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# Changing the Climate of International Relations



*Borderless problems such as climate change underscore the need to shift from a national security to human security approach in International Relations, because no one is safe until everyone is safe. Photo from Markus Spiske on Unsplash.*

FEATURED COMMENTARY

# Global Warming: Rethinking International Relations

By Alan Chong



In Asia and other parts of the world, natural disasters have become major security threats with worsening global warming. Photo from Saikiran Kesari on Unsplash.

*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 pop-

ulation, 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

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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 gases 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. ■

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## France as an Indo-Pacific Nation: Security and Multilateralism in Challenging Times

The Embassy of France and RSIS co-hosted a panel webinar on “France as an Indo-Pacific Nation: Security and Multilateralism in Challenging Times” on 8 July 2021. Ambassador Ong Keng Yong, Executive Deputy Chairman, RSIS, gave the opening remarks, noting that “Indo-Pacific” as a nomenclature is used more frequently today in place of the previously dominant “Asia-Pacific” construct. As major and regional powers publicised their respective narratives of the Indo-Pacific, ASEAN joined the conversation by adopting the ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific, which reiterates the idea of an open and multilateral architecture for the region with ASEAN at its centre.

Professor Geoffrey Till, Advisor, Maritime Security Programme, RSIS, outlined three maritime challenges for stakeholders to consider: (i) Continuing maritime

impact of the COVID-19 pandemic which has exacerbated regional stakeholder relations; (ii) Continuing concerns about the maintenance of good order at sea; (iii) Rise of great power, and even middle- and small-power competition in the region, aggravated by uncertainties surrounding China’s future role and intentions in the international order.

Dr Joel Ng, Research Fellow, Centre for Multilateralism Studies, RSIS, noted that the EU is seen as one of the most trusted external partners to Southeast Asia. He argued that ASEAN is a “pivotal actor” for the Indo-Pacific, making two observations: (i) Great powers will need ASEAN buy-in if they do not want to simply dictate terms to the region; and (ii) The momentum of ASEAN support will provide the vital tipping point for any regional initiative, and this is an open platform for

external powers to harness.

Ambassador Marc Abensour, Ambassador of France to Singapore, emphasised that France is a resident nation of the Indo-Pacific and the first European country to come up with an Indo-Pacific strategy. French strategy in the Indo-Pacific is characterised by three key features: (i) inclusiveness based on multilateral cooperation; (ii) priority to partnership with like-minded countries and regional organisations like ASEAN, with whom France is now a development partner; (iii) synergies between French and EU Indo-Pacific strategies.

Dr Collin Koh, Research Fellow and Coordinator, United States Programme, RSIS, highlighted the significance of naval confidence-building measures like the Code for Unplanned Encounters at Sea (CUES). CUES formalises the common practices concerning

navigational safety among navies. While CUES is not applicable to maritime law enforcement agencies, it is nonetheless good to have such mechanisms which are based on longstanding international conventions.

Rear Admiral Jean-Mathieu Rey, Joint Commander, French Armed Forces in the Asia-Pacific, concluded the webinar by noting that France is the only EU member state to maintain permanent military assets in the Indo-Pacific region. He highlighted three priorities of the French Armed Forces: (i) to protect French citizens, territories, and resources; (ii) to act quickly and efficiently in the event of natural disasters through Humanitarian Assistance and Disaster Relief missions; and (iii) to maintain a stabilising military presence in the region aimed at promoting and defending freedom of movement, at sea and in the air. ■

## Contesting Sovereignty: Power and Practice in Africa and Southeast Asia

On 22 July 2021, Dr Joel Ng, Research Fellow, Centre for Multilateralism Studies (CMS) launched his new book, “Contesting Sovereignty: Power and Practice in Africa and Southeast Asia”. Associate Professor Alan Chong, Head, CMS, delivered the introductory remarks at the launch ceremony, before Dr Ng elaborated on his latest title.

As sovereignty is jealously guarded by many nation-states, this begs the question of how and under what conditions contestations over it are resolved. In his book, Dr Ng examined how actors in the African Union (AU) and Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) negotiated sovereignty to accept, reject or

qualify foreign norms. Specifically, outcomes depended on how actors managed and controlled negotiations by influencing norm circles, using existing norms, and applying metis — or diplomatic skill and opportunities — to persuade others and realise their goals.

In terms of policy implications, Dr Ng found that the skilful use of diplomatic practices matters significantly, but this is not often discussed compared to diplomatic achievements. Abstract foreign norms, meanwhile, fared worse than foreign norms that had been tried and tested in the region. Finally, he observed that foreign and external pressure play a lesser role in the adoption of norms, arguing that this

might be counterproductive, as hard power does not always translate into soft power. Actors in the Global South have their own reasons in approaching foreign norms in the ways they do, separate from coercion or socialisation. It would be crucial to understand this to take a better pulse of different regional organisations rather than comparing them to the European Union.

Following this, Ambassador Ong Keng Yong, RSIS Executive Deputy Chairman, and Professor Khong Yuen Foong, Vice Dean (Research & Development) and Li Ka Shing Professor in Political Science, Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy, offered positive reviews of the book. Echoing

Assoc Prof Chong, they noted that it provides a useful comparison on different ways of doing regionalism, particularly when considering the difficulties in obtaining data on these less transparent institutions, and insights into how consensus is formed.

Discussants at the ensuing Q&A session also agreed that obtaining consensus can be a tricky and long process that not only boils down to norm circles and diplomatic skill, but also timing. Despite this, the speakers added that consensus remains favourable for keeping regions together, given that less powerful states would not have as much influence on shared futures otherwise. ■

## Multilateral Matters: News Roundup

### Myanmar crisis shows ASEAN's limits

*Bangkok Post* | 7 October 2021 | [Full Report](#)

### US-EU Trade and Tech Council reveals transatlantic fissures

*Hinrich Foundation* | 30 September 2021 | [Full Report](#)

### AUKUS: An Asian and European Perspective

*Observer Research Foundation* | 30 September 2021 |

Australia will need to bridge the trust deficit that joining the AUKUS has created with its European allies. [Full Report](#)

### The Age of America First

*Foreign Affairs* | 29 September 2021

| [Full Report](#)

### ASEAN and the Quad: Strategic impasse or avenue for cooperation?

*Brookings* | 23 September 2021 | [Full Report](#)

### China's CPTPP entry is closer than you think

*Nikkei Asian Review* | 20 September 2021 |

Beijing's application to join 11-nation partnership has been long in the making. [Full Report](#)

### Biden's doctrine and regional fallout

*Bangkok Post* | 14 September 2021 | [Full Report](#)

### Vaccine diplomacy in Southeast Asia: Russia squanders its Sputnik moment

*Fulcrum* | 16 August 2021 |

For a country that was first off the blocks, Russia has a long way to go if it wants to catch up with China and the United States in the game of vaccine diplomacy. [Full Report](#)

### Biden's digital trade idea reveals emerging US strategy for Asia

*Nikkei Asian Review* | 11 August 2021 | [Full Report](#)

### Asia and the Pacific a collateral EU carbon controls target

*East Asia Forum* | 8 August 2021 | [Full Report](#)

## SELECTED PUBLICATIONS

### ASEAN's role in driving post-COVID regional integration

Kaewkamol Pitakdumrongkit | *Perth USAsia Centre's Indo-Pacific Analysis Briefs 2021* | 25 August 2021

### German Warship in Asia: Berlin's Indo-Pacific Strategy?

Frederick Kliem | *RSIS Commentaries* | 24 August 2021

### Book Review for "The Political Economy of Southeast Asia: Politics and Uneven Development under Hyperglobalisation"

Kaewkamol Pitakdumrongkit | *Contemporary Southeast Asia* | 12 August 2021

### RCEP and its implications for the Lower Mekong Subregion

Kaewkamol Pitakdumrongkit | *Hinrich Foundation* | 3 August 2021

### Contesting Sovereignty in Africa and the Global South

Joel Ng | *Democracy in Africa* | 2 August 2021

### Book Review for "Dominic D.P. Johnson, Strategic Instincts: The Advantages of Cognitive Biases in International Politics"

Joel Ng | *Politics and the Life Sciences* | 27 July 2021

### Japan-India Strategic Partnership: An Indigenous Axis in the Indo-Pacific

Tan Ming Hui & Nazia Hussain | *RSIS Policy Report* | 22 July 2021

### Contesting Sovereignty: Power and Practice in Africa and South-east Asia

Joel Ng | *Cambridge University Press*

| 22 July 2021

### G7's 'Build Back Better World': Rival to China's BRI?

Pradumna Bickram Rana | *RSIS Commentaries* | 14 July 2021

### ASEAN Economies and a Post-COVID Era

Jikon Lai | *RSIS Commentaries* | 9 July 2021

### Singapore and Public Diplomacy

Alan Chong | *USC Center for Public Diplomacy CPD Perspectives* | 9 July 2021

The **Centre for Multilateralism Studies (CMS)** is a research entity within the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies at Nanyang Technological University, Singapore. The CMS team conducts cutting-edge research, teaching/training and networking on cooperative multilateralism in the Asia Pacific region. The Centre aims to contribute to international academic and public discourses on regional architecture and order in the Asia Pacific. It aspires to be an international knowledge hub for multilateral cooperation and regional integration.

**Multilateral Matters** is the quarterly publication of the Centre for Multilateralism Studies (CMS), analysing the most recent developments regarding multilateralism by our team. It covers articles on relevant economic and political issues as well as programmes and latest publications from the research centre. The objective of the newsletter is to promote the research being done by our centre, raising awareness of the many events that we hold on a regular basis.

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