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Climate Change and Human Security

Global Warming: Rethinking International Relations

By Alan Chong

SYNOPSIS

Recent escalations in the severity of extreme weather events in Europe have set the stage for a rethink of international relations as a policy pathway towards dealing with climate change. Such rethinking requires a refocus on the social contract undergirding sovereignty. Global warming attests to that.

COMMENTARY

IN RECENT weeks, seasonal summer rains wrought unprecedented havoc in Germany, Belgium, Austria and many places nearby. Scenes televised and shared around the world showed quaint once-picturesque towns upended by massive currents of mud and burst riverbanks. Whole houses, shops, main streets, community facilities and cars were swept away as if they were flimsy toys in the face of nature's fierce tempest. News editorials and reporters on the ground spontaneously chorused a universal question: why were their governments neglectful of preparing for this tragedy?

Worse, both pictures and utterances of disbelief at the sheer damage wrought by nature implied that sovereign power was helpless against the wrath of wind, rain and flood. In the pan-Asian region stretching from Pakistan in the west, threading through Indonesia and northwards towards Indochina, China, the Korean Peninsula and Japan, Europe's recent devastation is like *déjà vu*. Throughout Asia, natural disasters have been annual contenders for the position of biggest national security threat. But how should the policy and scholarly communities rethink the 'international relations' of sovereign states?

Refocus on the Social Contract

States have long been assumed to operate according to the ideal of possessing a clearly demarcated political border, containing an identifiable population, both border in turn ruled by a government. A government in control of border and population is described as possessing sovereignty – a legal condition that implies there are no serious and material challenges to that government's monopoly of power and legitimate authority.

Under both constitutional and political definitions, sovereignty is supposed to be employed by rulers to protect the population by defending the border. This clearly did not apply when the rains and floods came for the German towns last week, and perennially for most of monsoon-vulnerable Asia. What sovereignty must address going forward is the re-evaluation of the social contract that undergirds sovereignty.

The population – or preferably 'We the People' – consent to that very sovereignty in an exchange relationship. The government is elected, or assigned authority and power by alternative means as it may be the case in some authoritarian states, on the basis that the people obtain protection within the sovereign state from all threats to life, liberty and prosperity to the fullest extent possible.

When the foundations of the present Westphalian-based world order were derived in the 1600s, the European political powers of the day were concerned with thwarting religious zealotry and imposition, as well as territorial grabs by neighbours. Commerce quickly emerged soon after as another reason for sovereignty: government needed to order the markets through laws of equity, transparency and assurance.

Now one's life, liberty, property and economic livelihoods are being rendered equally risky by the forces of nature. In short, the sovereign state needs to expand the moral and legal foundations of its social contract by admitting to the insecurities of the human person arising from nature's caprice. The latter can be named as the usual ecological suspects: global warming, overconsumption of biodiversity and natural resources, and the release of industrially produced gases that upset the chemical equilibrium of Planet Earth's air.

Interdependent Consequences

Take global warming for instance. This is an international relations issue because it is possible today to measure nationally emitted industrial pollution in terms of volumes of specific oxide gases and the well-known carbon emissions. States can therefore be ranked in terms of pollution severity.

The cumulative trajectories arising from the UN Conference on Environment and Development's (UNCED) 'Earth Summit' in Rio de Janeiro in 1992, produced the equivalent of an acknowledgement by virtually every sovereign state that the warming of the Earth's atmosphere was a collective responsibility of all governments.

This was also symptomatic of what political scientists have termed the tragedy of the commons. If no state owned up to being a contributor to a planetary problem, global

warming will only be compounded by every sovereign state's insistence on unilateral interpretations, or worse, neglect of a common malaise.

But global warming has border crossing consequences. Every sovereign state will be affected by every other sovereign state's policies governing their national pollution. The unevenness of each set of national policies cannot but compound the problem of an excess in discharge of toxic gases that erode the natural composition of breathable air through the disruption of the various atmospheric layers enclosing the Earth.

The build-up of toxic gasses traps heat within the Earth and in turn disturbs the natural movement of air masses. This in turn triggers extreme weather events like the exceptionally heavy thunderstorms in Europe, and the increasing frequency of tropical cyclones in Asia. It goes without saying that no single sovereign authority can eliminate extreme weather threats to each and every member of their socially contracted citizenry.

There is sufficient moral and rational reasoning to embrace the idea that human security is an idea whose time has come. And it is urgent because global warming has produced a situation of interdependent consequences for every human being because of industrial activities occurring in every sovereign territory.

Human Security: Security Policy for Climate Change

Sovereign states must confront extreme weather events by rethinking the moral and pragmatic purposes of international relations. Unfortunately, the time honoured saying that something is as unpredictable as the weather has still stuck in the minds of old-fashioned sovereignty-bound politicians.

Enlightened leadership of today's complex industrialised nation-states needs to appreciate that human security is upon us. The ability to rehabilitate the Earth's atmosphere, for instance, must mean that every human being regardless of whichever region they are located in, is synonymous with the security of every citizen.

The social contract that enables sovereignty to stand must include humanity's self-preservation in its ultimate sense of becoming security policy. Europe's latest thunderstorm – inflicted human miseries have joined Asia's climate-induced population displacements in a global community of fate.

Alan Chong is Associate Professor and Head of the Centre for Multilateralism Studies, at the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies (RSIS), Nanyang Technological University (NTU), Singapore. This is part of a series ahead of the RSIS webinar on Climate Change and Communities – a Human Security Perspective on 28 July 2021.
