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The Geopolitics of Climate Change

John Ashton / Tom Burke

Climate change is one of the most urgent and difficult issues facing civilisation. Recently, the chief scientist to the British Government said that it was a bigger threat than global terrorism. Not all would agree with him, but it does share with global terrorism the property of being a new, different and dangerous phenomenon.

All experts want to claim that their problem is different. There are three reasons for believing that in this case climate policy analysts might be right.

First, the sheer scale of the problem. It is a truly global problem that directly affects every single citizen of every single nation. This creates an entanglement of interests unprecedented in history. No opt-outs are available.

If the problem of climate change is truly global, so too is the path to its solution. At its heart, solving this problem requires nothing less than aligning the energy policies of over 150 nations.

The European Union, despite all the urgent pressures of creating a single market, has tried without great success for 50 years to align the energy policies of just 15 countries. We have seen repeated attempts by governments of the United States to create a Federal energy policy diminished by internal difficulties.

Tackling climate change is a comparable diplomatic challenge to the strategic arms control talks or the creation of the World

Trade Organisation. Both of these processes took more than fifty years to arrive at their present incomplete positions. We may not have the luxury of fifty years to address climate change.

The second reason why this problem is different is that it is driven primarily by knowledge – by our understanding of an inexorable natural reality. It is the findings of the International Panel on Climate Change that have compelled governments to act on this problem. This is a very different motivating force from the collisions of national interest or the clash of deeply held beliefs that have traditionally driven international relations.

By comparison with interests and ideologies, knowledge is a weak influence on international relations: it is more complex and less compelling; its thrust is more easily ignored or deflected. Human beings have a well developed ability to avoid what they cannot easily address.

The ticking clock

The third reason is that with climate change there is a ticking clock. During the Cold War the Bulletin of Atomic Scientists would move the hands on a metaphorical clock closer or further away from midnight depending on the state of relations between the superpowers.

The climate clock is no metaphor. Its ticking is the growing concentration of carbon dioxide in the atmosphere. Today we live in a world in which this concentration has reached 378 parts per million (ppm), up from approximately 270 ppm in the pre-industrial age.

Because of the delays in the response of the climate to increasing carbon dioxide concentrations we do not know if even this level will maintain a safe climate for civilisation.

When, as we frequently did, we missed a crucial deadline in the arms or trade talks it was a setback but we could always try again to reach the same goal. Wealth increased a little later than it might otherwise have done, security was at risk for a little longer, but the goals remained available.

A road with no return

It is different with climate change. For all practical purposes we cannot return to the world of 270 ppm or even to the 378 ppm world that we now live in. Once we pass a certain concentration it is gone for good. The climate it created is no longer available.

Many climate analysts believe that we are already too late to avoid living in a climate shaped by a carbon dioxide concentration of anything less than 450 ppm. We have no idea whether economic development can succeed in such a climate. There is no experience in diplomatic history of having to negotiate under such relentless and implacable deadlines.

The need for coherence

Any problem on this scale is bound to transcend traditional policy boundaries. In particular, climate change blurs, perhaps eliminates, the distinction between foreign and domestic policy. Energy, transport, housing, agriculture, and many other policy disciplines must now be treated as an integral part of foreign policy.

Home departments must learn to think, with their foreign policy colleagues, about how to deploy foreign policy assets in support of shared goals on climate. In the UK, this has led to the creation of a symbiotic relationship between the Foreign and Environment Ministries in both the design and delivery of climate policy. On this issue the traditional barriers between the two departments have all but disappeared.

Climate equity and multilateralism

At the same time the advocates within foreign ministries of this new approach to climate diplomacy need to convince their colleagues to take part in this mobilisation. The consequences of climate change will have such a profound effect on international affairs that they will come to shape the context within which diplomacy takes place.

This will happen – is happening – on many levels. Clearly, the physical impacts of climate change, for example the displacement of large numbers of people, will be significant. But, at a deeper level, the international system can only function effectively if everyone with a stake in it believes that they can make it work in their interests, and that others will take some heed of their interests. In other words, there needs to be a certain minimum level of equity in the system.

There is no greater threat to that equity than climate change. It is fundamentally inequitable: those most responsible for the problem are not the same as those most vulnerable to its consequences. As those consequences become more evident, they will impose increasing stresses on the

framework within which other international conversations take place. We cannot expect to keep building rules-based international systems for dealing with other challenges – trade, terrorism, drugs, weapons proliferation – without a response to climate that bridges the equity gap inherent in the problem itself.

The EU has a crucial role to play in weaving climate into the fabric of its foreign policy. It has leaders who recognise the unique scale of the problem and have invested their own political capital in it. It has an array of policy and engagement tools that it can bring to bear. The notion of a Common Foreign and Security Policy makes no sense unless it includes a clear strategy on climate as a foreign and security policy issue.

The transatlantic challenge and Europe's response

One test of this will be the transatlantic relationship. The transatlantic climate disagreement is often presented as being about Kyoto. This is wrong and dangerous in equal measure. It leads to the temptation to explore alternatives.

The real root of the disagreement is that the EU accepts the need for carbon constraints and the US Administration does not. So the only alternative to Kyoto that is acceptable to current US policymakers is one that denatures the already very weak carbon constraint that Kyoto embodies to such an extent that the EU could never accept it.

The most effective instrument of EU climate diplomacy with the US will be performance. We must make climate action work: demonstrate that in pursuing it we make our own economy more dynamic, that the costs are smaller and the benefits greater than is alleged by the US. We must carry out our own commitments irrespective of the actions of others to show that we are investing in an international framework for the longer term building on Kyoto,

and that our markets will reward those who wish to play by the same rules.

Russia

But there is a much more operational priority for EU climate diplomacy in coming months. This concerns Russia. Russia has not yet decided about Kyoto. In the end, one man – President Putin – will decide the fate of a treaty that affects the interests of the more than 6 billion people with a stake in the global response to climate change. That response can only move to the next stage if and when the uncertainty over Kyoto is resolved.

Too many people are already assuming that this will not happen. If the EU simply sits back and lets events take their course they may well be right.

But the EU and its member states do not need to do that. They have dealings with Russia, and therefore potential leverage, across a wide range of issues that bear directly on the Kyoto decision. The EU has a high level energy dialogue with Russia. It is negotiating with Russia over the terms of its accession to the WTO, which includes energy pricing. Its companies are investing heavily in modernising the Russian energy economy and increasing its already high degree interdependence with that of the EU. Their commercial expectations, and thus their investment decisions, are sensitive to the political context within which they take place.

We need to look across the spectrum at these interactions, and construct a proposition to the Russians that gives them a strong incentive to ratify. This should be in the form not of penalties, threats or lectures, but an invitation to design jointly with us an energy framework suitable for European and Russian needs in the twenty first century. And we need a grown up political strategy, starting perhaps with the EU/Russia Summit, for putting this proposition to the Russians in the right way and at the right time.

Climate change is not just another environmental issue to be dealt with when time and resources permit. A stable climate, like national security, is a public good without which economic prosperity and personal fulfilment are impossible. It is a prime duty of governments to secure such goods for their citizens. The current level of investment of political will and financial resources addresses climate change as an environmental rather than as a national security issue. Without a fundamental change in this mind-set governments will remain unable to discharge their duty to their citizens.

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More information on the INTACT project can be found online at:
www.intact-climate.org