Climate change and security: the time to act is now

Recommended Citation

"Climate change and security: the time to act is now", APSNet Policy Forum, December 01, 2008, https://nautilus.org/apsnet/climate-change-and-security-the-time-to-act-is-now/

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Introduction

Allan Behm of the Canberra group Knowledge Pond, writing after the Nautilus Institute workshop on Mapping Climate Change Complexity in Indonesia and Australia, notes that “for Australia’s populous neighbour, Indonesia, the problems of climate change are real and mounting. And Australia has such fundamental security interests in Indonesia that it cannot sit on the sidelines and wish the problem away.” Behm continues: “How competently – and proactively – Indonesia and Australia deal with this complexity will largely determine the vitality of the bilateral strategic relationship over the next four decades or so.” Behm proposes a coordinated Australia-Indonesia strategy at the national, bilateral, regional and global levels. “The Australian and Indonesian governments”, Behm recommends, “need to set up an Inter-Governmental Climate Change Commission, under treaty arrangements, charged with directing and coordinating research programs and other bilateral cooperative efforts that would both mitigate the effects of climate change and provide a standing mechanism for responding to unforeseen or overwhelming events.”

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For the doubters and nay-sayers, climate change is surrounded by so many uncertainties that they see no point in doing anything now to mitigate its consequences, because whatever is done will be irrelevant, nugatory or both. So, Ross Garnaut’s report has been dismissed in some quarters as alarmist, and his recommendations as premature, too costly or pointless. Yet, in its most recent *World Energy Outlook*, the International Energy Agency suggests, on current trends, a 6°C rise in average global temperature in the long term, and implies that a 550 ppm concentration of CO2 equivalent is practically inevitable without drastic – and early – cuts to hydrocarbon usage. This makes Garnaut’s conclusions seem minimalist.

Climate change will bring with it profound challenges to national security and regional stability,

especially in South East Asia, Bangladesh and Burma. Rises in ocean levels and temperatures, combined with changed monsoonal weather patterns are likely to precipitate major weather events throughout Asia. The consequences will include significant population displacement as coastal agricultural land becomes unfarmable, as livelihoods and dwellings are destroyed, as potable water becomes scarce, and as unpredictable extrinsic variables such as pandemic influenza, water-borne diseases and malnutrition compound the pressures on national governments.

There is a growing recognition internationally that, while climate-induced international wars are less likely to occur, climate change could well trigger national and international distributional conflicts and intensify problems already hard to manage such as state failure, the erosion of social and rising violence.

For Australia's populous neighbour, Indonesia, the problems are real and mounting. And Australia has such fundamental security interests in Indonesia that it cannot sit on the sidelines and wish the problem away. Nor, as Richard Tanter pointed out at a recent Nautilus at RMIT climate change workshop, can Australia simply rely on aid-based approaches delivered from a position of assumed superiority.

Geography, and history to an extent, inextricably links the strategic futures of Australia and Indonesia. This is not simply a question of proximity, though that has its own consequences. Rather, it is the fact that the geophysical and ecological forces that are currently reshaping the physical environment add another layer of complexity to the political and economic forces that have hitherto determined the strategic prospects of both countries.

How competently – and proactively – Indonesia and Australia deal with this complexity will largely determine the vitality of the bilateral strategic relationship over the next four decades or so. And if the past is anything to go by, the governments of both countries will need to embark on a quantum change in relationship management if the consequences of uncertainty are to be managed effectively.

Both countries need to replace their characteristic caution, indecision and pragmatic adhocracy with an approach that might make the consequences of climate change amenable to a measure of proactive management.

Australia and Indonesia need to embark on a four part strategy that would develop national resilience to climate change on both sides of the Arafura Sea, as well as providing a measure of regional leadership and a serious contribution of broader international efforts to manage the effects of climate change before its consequences are simply overwhelming.

First, Australia and Indonesia both need to establish a National Climate Change Authority that works directly to the President or the Prime Minister, as the case may be. At the 2020 Summit, delegates suggested the establishment of a climate information authority, but much more than that is needed. To be effective, the climate change authorities must have an executive mandate and a funding base that makes them role players, not just clearing houses. A national climate change authority must drive the national agenda in both Canberra and Jakarta, and provide government with the hard-edged advice that is always the basis of sound decisions.

Second, to extend and complement the work of the national climate change authorities, the Australian and Indonesian governments need to set up an Inter-Governmental Climate Change Commission, under treaty arrangements, charged with directing and coordinating research programs and other bilateral cooperative efforts that would both mitigate the effects of climate change and provide a standing mechanism for responding to unforeseen or overwhelming events.

While then-PM Howard's response to the 2004 tsunami was both swift and generous, such a body, had it already been in existence, would have seen much faster rehabilitation and reconstruction results than have been the case so far.

Third, Australia and Indonesia should advance a joint initiative, through APEC, that would facilitate the regional dissemination of the results of work at the national and bilateral levels throughout Asia and the Pacific. The effects of rising ocean levels alone – discounting any other weather effects – suggests that the riverine deltas and archipelagos of Asia would suffer serious consequences such that strategic prevention would be infinitely preferable, and less expensive, than *ex post facto* cures.

Finally, Australia and Indonesia, perhaps working with APEC as a bloc, need to support global efforts to address climate change, and the UN is the best-positioned multilateral institution to do this. Of course, given the inertia that generally characterizes the UN, and the self-serving role of many of its members, that would be no easy task. But the French and German governments have already suggested the strengthening of the UN Environment Program (UNEP) and its elevation to a status similar to that of the UNHCR and the UNDP. This must be supported. To move beyond the post-Kyoto world, where the effects of climate change are contained and then reversed, strength, courage and energy will be key pre-requisites.

This is the kind of "war" that the Rudd government should fight.

About the author

Allan Behm is a director of Knowledge Pond, an international group advising on strategy and risk, and a former head of the International Policy and Strategy Divisions of the Department of Defence.

Acknowledgments

A version of this article appeared in the Defence Supplement in The Australian, 29-30 November 2008. A longer version written for the Nautilus Institute workshop on Mapping Complexity in Climate Change Impacts and Responses in Indonesia and Australia on November 21-22 will appear in the new year.

Nautilus invites your response

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