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Insecurity and the Retrograde State

What do global warming, prolonged periods of economic instability and faltering non-proliferation regimes have in common? According to Anthony Burke, they demonstrate the increasing inability of states to cope with major security threats. It's the way they're structured that's the problem.

By Anthony Burke for ISN

Like many other cities in China, Shenzhen regularly feels the effect of poor air quality. Recently, it has become difficult for humans and animals to breathe, and a 'combination of conditions' has made it possible to look directly at the sun. These are daily conditions in Beijing, a city of 22 million.

Why is this such a scandal? First, there is state failure. The Chinese state is manifestly failing to protect and provide for its citizens' basic health and human security - even as it robustly defends and pursues the rapid path of capitalist industrial development it has chosen. Second, there is the moral scandal of widespread atmospheric pollution, which so often crosses borders and damages the health of people in other states. The annual [Southeast Asian haze](#) - a product of illegal Indonesian forest burning - is a notorious example. While ecologists and international lawyers have a term for the problem - '[transboundary atmospheric pollution](#)', for which European states have developed a non-binding convention - a moral philosopher would also remark that the air we breathe is a gift from the cosmos, a reminder of the fragile structure of our coexistence with the planet and each other. To poison it is a moral and political scandal..

The inexorable growth in greenhouse emissions shows that our abuse of the atmosphere has taken on dimensions that pose grave threats to human communities and global security over coming decades. With only a little hyperbole, the International Institute of Strategic Studies wrote in 2007 that if global emissions were allowed to continue unchecked, 'the effects could be catastrophic - on the level of nuclear war - if not this century, certainly in the next.' In 2006 and 2007 respectively the [Stern Commission](#) predicted that unchecked climate change would lead to a fall of up to 20% in per-capita consumption globally, and the [most recent assessment](#) of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) predicts up to 4.8°C of warming in the same scenario. More recently, a [panel of eminent scientists](#) have warned that even 1°C of warming will trigger some of the worst impacts-arctic melting, sea-level rise, and extreme weather - and that the UN's target cap of 2°C is in fact dangerous.

Threats to human and global security from climate change relate to the potential for climate stress - such as drought, or competition over water - to be a 'threat multiplier' in conflict or genocide; increases in water-borne disease and mortality; increased intensity of extreme weather events such

as flooding, hurricanes, and storm surges; and massive levels of forced migration. As we have seen with flooding in Bangladesh, Hurricane Katrina, and Typhoon Haiyan in the Philippines, it is the poorest communities which are most vulnerable to these security impacts and least able to adapt or ride them out. This reflects a range of grave inequalities in the global security system as it currently exists.

So what's the State doing?

Here, the very structure of the nation-state, and the international society of states, is failing to address a major globalised threat to the security of human beings and ecosystems. There exists no effective global institutional or legal regime to address the problem of climate change, even if the United Nations Framework Convention has been a useful mechanism for co-ordinating diplomacy, gathering scientific data and publicizing the problem. Efforts to promote discussion of the problem in the United Nations Security Council have been resisted by states like China and resulted in little more than statements.

Global climate change negotiations to agree on national contributions to a global cut in emissions that would stabilise the global climate at safe levels are still to produce any tangible results, even though they have been discussed since the 1990s. China is one of a group of countries resisting binding national targets, even as they accept that as the world's largest emitter, they must reduce the growth in their emissions. Under the influence of climate 'denialism' and the fossil fuel lobby, developed states like Australia, the US, and Canada are taking even more morally compromised positions. In short, while we may achieve a global climate treaty in 2015, it will have few teeth and fail to set the world on a path to prevent dangerous climate change.

The state-centric global order is also failing to manage other grave globalised security challenges – such as nuclear proliferation, global economic instability and inequality, terrorism, forced migration, transnational conflict, and the prevention of genocide and crimes against humanity – even if we can point to partial efforts such as the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons (NPT) or the emerging norm of the 'Responsibility to Protect' (R2P). Yet, effective genocide prevention is stymied by the great-power veto in the Security Council, and as [Stefanie Fishel](#) has recently argued, the R2P norm itself fails to grapple with the 'potential for massacre' latent in the state form itself.

The non-proliferation regime is also failing in its objectives to stymie proliferation and achieve disarmament, because of the freedoms it grants to states to control the nuclear fuel cycle and develop nuclear weapons policy without scrutiny. It is certainly ill-equipped to deal with two potential, and quite different, long-range futures: unchecked proliferation, or the strategic uncertainties of a disarming world.

Which begs a couple of questions

Can we continue to depend on the state to defend us against threats to humanity? Many political theorists and international security analysts would undoubtedly answer this question with a heartfelt 'no'. Instead, the [underlying assumptions](#) of the national security state must change. No longer can it be seen as a contained and sovereign 'body-politic' that can – with military threats, hardnosed Realpolitik, and selective cooperation – 'immunise' its citizens from external security threats. Instead, globalized threats transcend borders and emerge from within states themselves, from their own activities and interactions with corporations, the weapons complex, and non-state actors. Threats are the result of long-range, complex and often anonymous processes and need to be understood and addressed in a systemic way.

So, does this mean that a world government is a likely or desirable solution to globalised insecurity?

Not necessarily. However, cosmopolitan-inspired change must be a key part of the solution. This means two things.

First, some (ethical) principles. All governments and international organizations – and all actors who affect the security of many others – must accept that all states and human beings have an equal right to security, which must be pursued in harmony with the global ecosystems we depend on for survival. All security actors have a responsibility to promote the long-term security of all communities, cooperatively and systemically, into the future. This means incorporating a concern for the long-term strategic effects of policy choices, and a moral responsibility to future generations, into everything we do – foreign and defense policy, economic and environmental governance, social welfare, and global diplomacy, treaty-making and institution-building.

Second, a (political) pathway to change. States are not likely to disappear, and often form a valuable (if flawed) mechanism for democratic representation and the delivery of economic stability, social security, education and public health. However their foreign policy ethos must shift to one that supports the achievement of cosmopolitan global ends – human rights, deep human security, the reduction of conflict, environmental protection, and disarmament – through cooperation to improve global governance and build new institutions and law. This will require, more and more, giving up sovereign freedoms to act and cause harm, and yielding powers to global and regional institutions that work – through the agency of their state members – to represent the interests of humanity. It means reforming global security governance across a range of areas, so that it genuinely functions to serve the security of humanity rather than the powerful few.

It will also mean that corporations – especially those operating in the areas of global health, energy, defence, mining, and banking – must increasingly give up the market freedoms that pose serious threats to particular communities, the environment, or humanity itself. The current situation, in which powerful companies use their funds and influence to lobby and subvert governments to promote narrow interests, cannot be allowed to continue. That itself is a threat to global security, and one of the most perverse features of the international state system.

There should also be the tacit acknowledgement that states remain just one level of effective governance that will stretch from the most local levels through to sub-state, national, regional and global levels. Global diplomacy and problem solving (especially in an area like climate change) must reach beyond the state level to incorporate the voices and expertise of those whose security is most affected and who are most capable of contributing to solutions. This involves a complex balancing act between those with power, resources and expertise, and hearing the voices and enabling the agency of the communities most affected and whose interests to date have not been heard.

There are, without doubt, a host of philosophical and political complexities that are associated with this path, not to mention many practical obstacles. The need to manage competition and strategic uncertainty, and patiently resolve clashing interests, will remain. However, confronting the global security challenges that potentially lie in wait – more economic crises, unchecked climate change, nuclear war, hundreds of millions of refugees, and more terrible crimes against humanity – means that we must begin to explore this path. Even modest advances along it will have enormous security benefits and show us how much easier it could be to create a better world.

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