



E3G

Delivering Climate Security

International Security Responses to
a Climate Changed World

Nick Mabey

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About E3G

E3G is an independent, non-profit European organisation operating in the public interest to accelerate the global transition to sustainable development.

E3G builds cross-sectoral coalitions to achieve carefully defined outcomes, chosen for their capacity to leverage change.

E3G works closely with like-minded partners in government, politics, business, civil society, science, the media, public interest foundations and elsewhere.

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The full version of this paper is available as Whitehall Paper 69¹, published by the Royal United Services Institute (RUSI) and distributed by Routledge².

Edited Summary

Food riots in Mexico City, environmental outrage from Osama bin Laden and Russian territorial claims in the Arctic: the past year has seen climate change emerge as a serious issue across the security agenda, from the abstraction of discussions in the UN Security Council to the brutal reality of drought-driven conflict in Africa. These are just the first signs of how climate change – and our responses to it – will fundamentally change the strategic security context in the coming decades.

Conflict over natural resources, whether driven by need or greed, has always been a part of human society. The past shows us that social tensions driven by past climatic change destroyed many advanced societies, such as the droughts which drove the collapse of early civilisations in Mesopotamia and Peru. The coming decades will see rising resource scarcity, greater environmental degradation and increasingly disruptive climatic change at levels never experienced before in human history. In an increasingly uncertain world these trends are disturbingly predictable.

Climate change is already creating hard security threats, but it has no hard security solutions. Climate change is like a ticking clock: every increase in greenhouse gases in the atmosphere permanently alters the climate, and we can never move the hands back to reclaim the past. Even if we stopped emitting

¹ http://www.rusi.org/go.php?structureID=issues_whitehall

² <http://www.tandf.co.uk/journals/titles/02681307.asp>

pollution tomorrow, the world is already committed to levels of climate change unseen for hundreds of thousands of years. If we fail to stop polluting, we will be committed to catastrophic and irreversible changes over the next century, which will directly displace hundreds of millions of people and critically undermine the livelihoods of billions. There is some scientific uncertainty over these impacts, but it is over when they will occur not if they will occur – unless climate change is slowed. Preventing catastrophic and runaway climate change will require a global mobilisation of effort and co-operation seldom seen in peacetime.

A new security environment

In the next decades, climate change will drive as significant a change in the strategic security environment as the end of the Cold War. If uncontrolled, climate change will have security implications of similar magnitude to the World Wars, but which will last for centuries. The past will provide no guide to this coming future; a robust response will require clear assessments based on the best scientific projections.

Despite these threats, current responses to climate change are slow and inadequate. Even Europe, which leads global efforts to move to a low-carbon economy, is only spending the equivalent of around 0.5 per cent of its combined defence budget on tackling climate change, though this does not count the action achieved through direct regulation. There is a need for more direct and interventionist action to prevent climate risks. One reason for this is that economic analysis has systematically undervalued the potential extreme impacts of climate change, underplaying the implication of the most severe risks to policy makers. But a failure to acknowledge and prepare for the worst case scenario is as dangerous in the case of climate change as it is for managing the risks of terrorism or nuclear weapons proliferation.

The security sector must be part of the solution

Security sector actors must not just prepare to respond to the security challenges of climate change; they must also be part of the solution. Partly, this means reducing the climate impact of their operations and activities. Much more importantly, it means communicating the security implications and costs of uncontrolled and extreme climate change to political leaders and the public. Unless achieving climate security is seen as a vital and existential national

interest, it will be too easy to delay action on the basis of avoiding immediate costs and perceived threats to economic competitiveness.

But climate change is also a security opportunity. A low-carbon global economy will be a far more energy-secure economy. Trillions of dollars otherwise invested in oil and gas production increasingly concentrated in unstable regions, will instead deliver new technology and local clean energy sources. This will lower geo-political tensions over fossil fuel reserves, and greatly reduce the security impact of 'peak oil' when it arrives.

The security sector has the vital – and expensively acquired – experience of how government can drive technological development and infrastructure deployment at a similar scale to that needed to respond to climate change. Security actors should promote dramatically increased investment in the development and deployment of technologies critical for energy and climate security. This will be expensive, but is achievable. Recent estimates suggest this would require investment commensurate with current spending on the War on Terror, and if a crash response is needed in response to extreme climate change, investment at levels similar to the Apollo programme.

The impact on foreign policy

The reality of climate change will require fundamental changes in how international relations are conducted, and will alter much of the focus of international security policy. It will change strategic interests, alliances, borders, threats, economic relationships, comparative advantages and the nature of international co-operation, and will help determine the continued legitimacy of the UN in the eyes of much of the world. Climate change geopolitics will extend far outside the environmental sphere, and will link old problems in new ways.

Managing the complexity of our collective climate security will become an ever more important part of foreign policy. Climate change will require OECD countries to revisit their international industrial policies by sharing advanced energy technologies and funding large-scale investment in economic competitors such as China and India. OECD countries must recognise that achieving climate security is a more vital national interest than the narrow maximisation of domestic company profits.

Energy security interests will be increasingly delivered through co-operation with energy consuming countries on technology development and diffusion,

rather than through relationships with producing countries on fossil fuel discoveries and delivery. Declining use of imported fossil fuels may cause tensions with many producer countries. Countries will not be able to achieve national energy security by undermining other countries' climate security by using coal without capturing the carbon. There will be no agreement on climate security without guaranteeing all countries' energy security.

Nuclear proliferation mechanisms will need to be greatly strengthened if nuclear power is to be deployed at a scale which would make a real difference to climate change. Climate change will be used as a political mask for some states to acquire nuclear technology for military purposes, and development and sharing of more benign energy alternatives is the best protection against this. A major climate change disaster in the next decade would also drive pressure for a 'crash programme' of rapid deployment of nuclear power worldwide; at rates which would compromise the ability of the current nuclear industry supply chain to preserve safety or security.

Climate change and geopolitics

Rising sea levels and melting ice caps in the Arctic are already leading to territorial disputes between major powers. The disappearance of small islands could release valuable marine resources into the already contested waters of the Indian Ocean, Pacific and South China Sea. The rights of environmental refugees and migrants will become a source of national and international tensions, especially in delta regions such as Bangladesh, Nigeria and Egypt. Fisheries stocks will collapse or move, destroying millions of people's livelihoods and undermining delicately negotiated international management regimes. The EU Common Fisheries Policy will not survive in its present form.

Countries will respond to the forecasts of more erratic water flows in all major river basins by building new upstream dams and water storage. Such 'climate change adaptation' will drive cross-border tensions in the next decade, including the potential for armed interstate conflict. Strengthened international rules and more activist preventative diplomacy from the international community will be needed to peacefully manage changes in shared water and fisheries resources, and to preserve the rights of displaced people and states.

Justice, terrorism and insecurity

Issues of justice and ethics lie at the heart of climate change; the rich have caused the problem but the poor are bearing the brunt of the impact. Global

resentment against the current international order will rise if there is a failure to agree and deliver aggressive emission reduction goals, or adequately help the victims of climate change adapt and obtain compensation. Radical protest movements are building around the globe, and direct action against new airports and power stations is growing. Violent extremists will use these tensions to fuel existing causes and Osama bin Laden has spoken several times on the inequities of climate change: Muslim countries will be among the hardest hit by climate change. If frustrated by inaction to slow climate change, radical environmental movements may spawn eco-terrorist groups in a parallel with the evolution of extreme left-wing movements in the 1970s. Failure to act effectively will undermine the legitimacy of the international system, reducing its effectiveness in tackling other security threats.

In general, climate change could drive a more collaborative approach in inter-state relations or it could exacerbate tensions between and within countries, leading to a 'politics of insecurity' as countries focus on protecting themselves against the impact. The pattern of co-operation which arises will depend on how effectively climate change is incorporated into mainstream foreign policy, and is perceived as changing the balance of national interests in major countries across a wide range of security and geo-political issues.

Climate change is already increasing conflict risks in unstable regions – especially Africa – as fragile governance systems are overwhelmed by the social stresses released by drought, famine, flood, migration, extreme weather events and rising sea levels. At moderate levels of change, conflict is preventable and conflict causality is complex as climate change acts as a stress multiplier of existing tensions. But the growing information on present and future serious climate security impacts is as good, if not better, than other information routinely used in security planning and assessment. If climate change is not slowed and critical environmental thresholds are exceeded, then it will become a primary driver of conflicts between and within states.

Tackling instability

Over the next decades, the determinant of whether climate change drives serious conflict lies in how political systems respond to the tensions it creates. Too often, analysis of climate change impacts assumes that all governments will act to maximise the common good in response to change. But resource management regimes in much of the world are already built upon communal divisions and conflict, and are highly unlikely to respond in a predictable,

rational and inclusive manner to climate stresses. Experience of current instability in the Sahel – especially Darfur – shows how quickly disputes over access to resources in times of environmental stress can become politicised and exacerbate existing communal conflicts based on ethnic, religious or other lines. These conflicts develop their own internal dynamics, but will see no sustainable solutions unless the root causes of resource grievances are addressed.

Achieving security in a climate-stressed world will require a more pro-active and intensive approach to tackling instability in strategically important regions with high climate vulnerability and weak governance. This will require changes across the security sector, with a stronger incorporation of long-term and structural risk factors into planning and a willingness to engage effectively with tough governance challenges; bringing diplomatic, development, intelligence and law enforcement capabilities to bear. This does not just require implementation of some general ‘conflict prevention’ agenda, but direct focus on the strategic necessity of managing increased resource use tensions. There will be no long-term stability in Afghanistan unless rural livelihoods and water management are robust to climate change. Attempts to build a ‘hearts and minds’ coalition against Islamist extremism will be crucially undermined when many of the main sources of job creation for young men in North Africa are being undermined by warmer temperatures and declining rainfall.

The impact of climate change on instability will also require changes to how climate adaptation is handled in the international climate change regime. To date climate adaptation has mainly been framed as a technical development activity, but in reality it will involve complex political and diplomatic interventions in difficult and highly charged internal resource management issues. The political economy of resource management must lie at the heart of all adaptation measures as they deal with the resources of subsistence and identity: land, water and security. More controversially, access to international adaptation finance may need to be made conditional on countries implementing reforms to internal resource management policies to improve social resilience and prevent conflict and marginalisation of vulnerable groups.

All these impacts are already occurring as the earth gradually warms in the early stages of climate change. If climate change is not controlled before we meet critical ‘tipping points’ in natural systems the impact will become catastrophic, with large parts of the world becoming uninhabitable for their current populations by the middle of the century. Such an outcome would overwhelm

current security and humanitarian capacity to respond, and would make a mockery of the international community's commitments to a 'Responsibility to Protect' and the achievement of the Millennium Development Goals.

Conclusion

The world has the financial resources and technological potential to deliver a secure and low-carbon economy. The question is whether we are capable of making the political choices to mobilise these resources in pursuit of our collective climate security. Security issues are fundamental for making the political case for urgent action. Security sector reform will be central to managing the consequences of the changes we are already undergoing. Security actors have a strong interest in ensuring a bold and rapid transformation to a secure and low-carbon economy, as this will also reduce tensions over access to dwindling fossil fuel reserves.

The changing security context driven by climate change requires an imaginative and forthright response from security actors if we are to preserve our vital interests and values in this century. The first signs of this response are emerging, but the necessary changes will need to happen much faster than in the past if they are to match the remorseless ecological timetable of a changing climate driven by a dynamic global economy.