



A difficult path ahead

Climate change action is imperative, **CHRISTIAN DOWNIE** writes

As almost 100 heads of state meet in New York and Pittsburgh this week, fissures are beginning to emerge between the United States and the European Union over what a global deal on climate change should look like. Both parties would be wise to remember how they got here.

Recent calls by the United Nations Secretary General Ban Ki-moon for the climate negotiations to "get moving" ahead of the Copenhagen conference at the end of the year, which is supposed to set out a global agreement to replace the Kyoto Protocol, suggest all is not well between the two major parties.

It appears that the disagreement between the United States and the European Union rests on who sets the rules governing how a country's emission target will be counted and the means by which it can be met.

The EU wants to stick with the existing architecture of the Kyoto Protocol, whereas it is reported that the US has been telling its European colleagues that each country should set its own rules and set its own path for meeting its target.

In other words, the EU wants an international agreement to drive the domestic sphere while the US wants the opposite. That is, to globalise its domestic position. Reconciling these standpoints is likely to prove critical to reaching a global deal at the end of the year.

For this to happen, it is important to appreciate where the US is coming from. In 1997, the Clinton White House hoped that the Kyoto

Protocol could be used to drive climate action at home. The strategy failed miserably. Americans do not take kindly to international pronouncements on how things should be done.

Ask any Democrat insider from the Clinton years what the biggest lesson from the failure of Kyoto was in the 1990s and it sounds like they are all singing from the same song sheet: We must get the domestic framework in place first, we did not lay the domestic foundations last time, so the domestic must go first.

For many people working with the Obama Administration who were there in the Clinton years, such as Todd Stern, who was a White House negotiator at Kyoto in 1997 and is now Obama's special envoy for climate change, this is the new modus operandi.

And it shows. Take the comments last week from Stuart Eizenstat, the lead negotiator for the US at Kyoto in 1997: "the EU needs to understand the limitations in the US. The reality is, that it is impossible for my successor to negotiate something in Copenhagen beyond which Congress will give the Administration in domestic cap-and-trade legislation".

It is unclear whether the US will budge from this position. The memories of the past are not easily forgotten, especially by those in Washington who count the scorecard of the wins and losses at the end of each presidential term. And let me tell you, they much prefer to win.

So, where does that leave a global

deal? On the one hand, the EU could accept the American position if they decide that the concessions are worth it to achieve a global deal.

In essence, this is what happened in 1997 when the EU agreed to US demands for emissions trading, among other things, to be included in the Kyoto Protocol, despite their initial opposition.

On the other hand, the EU might believe that accepting the US position could threaten the environmental integrity of the post-Kyoto agreement.

This too has happened before. In The Hague in 2000, the climate negotiations collapsed for this very reason.

That was the last international climate conference of the outgoing Clinton administration and the Obama people remember it.

The problem is that both the US and the EU have a point. The EU realises that if global emissions are to stabilise and then decline, the world must have a strong international agreement.

And the Obama Administration knows only too well that in the face of a recalcitrant Republican party and wavering Democrat senators, they simply cannot afford another Kyoto.

Ban Ki-moon is right in saying the negotiations better get moving, though, because this time around, as the science is telling us, it could well be our final chance to get it right.

Christian Downie is a PhD scholar at the Australian National University, researching the international climate negotiations.