

Global Security Briefing – January 2019

Blueprints for a Green Challenge

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Summary

Climate disruption is perhaps the greatest challenge facing the world, yet no state seems prepared to lead on the energetic, economic and cultural transition required to mitigate its threat. What would such leadership entail, domestically and internationally? What factors impede it? And how could the UK rise to the challenge?

Introduction

Oxford Research Group's long-term work on climate change and human security has been reflected in recent briefings in this series. [Last July's briefing](#) on a sustainable security approach for the UK summarised some of the policies that could be enacted to accelerate radical decarbonisation, the [November briefing](#) looked at the issue in relation to growing populism in the US and BRIC states, and last month's [review of the year](#) pointed to the partial success of the COP24 climate summit in Katowice but also highlighted the major problems ahead such as the continuing denial of the problem by the US government and some other states.

There is no doubt that climate disruption is one of the greatest challenges facing the global community and given the lack of an appropriate response it is going to be essential for some states to take a much more forceful role, both in terms of their own economies and also as international actors. This briefing discusses what would be required for a country to take such a lead and, while it applies this thinking to the UK, it is relevant to other high-carbon emitting states.

The Challenge

The climate science community, as reflected in the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change ([IPCC report to COP24](#)), is insisting that the issue is hugely urgent, with the need for radical action within the next 12 years. It is uncompromising in its argument that there is now no alternative to the rapid decarbonisation of current economies and the development of ultra-low carbon emission by emerging economies. ORG's November briefing summarised what was required:

“The rate of progress has to be rapid in the 2020s and zero carbon economies have to be implemented by the mid-2030s, not the late 2040s as often currently assumed. The internal combustion engine should be seen as already obsolete, renewable energy capture and storage must be accelerated greatly, there have to be radical improvements in the efficiency of household heating and cooling and

industrial use of fossil carbon as an energy source together with numerous changes in agricultural practice. Put simply, what is already beginning to be undertaken by a few countries must be expanded to comprehensive global change and done so in less than a decade.”

The issue is that “what is already beginning to be undertaken by a few countries” is itself far too little and, instead, a radical change in policies and practice must be implemented in a very few years. Moreover, this requires a different approach to international security.

The Security Problem

In the UK, as in many countries, the current security narrative prioritises national security, while the broad global challenges that require a common security approach are seen as being of far less consequence. Much of this is because the security posture is rooted in “national interests” determined by a political and corporate establishment (sometimes called the “military-industrial-bureaucratic complex”) dominated by a small and exclusive group subject to little independent oversight, let alone critical analysis. This posture is rooted in the presumed centrality of offensive military capabilities to uphold British interests globally rather than to defend British territory.

As Celia McKeon has pointed out in her recent [comparison of 20 Western national security strategies](#), such approaches have great difficulty in coming to terms with an issue such as climate disruption and tend to visualise it almost entirely as a matter of countering impacts rather than prevention. In this securitising process, national think tanks may well point to future problems of weak and failing states, mass migration and social and political chaos leading to extreme social movements, but the response is all too frequently one of how to maintain the security of the state against these new threats. This is certainly not limited to the UK and is already apparent in “the close the castle gates” response to asylum seekers, war refugees and economic migrants, early indications of attitudes that are likely to be greatly hardened if we move to an era of sustained environmental and social stress.

The fundamental change in attitude that is required must be based on a response to climate disruption rooted in prevention not endeavouring to maintain an unsustainable status quo. This also means that, while there must be extensive adaptation to the unavoidable impacts of what is already a globally changing climate, these are only short-term and immediate responses that do not obviate the need for rapid movement to ultra-low carbon economies world-wide. There are many areas for action and the following summary illustrates these, taking the UK as an example of possible change.

Research, Development and Innovation

The UK already has a strong reputation for research in climate change, oceanography and polar science, and all three should receive substantially increased support, with specific funding for enhanced international collaboration, especially with countries in the global south that may have much more limited research capabilities. While climate science overall has made huge progress in the past two decades, it is still an area of

research with many uncertainties and any state that supports increased work in this field is playing an important internationalist role.

Beyond climate science there are many areas for urgent government action, not least improvements in renewable energy generation, storage, transmission and conservation. Research councils should routinely prioritise research with rapid innovation potential with government using a range of fiscal measures to speed up the development of low-carbon systems.

Priority should also be given to expanding research into energy conservation, especially in a country such as the UK where there is huge scope for improved building efficiency. In all these areas - research, development and innovation - change should be aided by reallocation of financial support from other sectors as well as an increase in overall funding allocated.

Accelerating Change

In the early 2000s, the UK government did initiate some policies to assist a transition to a lower-carbon economy, including feed-in tariffs for solar photo-voltaic energy systems and wind power, and it also promoted some improved building standards. From about 2006, for [reasons unclear](#), this progressive trajectory was shifted markedly back to reliance on fossil carbon and nuclear energy sources. After 2015, most remaining policies and green incentives were either ended or radically scaled down. Fortunately, this change did not bring to an end the potential for a zero-carbon transition, and technological improvements have ensured that some renewable energy sources are already at or below grid parity in cost compared with electricity generated from fossil carbon resources.

Given these developments, changes in government policy could have a very rapid impact. Among the many areas for policy shifts are more generous feed-in tariffs, an easing of controls for onshore wind power, much increased support for electric vehicles and public transport, higher house-building standards and extensive financial and technical support for upgrading existing housing stock. Across these areas and many more, including [food production](#) and air and sea transport, it is less a matter of sudden revolutionary change and more a process of very rapidly expanding what is already in its early stages.

There is also a specific need for a transformation in approaches to international development, with a strong emphasis on assisting countries across the global south to develop ultra-low or zero-carbon economies while moving rapidly away from fossil carbon energy sources. At root this means comprehensively embracing renewable energy resources as well as appropriate variants of the many issues just mentioned, with sustained assistance from high-carbon economies in the global north as they engage in their own transition.

Effecting Change – Internal and International

There are two major obstacles to rapid change. First, there is resistance to immediate developments on grounds of cost combined with an endemic conservatism in the face of change. Second, there remains a pernicious legacy of climate change denial made worse by the determination of a well-funded climate denial lobby to resist any response, even in the face of the overwhelming evidence that action is essential. In a state such as Britain, though, there are three elements that could counter these obstacles while greatly aiding the process.

The first would be a very active and persistent civil society environment that pushes relentlessly for action. This is absolutely essential and there are signs that there is a renewed commitment coming to the fore that is taking many forms. Much of it is linked to a related concern that the neo-liberal economic system is failing, but since many elements of that system have a climate denial aspect, the linkage is an advantage. This civil society environment provides agency in its own right and can also help precipitate change in the national political system.

The second element would be the capacity for government, whether local or national, to provide a sustained process of embedding the requirement for radical change in the public discourse. Responding to the threat of climate disruption affects many different aspects of society and a governmental system orientated to implementing change has potential for action in those aspects, from education to industry and transport to agriculture. In all the many different areas the change in culture would need to be one of consistently seeing behaviour within the frame of countering climate disruption.

Finally, and linked closely to this, would be greater political leadership, again from the local through to the national level. While this may be dependent on a heretofore-lacking degree of political leadership, there is much scope for diverse elements of civil society to be far more directly demanding of politicians. Since climate disruption, if not curbed, will have an appalling impact on future generations, then any significant political actor that does not recognise and act on this should be seen as deficient in a primary requirement of office.

At the international level, any country that moves rapidly towards a zero-carbon economy will have increased authority to be listened to on the international stage, whether that is in regional or global organisations. But to be effective, promotion of the post-carbon transition has to be continual and deeply embedded. Foreign policy and the diplomatic and political processes that implement it normally prioritise national interests, whereas the risk of climate disruption is a matter of common security. Consequently there has to be a systematic change in the diplomatic and intergovernmental political culture in parallel with a changing national culture.

Conclusion

This summary of the essential changes required to address climate disruption covers a number of inter-related processes. At present some states are engaged in some of these processes and in a few cases progress has been quite rapid. What we do not so far have

is any one state that has combined more rapid internal change with a determined and sustained political commitment within its leadership. The purpose of analysing the issue in this manner does highlight that need but also argues that responding to the huge risk of climate disruption must be a process that permeates and changes a national culture, including its security culture, to something more inclusive and outward-looking. It may therefore be helpful to see agency within civil society in that light and for civil society actors to take this wider view whatever their individual contributions.

About the Author

Paul Rogers is Oxford Research Group's Senior Fellow in international security and Professor of Peace Studies at the University of Bradford. His ['Monthly Global Security Briefings'](#) are available from our website. His latest book *Irregular War: ISIS and the New Threats from the Margins* was published by I B Tauris in June 2016. These briefings are circulated free of charge for non-profit use, but please **consider making a donation to ORG**, if you are able to do so.

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