

Global Security Briefing – November 2018

Climate Change, Populism and National Security

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Summary

Climate disruption is the human security challenge of our age, with even a relatively modest increase in global temperatures impacting almost all aspects of economic, social and political life. With carbon emissions again rising and the world well off course delivering on the commitments it made in Paris three years ago, this briefing looks at this challenge as well as the rising influence of populist nationalism in key states, including the US and BRIC states. It argues for national security strategies to take a much clearer, preventive line in addressing the catastrophic risk posed by climate disruption.

Introduction

The twenty-fourth meeting of the Conference of Parties (COP24) to the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) meets in Katowice in Poland from 02 to 14 December. It follows hard on a new UN Environment [assessment](#) that global carbon emissions began rising again in 2017 after several years of stalling, as well as an International Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) preparatory [report](#) that presents the most forthright conclusion yet from a scientific panel that it is essential to limit global temperature increases to below 1.5°C. The previous consensus of a 2.0°C limit is now considered far too modest and there must therefore be a sustained acceleration in governmental and intergovernmental responses.

There is widespread agreement within the climate science community that, while a few countries may be treating this issue with the seriousness it deserves, the overall global response is wholly inadequate and, as a result, the chances of meeting this revised target are extremely low.

In recent years Oxford Research Group has published a series of research and analysis that relates the dangers of climate change to national and international approaches to security and this briefing seeks to put these articles in the context of the urgent need to respond adequately to the evolving crisis of what might more accurately be termed climate disruption.

The Response Required

Previous IPCC reports have required states parties to commit to progressive decreases in carbon emissions, the great majority of which result from the combustion of fossil carbon – coal, oil and natural gas. In parallel with this has been a recognition that the recent and current increases in atmospheric carbon dioxide are already going to cause serious problems of climate disruption that impact especially on poorer communities, so that adaptation to the inevitable changes is also essential. This should not, though, divert attention from the much greater problem of preventing catastrophic change.

The issue facing us is less a question of searching for radical new approaches and much more of accelerating the implementation of known answers. In the longer term it is possible that massive geo-engineering technologies capable of removing carbon from the atmosphere may emerge, but this is by no means certain and, in any case, the timescales are far too great. Instead, change has to come rapidly in two broad areas.

1. Firstly, the agreed timescales for rapid economic decarbonisation have to be radically shortened. 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.
2. Secondly, as economies across the global south expand, it is essential that such growth becomes carbon neutral, not least through the accelerated uptake of renewable energy technologies. This demands considerable support from those countries in the global north that have been responsible for the overwhelming majority of carbon emissions until very recently.

The Political Challenge of Decarbonisation

The obstacles to achieving this change are considerable and range over a number of areas of economic and security thinking as well as human behaviour more generally.

First, for the past three or four decades the dominant economic system has followed the neoliberal model which prioritises shareholder capitalism and the privatisation of state assets and minimises regulation, especially of financial systems. Whether or not it has been a successful development from the more mixed economies of the previous forty years may be highly questionable but its emphasis on the market and minimising the role of government makes it singularly unsuited for countering climate disruption.

In the current economic system, fossil carbon is assumed to be available long-term, with reserves broadly maintaining or increasing their value for investors. The transition to a zero-carbon economy will mean a progressive loss of value, with fossil carbon becoming

a stranded asset. If this were to happen quickly, with a bursting of the “[carbon bubble](#)” - estimated in current value at anywhere between \$1 and \$4 trillion - then a major financial crisis would be likely.

Countering climate disruption requires a more directionally managed economic approach and strong intergovernmental cooperation. Furthermore, sectors of modern economic activity espousing neoliberalism, especially those concerned with fossil carbon utilisation, have persistently downgraded the importance of climate change not least through the funding of opinion formers and policy groups promoting such views.

Secondly, while climate disruption does figure in the security thinking of some states, it is mainly in terms of the potential for this to affect the direct security of the state, either now or in the coming years. This means that responding to security challenges stemming from weak or failing states, the effects of climate-induced disasters and other specific factors are essentially responses to climate disruption rather than countering its causes. Military thinking in most states places emphasis on short- and medium-term state security issues (the “defence of the realm”) and very rarely extends to demanding of a government that it should see future climate disruption as a matter of conflict prevention.

Thirdly, current thinking on climate disruption points to the critical need for governments to take radical short-term action over the next decade in order to avoid huge problems in later years. Such action, if it is to be effective, may be electorally unpopular and therefore against the interests of ruling parties.

Another BRIC in the wall

There are also specific problems with the attitudes of five key states, the United States, Russia, India, China and now Brazil. In the **United States**, the George W Bush presidency was a period of marked climate scepticism, even if some constituent states took a very different view, and the current Trump White House is even more sceptical, even decrying a major internal report on the impact of climate disruption on the domestic economy.

Even under President Obama, who was an international advocate of climate action, the US shifted strongly towards domestic oil production from fracking, which has very serious environmental consequences. Much the same may be said of Canada under Premier Justin Trudeau, which talks the talk on climate change but remains heavily committed to producing and exporting oil from its vast tar sands deposits.

President Putin’s **Russia** is a major producer and exporter of fossil carbon, principally oil and gas, and may even be thought to be one of the few states (along with Canada) that may experience short-term benefits of a changing global climate as near-Arctic regions warm up. It shows little interest in climate science and the consequences of climate disruption.

While **India** is experiencing an increase in renewable energy utilisation, the rate of uptake is slow and there is a continuing dependency on coal, the dirtiest of the fossil carbon

sources. Given its relative economic under-development and its rate of growth, likely to overtake China's, India has perhaps the greatest potential to contribute to the growth or restraint of atmospheric carbon in the coming decades.

China is certainly expanding its renewable energy sources at a rapid rate, but its favouring of coal as an energy source in its international development projects does not square with a fundamental commitment to preventing climate disruption. With China's rate of economic growth somewhat reduced and competition with the US and India increasing, President Xi may be feeling greater pressure to pursue easy short-term options to increase power supply instead of a wholesale shift to renewables.

With the election of Jair Bolsonaro to its presidency, **Brazil** now becomes the final of the BRIC states to become of climate concern. A right-wing populist in the mould of Donald Trump, Bolsonaro has championed agribusiness and chafed against the protection of the Amazon rainforest by the environmental lobby. Brazil is less of significance for its greenhouse gas emissions or oil exports – both of which are very substantial – than for its capacity to absorb carbon. Bolsonaro, who will be inaugurated on 01 January, had campaigned on following Trump's lead out of the Paris Agreement but has now made rather conditional commitments to stay within the international agreement.

Finally, there is the issue of public perception and the demotivating effect of fear – the problem is simply too big so we either leave it to others or hope for the best. There is a marked generational impact in this respect since for people over fifty it is possible to have recourse to the notion that “I won't be around so why worry?”

Possibilities

ORG's Sustainable Security Programme's extensive recent work on climate and security includes Oliver Scanlan's [analysis of government spending](#) on the two areas, a primer on [energy security](#) in relation to the UK's current energy mix, and an attempt through the forthcoming [Sustainable Security Index](#) to quantify the relative contributions of 170 states to current and future climate change.

The Programme has also looked at more [positive developments](#) in lowering carbon emissions and, perhaps most significantly, has made a [strong case](#) for integrating a climate security approach into the UK's National Security Strategy.

ORG's work is, in turn, just one part of a wide range of action on climate from think tanks, pressure groups and campaigning organisations through to nonviolent direct action. The cumulative effect should be to shift the debate in concert with other groups across the world, leading to more effective action.

This has also been detailed, in the case of the UK, by a recent [briefing](#) in this series which follows the innovative thinking of security being undertaken by [Rethinking Security](#). But the connection with the National Security Strategy needs to be taken much further. In particular, military strategy and posture in the UK should be challenged much more

directly than at present, specifically on the issue of the future of the global climate system.

The argument that human-induced climate change should be a fundamental concern of any state, and that it is in an important sense a security issue, means that preventing that change rather than merely responding to its effects should be a core part of the National Security Strategy. This means that the security community including military leaders should be arguing strongly for rapid economic decarbonisation as a persistent priority in government thinking. That is simply not the case at present and there are good reasons for thinking that military leadership has not been presented with this argument.

Conclusion

Among the many initiatives and activities by diverse groups favouring a proper response to the risk of catastrophic climate disruption there is now a very strong argument that the security community, and especially the senior military leadership, should be far more active. Preventing climate disruption, rather than responding to the crises it causes or exacerbates, should be seen as the priority for conflict prevention and should therefore be central to thinking on national and international security.

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