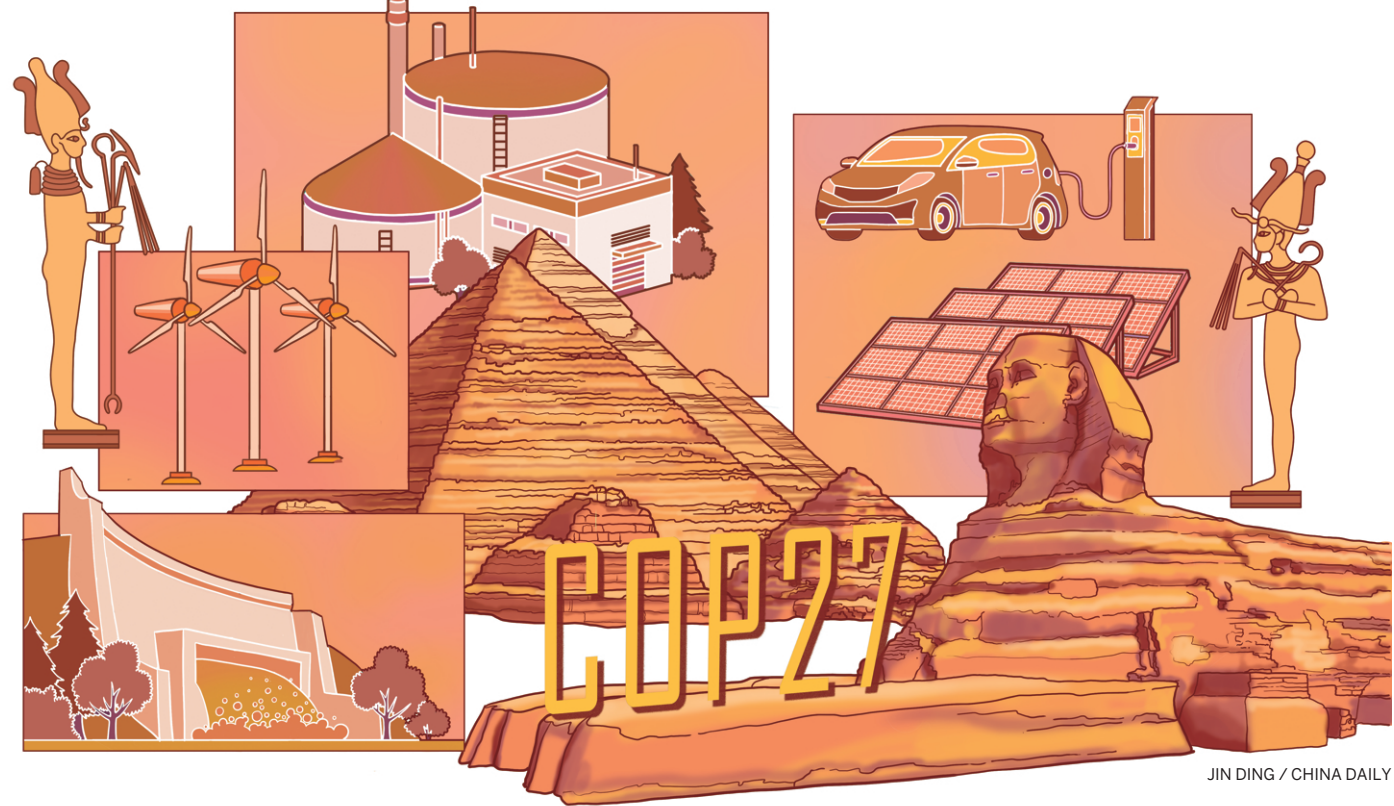
The intensifying impacts of the climate crisis and its tragic human costs are evident in every region of the world. The science is clear: we are running out of time to preserve a stable climate. At the 27th session of the Conference of the Parties (COP 27) to the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change to be held in Egypt in November, world leaders must accelerate actions to reverse the continuing increases in greenhouse gas emissions if we are to avert the escalating threats to the future of humanity.

Global economic growth has undoubtedly produced enormous progress for hundreds of millions of people in both developed and developing countries. A major factor has been the historic achievement of China in lifting some 800 million people out of abject poverty and building a successful, productive economy. But this progress has been achieved at high environmental cost and is now vulnerable to the impacts of environmental degradation and global heating.

The most fundamental challenge to the future of humanity is restoring a safe and productive balance between the economy and nature. Young people across the world increasingly understand that the present path of development in the world is leading to catastrophe and that it is also unfair, failing to achieve an equitable distribution of the costs and benefits of globalization and economic growth.

In the face of accelerating climate change, governments across the world have now debated for almost 30 years on how to decrease greenhouse gas emissions in 26 Conferences of the Parties to the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change. But, over this period, the greenhouse gas emissions have actually increased by around 70 percent. And, while IPCC (Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change) calls for emissions to be halved by 2030 — in only seven years — to maintain a chance of limiting global average temperature rise to the relatively safe level of 1.5 C, the current plans of corporate and national fossil fuel producers could lead to further substantial increases in consumption for many years ahead.

The climate change crisis is intimately linked to the extensive ecological destruction which now drives migration and threatens economic progress and peace. As phrased by Frans Timmermans, vice president of the European Commission, “The



human-made crisis engulfing the natural world is just as threatening, perhaps even more so, than the climate crisis.” Chinese leadership of the UN Biodiversity Summit in December offers a unique opportunity to stimulate actions on the essentially connected climate and biodiversity crises.

As we have failed to cut emissions, the world remains on a path toward disastrous temperature increase of more than 2.4 C, even with the full implementation of targets agreed for 2030, and of at least 2.7 C based on the current policies. The extreme events which we see today are driven by a rise of 1.2 C since pre-industrial times: we are right therefore to fear that a rise of 2.4 C or more will have catastrophic consequences, especially for the poor who are least responsible for the climate changes.

Strong climate action is even more urgent because the interactive, dynamic systems which drive the global climate will behave in non-linear ways, both separately and together. There is now intense concern in the scientific and expert communities that rising anthropogenic emissions are pushing these systems beyond critical thresholds, triggering “positive feedback

loops” which will provoke sudden shocks and drive irreversible “runaway” climate change, beyond human influence.

We can still avoid such dangerous outcomes. We have had, for many years, the understanding, the technological solutions and the resources needed to achieve a rapid transition to a safer, more sustainable path for the future of humanity. There is a remarkable opportunity to mitigate emerging threats and to create the new green economies and employment of the future — but time is short. In any case, the costs of action will be immeasurably less than the human and civilizational costs of inaction.

To achieve a just transition to a low-carbon, equitable and sustainable world, policies, management and institutions must be framed around five realities: The current processes of international negotiation must be revised; deep structural changes are required in economic, energy and financial systems to correct the causes, not the symptoms of the environmental crisis; economic and finance policies must now be framed to respect and include the environmental facets of policy in integrated strategies for sustainable progress; corrective action

must engage the full world community and must be founded on climate justice, solidarity and human rights; public support must be mobilized for strong climate action to overcome the ideological and commercial vested interests which obstruct essential change.

The human, social, economic and financial impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic, coupled with the intensifying impacts of climate change, have created a radically new global situation, now compounded by the conflict in Ukraine and by major on-going shifts in the geopolitical landscape. We will not be able to master the multiple crises of the 21st century with the entrenched models and methodologies of the 20th century.

We are at a turning point in human affairs, as was the case following World War I and II. World leaders were then able to implement major transformations of policies and institutions to advance economic progress and to avert the risks of further conflict. We need a similar degree of vision, statesmanship and institutional innovation today.

Over four decades of reform and develop-

ment, since proposing the Four Modernizations in 1978, China’s policy priorities have evolved from a focus on growth and employment in the 1980s to a broader view of an all-round *xiaokang* prosperous society, and now toward the current goal, defined by President Xi Jinping, of an ecological civilization.

In particular, Chinese environmental policies have evolved remarkably. A key step in 1992 was the establishment of the China Council for International Cooperation on Environment and Development, which mobilizes national and international expertise in science and policy across the world to provide regular advice to the leadership of China on strategies and measures to achieve sustainable development.

The Chinese leadership has taken strong and sustained measures to reduce the country’s dependence on coal and to promote emissions reduction and sustainable development. But China still accounts for more than half of global demand for coal which supplies around 56 percent of China’s power and employs millions.

To avert the risks and impacts of intensifying global heating on China itself and on the wider world, China will have to cut its emissions faster and accelerate its current plan to achieve net-zero by 2060.

China can play a crucial role in the next phase of efforts by the international community to master the existential threats of climate destabilization and to achieve sustainable and equitable development, through four transformations:

First, accelerating the restructuring of its national economic and energy systems to cut its emissions more rapidly. Second, promoting shifts in domestic consumption and behavior to reduce resource exploitation, energy use, pollution and waste. Third, supporting developing countries in their efforts to mitigate and adapt to the impacts of climate change through finance, technology and expertise. Fourth, participating in cooperative global leadership to contain the overarching climate crisis and to build a fair, peaceful and sustainable world.

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Safe and sound

With the implementation of its new law on wetland conservation, China can better protect these vital ecosystems

This year marks the 30th anniversary of China’s accession to the Ramsar Convention on Wetlands. The 14th meeting of the Conference of the Contracting Parties to the Convention (COP 14), with the theme of “cherishing wetlands and achieving harmonious coexistence between humans and nature”, will take place in Wuhan, Hubei province, in November.

The Conference will address the issue of strategic development of the Convention and other important issues related to the implementation of the Convention’s objectives to help achieve the goals of the United Nations 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. In this critical year of global wetland conservation, China’s first Wetland Conservation Law was formally implemented on June 1, 2022, starting a new journey for wetland conservation and restoration by rule of law in China, which is undoubtedly a great gift to the Conference.

Wetlands are one of the most important ecosystems on Earth, providing a variety of ecosystem services such as water conservation, water purification, flood storage and drought prevention, biodiversity maintenance, climate regulation and carbon sequestration. Known as the “Kidneys of the Earth” and the “Gene Pool of Species”, wetlands play an important role in maintaining ecosystems, food, water resources, human health, biosecurity, and addressing global climate change.

However, for quite a long time, people were not aware of the importance of wetlands and their characteristics, let alone these important ecosystem services, leading to a worldwide shrinkage of wetland areas and degradation of wetland functions. The Global Wetland Outlook (2018) estimated that the global wetland area had declined by 35 percent since the 1970s, three times faster than the loss of terrestrial forest ecosystems, and even the quality of

remaining wetlands is declining due to the impacts of drainage, pollution, invasive species, and climate change.

In the United States, wetland areas in its 48 contiguous states declined by nearly 50 percent between 1800 and 2010. Studies suggest that in the early decade of this century, China’s total wetland area decreased by 8.82 percent, which is equivalent to the size of the Hainan Island.

Although there are many factors leading to the loss and degradation of wetlands, and they vary from place to place, one undeniable reason is the lack of strong legal protection in many countries. For example, in China’s land use classification system, wetlands were classified as “unused land”, which has undoubtedly contributed to their occupation and destruction to a certain extent.

But this is no longer the case. China’s Wetland Conservation Law not only fills a gap in China’s eco-environmental legislation, but also establishes the general principle of wetland conservation and restoration, namely “conservation first, strict management, systematic management, science-based restoration and reasonable utilization”. What is even more remarkable is that the law takes into account the resource value and ecological value of wetlands when setting the penalty standards for violations, and the penalty standards are even more stringent.

Moreover, in the third national land survey in 2021, for the first time in China “wetlands” were surveyed separately as first-class land having the same status as forest land, grassland and arable land, instead of “unused land”, highlighting the importance of the ecosystem services of wetlands.

The law is an important tool of governance, but the law alone is not enough. It is more important to effectively implement and strictly enforce the law. Therefore, the urgent task of the authorities is to figure out how to integrate the Wetland Conserva-



tion Law into existing environmental laws and regulations. Local authorities should develop wetland conservation measures based on local conditions, strengthen publicity and law enforcement, and prosecute a certain number of typical cases involving illegal occupation and destruction of wetlands that have big social impacts, so that violators are duly punished. Having a strong deterrent and warning effect, it can become a law with real “teeth”.

According to the classification standards of the Wetlands Convention, there are about 53.6 million hectares of wetlands in China. The country has designated 64 wetlands of international importance, and established 602 wetland nature reserves, more than 1,600 wetland parks and numer-

ous wetland conservation areas. The wetland protection rate is over 50 percent in China. It is of great significance to the world to protect China’s wetland resources. At the same time, with about 4 percent of the world’s wetlands, China meets the needs of nearly 20 percent of the world’s population for wetland production, living, ecology and culture, and is an active practitioner in the conservation and rational use of wetlands worldwide.

The promulgation and implementation of China’s Wetland Conservation Law is an important catalyst for the Chinese government to fully implement the Convention on Wetlands and to demonstrate China’s role as a great power in promoting the building of a community with a shared future for

mankind. We look forward to seeing typical enforcement cases in the near future, and expect the Chinese government to share its experience of enacting and implementing the Wetland Conservation Law with participants from various countries at the COP 14, so as to better participate in and lead the international trend of wetland conservation.

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