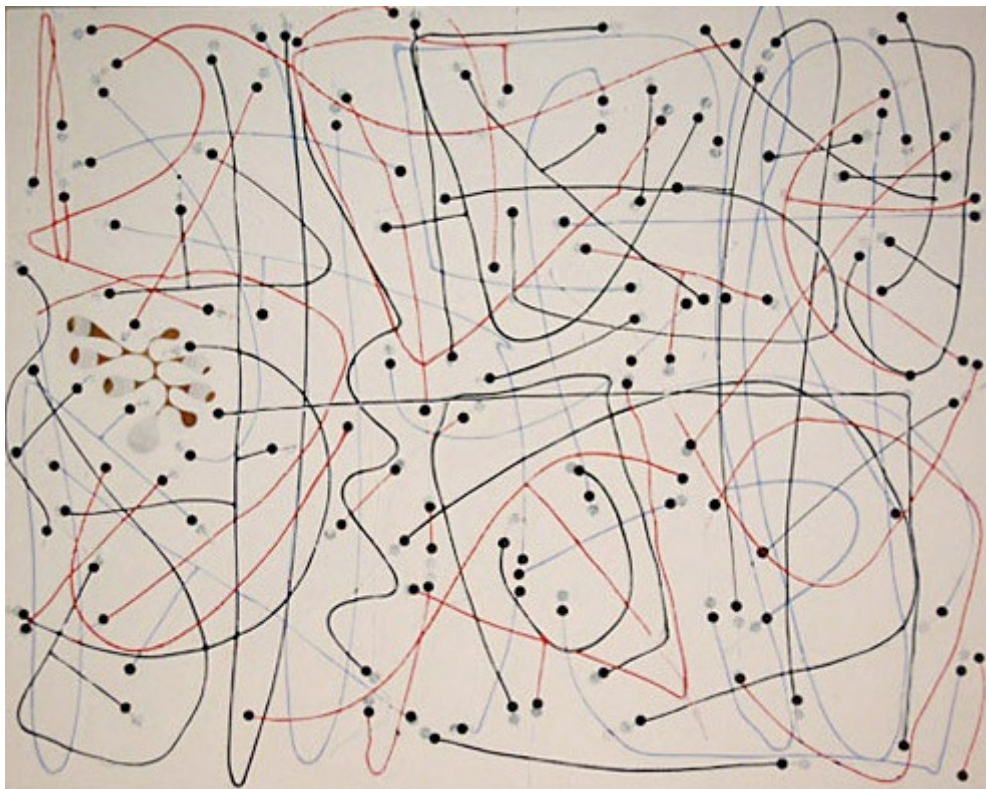




Connecting the Dots - In an Ocean?



The NAPSNet Policy Forum provides expert analysis of contemporary peace and security issues in Northeast Asia. As always, we invite your responses to this report and hope you will take the opportunity to participate in discussion of the analysis.



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by Nikhil Desai

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I. Introduction

Nikhil Desai questions the dubious connection between violence and crime and regional and global rises in temperatures.

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II. Policy Forum by Nikhil Desai

Connecting the Dots - In an Ocean?

We teach children that correlations do not imply causality. Even causal links can run in the opposite direction than suspected--or in both directions--and there may be some intervening factors including matters of choice and intent.

But this common sense can take its leave, especially if the subject resides closer to the analysts' hearts than to their brains.

On 1st August, LA Times reported on a study – printed in the journal *Science* with the headline “Violence *will* rise as climate changes, scientists *predict*”.

Nothing of the sort. The paper's authors are econometricians, not scientists, and abusing all kinds of evidence and advanced statistical methods. It probably wouldn't have been published in *Econometrica* but *Science* these days doesn't seem to mind Unscience.

Science Daily led with a somewhat qualified headline “Cool Heads Likely Won't Prevail in a Hotter, Wetter World: Climate Change Will Likely Exacerbate Violence”. The next day's stories were a little moderate – the BBC headline was, “Rise in violence '*linked*' to climate change” and Guardian's “Climate change *linked* to violent behavior*”;

The “study analyses historic and modern data gathered from around the world and finds **a link** between global warming and increased human violence”. (emphasis added)

A link. As if connecting dots with a line.

What was the hoopla? “UC Berkeley researchers pull together data on ancient wars, road rage and more, and conclude that violence *may* increase between now and 2050 because of higher temperatures and extreme rainfall patterns.”

One story cites a co-author “.. the climate does not have to deviate much to upset that peace and well-being.” And goes on “The 1 standard-deviation shift he and his co-authors uncovered equates to a seemingly paltry change in weather: it's roughly equal to warming an African country by 0.35°C, or by 0.63°F, for an entire year, or warming a county in the United States by 2.9°C, or by 5.2°F, for a given month.”

The next time the temperature in Egypt goes *down* by 0.35°C for an entire year, we might get to see a return to peace and democracy, I suppose.

"These are pretty moderate changes, but they have a sizable impact on those societies," the same co-author says.

Only according to dubious models most people won't bother to scrutinize. There is safety in opacity and self-proclaimed rigor.

The apparent lesson for dealing with moderate increase in temperatures is to use air-conditioners and run the power plants, no matter what they emit. And to deal with crop failures, expand food storage and distribution systems and timely information and action all year around – from crop planting to the next round of the same.

Heat waves and crop failures are not new to humanity, but we are getting better at coping with them. True, sometimes the famines have to reach potentially catastrophic levels before food aid is mobilized, or that thousands of people die of famines, and millions stay chronically hungry and malnourished, and not always due to crop failures. Even crimes and wars can be deterred with state use of force.

However, Hurricane Sandy led to some rise in crime – mostly burglary – perhaps because the lights went out and some people had left their homes. But is this an underlying link?

"The authors say they can only speculate on the reasons why increased temperature and changed patterns of rainfall would move humans to violence." "The physiological mechanism linking temperature to aggression remains unknown," they wrote."

Reducing climate to earth surface temperatures, and societal violence to some unknown physiological response of individual human bodies to temperature increase, undermines centuries of thinking and research on ethics, criminality, wars, and one might say even peace and cooperation.

Pretensions – and millions of pages of "scientific research" – aside, we don't know much for sure about how climate affects society – tens and hundreds and thousands of processes intermediated by technologies and institutions – and these people presume to model climate *change*, by definition a multi-decadal phenomenon that is a multiplex of global, regional, local temperature, winds, water flows, biotic responses, and that's before we even get into modeling institutions, knowledge, infrastructure, economics, politics, and all the confounding factors for each of these processes?

We certainly do not know enough for any plannable action.

A blogger writes, "Will climate change trigger endless war? If we don't change prevailing business-as-usual political economies, probably – but we can still say 'no' and mean it."

Research in service of propaganda, do-anything-ism. With the usual plea – "More studies would be needed to confirm the results and explain why such a correlation might exist, they said." Then comparing speculations to the history of research on tobacco and cancer. Of course, climate change may be inversely linked to tobacco smoking; particulates may cool the atmosphere, some more studies could no doubt show.

Shouldn't one ask, "What is climate, and is surface temperature a good proxy for all climate-related events and processes?" And whether it is cheaper to strengthen the societal resistance to climatic risks – whether or not the climate is changing or if it is, by specific amount in specific forms for specific contexts – than to dream that changing "business as usual" will protect the whole of

humanity from violence, deprivation, and illness.

Children drawing with crayons can claim they are connecting dots while all they do is create a mess. Claiming causality between higher temperatures and violence in society is like asking children to connect the dots while sitting in a bathtub. Or in the middle of the ocean.

III. References

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IV. NAUTILUS INVITES YOUR RESPONSES

The Nautilus Peace and Security Network invites your responses to this report. Please leave a comment below or send your response to: nautilus@nautilus.org. Comments will only be posted if they include the author's name and affiliation.

View this online at: <https://nautilus.org/napsnet/napsnet-policy-forum/connecting-the-dots-in-an-ocean/>

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