

## Climate war? Australia gets it wrong twice over

Peter Vintila, currently writing a book on war and climate change, argues that climate change politics and treaty making are only likely to succeed when they grasped as global rather than as national security challenge. [www.postkyoto.org](http://www.postkyoto.org) [central@postkyoto.org](mailto:central@postkyoto.org)

The recent *Defence White Paper* acknowledges possible future security risks associated with climate change but makes little of them. They won't matter until 2030. For whatever reason, Australia is dithering. It is also at odds with a US defence establishment that began its serious thinking on the security implications of climate change in 2003.

More recently, the Royal United Services Institute in London, also suggested that Australia was getting wrong:

Climate change is already happening, so to press pause on considering it as a strategic issue, I think, could be a mistake," he said. The time cycles for buying equipment rotate in about 20-year cycles so you need to begin to make the decisions now to purchase the kinds of equipment that you'll need for a climate change world. (<http://www.abc.net.au/news/stories/2009/10/09/2709035.htm?section=australia>)

What kind of "equipment" is needed for a "climate change world"? Weapons and infrastructure for the new conflicts that might arise from unknown cocktails of menace: food and water shortages, catastrophic weather events, human displacement, mass migration sea level rise economic disruption and so on. Professor Alan Dupont, another Australian defence planner, agrees with these assessments and is also critical of the White Paper.

Surprisingly, the media has given only scant attention to the pressing issue. And even activists remain a little negligent. Too pre-occupied with the destructiveness of our peace-time economy perhaps? That's understandable, but it's also a serious mistake. The path of climate change will cross many theatres of war. In his pioneering book, *Climate Wars*, published last year, Gwynne Dyer notes that

climate change scenarios are already playing a large and increasing role in the military planning process... the implications of their scenarios are... alarming. There is a probability of wars, including even nuclear wars, if temperatures rise by 2° to 3°C. Once that happens, all hope of international co-operation to curb emissions and stop the warming, goes out the window.

### **A match made in hell**

As negative climate change impacts bite more deeply, the connections binding war and climate change will become more obvious. At this point we can only say that the two look like a match made in hell and this partnership will feed on itself as climate change brings hunger, thirst, displacement, despair, war and treaty failure ... and then more emissions, intensified climate change and escalating conflict...

But will the hungry and thirsty really fight? Dyer, again offers crucial insight:

This is a world where people are starting to starve but it is not always the familiar scene of helpless peasant societies facing famine with numb resignation. Some of the victims now are fully developed countries and their people will not watch their children starve so long as there is any recourse, however illegitimate, that might save them.

### **All dressed up but for the wrong event**

However diligent they might be, defence planners who are preparing for climate change are working on the basis of their own fundamental misunderstanding. (Australia will arrive here later!) Militaries belong to nations in what they all, great and small, see as a system of permanent anarchy, of mutually hostile national powers ready to pounce wherever weakness presents.

This view of the international world is called 'realism' and our defence planners and diplomats are all trained in it. It is crucial to distinguish what these public servants are ideologically trained to see and the world as it is – or at least, may be. Think about it for a moment. Perhaps no nation is as ferociously ruthless as realism suggests, perhaps we live in a kinder world than we imagine, one offering far more opportunities for international peace and co-operation than have yet been exploited – ever in history perhaps.

Realism denies its adherents a chance to even peep in on this world, never mind shake hands with the friends it may contain. Now wouldn't it be a shame to sacrifice the planet on the empty altar of aging, sclerotic and empirically unsupported theory dreamt up by a crabby Thomas Hobbes 350 year ago. It has nothing to contribute to a tired and crowded planet. There's not even a case to bet on here. Unrelieved suspicion and malice will guarantee planetary destruction. Trust may not guarantee salvation, but it creates a chance. And that's as good as it gets.

Trade economists are also typically "realists" and Garnaut does not hesitate to acknowledge this in his *Review*. Despite his principled stance on industry concessions, the *Review* gave Rudd the licence to run with the miserable 5% base-line target. Garnaut is principled but he is a principled realist and neo-liberal. The planet needs more than that.

Realism also fails because it describes security horizons that are unwaveringly national - national borders marking lines human solidarity and enmity. Unfortunately, climate change poses an entirely new threat: it poses a **global security crisis which cares nought for these borders..** The well-prepared may all be dressed up, but it's for the wrong event. A global, unlike a national crisis, says not "fight with all your brute to protect your patch"; it says "co-operate with all your heart, mobilise all of your generosity to save the planet".

Defence planners simply have the problem of climate war wrong, not because they underestimate it but because they cannot grasp its novel character and because their primary reason for being is to fight for patches. Their mode of engagement in the world, prevents proper understanding and their actions are pointless at best when it comes to global problems. Integrated planetary life-support systems, climate included, cannot be seized or protected by force.

### **A world beyond grasping**

Governments incite outrage if the costs of global climate change mitigation come to a few percentage of GDP. In the event of climate war, however,

leaders will be granted emergency powers and There'll be little argument about costs.. During WWII, the US, Britain and Germany spent up to 40%, 50% or 60% of their GDPs on war effort. Not four or five or six - should mitigation costs rise to these levels.

What dark lunacy is this? Death-making has unlimited access to the Treasury while the protection of life hustles for small change? Can that be right? Shouldn't we reverse these priorities? Or, as Spratt and Sutton's *Climate Code Red* argues, just give the planet's protection a little priority or emergency status.

Madness always has its own reason but here it leads to dangerous disability: Our leaders cannot rationally risk assess or rise to real dangers. Their minds are disposed to see only dangers posed by the often imagined hostility of their fellow humans. So fixed is their gaze by this obsession, they just cannot see the realities of a disintegrating planet. We need them to do so urgently, but they just cannot grasp the whole world in their hands.

(See *Climate Change War or Climate Change Peace* at <http://www.postkyoto.org/journal.pdf> for more extended discussion.)