

## A global threat multiplier

By Paul Rogers,  
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A European Union study on the problems of global climate change, leaked to the press four days before its official launch on 14 March 2008, contained the sobering [1] assessment that a failure to take radical action now to address global warming would create the likelihood of severe conflict over resources in the decades ahead. Two days later, on 16 March, data from the United Nations Environment Programme (Unep [2]) reveals that the rate of shrinking of glaciers across the world - a key marker of climate change - has accelerated; this more than doubled between 2006 and 2007, and the 2007 figure was five times the average for the 1980-99 period. These two documents, taken together, present governments and citizens in the leading emissions-producing countries in particular with an unavoidable test.

UNEP's data - included in its report *Meltdown in the Mountains* [3], based on research conducted by the World Glacier Monitoring Service (WGMS [4]) - is significant for two quite different reasons. The first is that in a number of key parts of the world, glaciers are essential parts of the crop-support system. Winter snow and ice locked up in massive glaciers in mountain ranges (the Andes, the Karakoram and especially the Himalayas, for example) store water which is slowly released during the spring and early summer, providing water for irrigation as much as a 1,600 kilometres away from the glaciers themselves. If the glaciers melt more quickly, or if what would normally be late winter snow falls as rain, then the rivers flowing off the mountain ranges will no longer provide water for crops during the growing season.

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The second reason why the Unep study is important is that it provides one more indication that climate change [5] is speeding up and therefore more evidence for the argument that decisive policy-shifts are urgently needed to address the crisis. Yet the spread of such is not yet having the impact on government policy that it should; too many influential people and interest groups (including the governments of many oil-producing states and some transnational oil-and-gas companies) still reject the evidence and block progress.

Moreover, as the problems intensify the scale of measures needed to address them also expand. The evidence that existing carbon emissions will have their severest impact over at least the next three decades mean that plans for a 50% cut in global carbon output by 2050 - which, it is true, go beyond what was proposed barely five years ago - have already become woefully inadequate. Analysts may differ on the details of what is really required, but a consensus is beginning to emerge that 80% cuts are needed a long time before 2050 - including deep cuts by 2012-15, i.e. in the *next five to seven years*.

### A global focus

It is in this context - of an unfolding emergency - that the European Union document - *Climate Change and International Security* - is so interesting. It must also be read in relation to three specific aspects of climate change (see "[Climate change: a window to act \[5\]](#)", 22 November 2007):

- \* [positive-feedback \[6\]](#) processes, including summer melting of polar sea-ice, and methane release from melting permafrost, mean climate change is likely to intensify
- \* climate change will (against projections common in the early 1990s) affect many of the poorest parts of the world, mainly through severe droughts
- \* global climate-change estimates are necessarily consensus documents, intended to keep climate specialists from scores of countries on board; they are inevitably and naturally conservative in their assessments.

The EU report - prepared for the European commission by Javier Solana (the union's lead foreign-policy coordinator) and Benita Ferrero-Waldner (its commissioner for external relations), and presented to the European council's climate-change [summit \[9\]](#) on 13-14 March 2008 - reflects these features, yet it also has a [sense of urgency \[10\]](#) that is largely lacking from the equivalent documents or reports produced by its own member-states or other national governments. Indeed, one of its most compelling arguments concerns the impact of climate change on weaker states beyond the global north: "Climate change is best viewed as a threat multiplier which exacerbates existing trends, tensions and instability. The core challenge is that climate change threatens to overburden states and regions which are already fragile and conflict prone."

The document anticipates a number of severe outcomes if this challenge is not properly met: conflict over food and water resources as rainfall diminishes; risks to the infrastructure of coastal cities and fertile river deltas; strains from [environmentally-induced migration \[11\]](#) and to radicalisation as marginalised peoples react to their exclusion. It also cites the potential for conflict over energy resources inside some of the world's most energy-rich regions, as they too experience physical and social stresses due to climate change.

The tone of the entire report is downbeat, with an unusual (in such official products) awareness of the inescapable immediacy of what lies ahead. Its main emphasis is on the consequences of climate change and how Europe might best address them - especially by cutting carbon emissions. It also recommends putting far more research effort into understanding the regional effects of climate change, and more development resources into countering these (see "[Climate change: threat and promise \[11\]](#)", 2 November 2006).

### **An elite lens**

For all its value and importance, however, there is a problem with the report: it is unable to transcend what is essentially a Eurocentric view. In this sense, it has much in common with the report published in January 2008 by five former defence chiefs from the United States, France, Britain, Germany and the Netherlands (see "[The New Atlantic Century? \[11\]](#)", 24 January 2008). This document - [\*Towards a Grand Strategy for an Uncertain World: Renewing Transatlantic\*](#)

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Paul Rogers's most recent book is [\*Why We're Losing the War on Terror \[8\]\*](#) (Polity, 2007) - an analysis of the strategic misjudgments of the post-9/11 and why a new security paradigm is needed.

Partnership [12] - is straightforward and unashamed in seeing global threats in terms of a north Atlantic dimension. The authors' concern is with the lands from Finland to Alaska; they insist on the need for a revitalised and strengthened Nato in parallel with far closer collaboration between north America and the European Union than at present. The report's imaginary "other" is the new adversary of an unstable and uncertain world whose millions of inhabitants are metaphorically gathering outside the walls of civilised Europe, Canada and the United States.

This view of the world is essentially about protecting the status quo, making climate change a security problem for the elite states [13] rather than an issue for the whole global community. As such, it fails and is bound to fail: since it embodies no recognition that climate change is part of the much wider issue of a deeply and increasingly divided world. This division is both socio-economic and (again) imaginary: for improvements in education, literacy and technology produce the consequence that what remains essentially the marginalised majority of the world's people are - from the "other" side - far more knowledgeable of that very condition than ever before.

The logic of the "climate-change-as-threat" paradigm is, at heart, to create the need for more forms of physical security: that since Europe's biggest problem is likely to come from "militant migration" (especially from north Africa and the middle east), the land borders in southeast Europe must be controlled and the Mediterranean [13] seen as a barrier, with the necessary military forces constructed and deployed to help keep Europe safe.

The reality of an interconnected, globalised, technologically distributed world in which small groups of determined people can (for example) use civil aircraft to attack New York skyscrapers and the world's largest military headquarters armed only with parcel knives makes this outlook - to say the least - self-defeating. Europeans will be as little able to align the Mediterranean as the moat [14] for their 21st-century castle as will the Israelis to build a wall [14] high enough to exclude those determined to breach it.

True, the European Union report at least does see things in more than purely security terms; it addresses [15] the need to support affected countries outside Europe in surviving the impacts of climate change, and it recognises that there is a link between socio-economic divisions and environmental constraints. What it is unable to do is to follow comprehensively the implications of that link.

European action to avoid a dysfunctional global condition requires an unprecedented commitment to prevent climate change and ameliorate those effects that cannot now be avoided, especially in poorer countries. It will also require a greatly heightened commitment to development, not least in terms of trade reform, debt cancellation and direct international assistance targeted at sustainable and gendered development (see "Wanted: a new global paradigm [15]", 8 November 2007).

## **Dystopia and optimism**

Thirty-five years ago, the economic geographer Edwin Brooks [16] evoked the risk of "(a) crowded glowering planet of massive inequalities of wealth buttressed by stark force yet endlessly threatened by desperate people in the global ghettos" (see Edwin Brooks, "The Implications of Ecological Limits to Growth in Terms of Expectations and Aspirations in Developed and Less Developed Countries", in Anthony Vann & Paul Rogers (eds), Human Ecology and World Development [17] [Plenum Press, 1974]).

An integrated response to climate change and the wealth-poverty divide is both essential and urgent. The Europeans have the capacity to provide leadership and the resources to take

action, and their new - as yet officially unreleased - report begins to open up [17] the issue in the systematic manner needed (see Mats Engström, “Europe’s green power [17]”, 25 March 2007). If the analysis could be extended to a global understanding, and if the sheer urgency of the issue could be recognised, then there will be cause - even at this late stage - for optimism. All this, however, demands the biggest step-change of all: imagination. If it is not forthcoming, Brooks's dystopic prediction - already reality in too many places - is the most likely outcome.

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**Links:**

[1] <http://www.guardian.co.uk/environment/2008/mar/10/climatechange.eu>

[2] <http://www.unep.org/>

[3] <http://www.unep.org/Documents.Multilingual/Default.asp?DocumentID=530&ArticleID=5760&l=en>

[4] <http://www.geo.unizh.ch/wgms/index.html>

[5] <http://www.unep.org/themes/climatechange/>

[6] <http://pespmc1.vub.ac.be/FEEDBACK.html>

[7] <http://www.oxfordresearchgroup.org.uk/paulrogers.htm>

[8] <http://www.polity.co.uk/book.asp?ref=9780745641966>

[9] <http://www.euractiv.com/en/euro/spring-summit-address-economy-climate-change/article-170850>

[10] <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/earth/main.jhtml?xml=/earth/2008/03/10/eaclimate110.xml>

[11] [http://www.esrc.ac.uk/ESRCInfoCentre/about/CI/CP/Our\\_Society\\_Today/News\\_Articles\\_2007/migrationcrisis.aspx?ComponentId=19843&SourcePageId=17746](http://www.esrc.ac.uk/ESRCInfoCentre/about/CI/CP/Our_Society_Today/News_Articles_2007/migrationcrisis.aspx?ComponentId=19843&SourcePageId=17746)

[12] [http://www.ssronline.org/document\\_result.cfm?id=3454](http://www.ssronline.org/document_result.cfm?id=3454)

[13] <http://ap.google.com/article/ALeqM5g6OzQY4bQiOy1D5V7aRzGq12Hc0AD8VDAMGO0>

[14] [http://ec.europa.eu/external\\_relations/med\\_mideast/intro/index.htm](http://ec.europa.eu/external_relations/med_mideast/intro/index.htm)

[15] <http://www.iht.com/articles/ap/2008/03/14/europe/EU-GEN-EU-Summit.php>

[16] <http://www.bookfinder.com/author/edwin-brooks/>

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