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Elizabeth L. Chalecki

University of Nebraska at Omaha, echalecki@unomaha.edu

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Climatic Cataclysm: The Foreign Policy and National Security Implications of Climate Change

Kurt M. Campbell, editor

Washington: Brookings Institution Press (2008)

Reviewed by Elizabeth L. Chalecki

Awkward title notwithstanding, Climatic Cataclysm is the first attempt at a systematic generation of future climate scenarios and their possible security and foreign policy impacts, and as such is sorely overdue in the field of environmental security. Much of the scholarly literature in this field is devoted to statistical models and general theories; what is lacking is serious national security consideration of the best climate science we have at present, and its possible effects on future policy.

Jay Gullede, from the Pew Center on Global Climate Change, provides the scientific rationale for the three climate scenarios that serve as the basis for the volume's consideration of foreign policy and security. Gullede wisely heads off potential detractors right away by stating that his criterion is *plausibility* of scenario, not *possibility*. In other words, he is not looking to predict the future, but rather to provide a solid scientific foundation for any conclusions that come after.

John Podesta and Peter Ogden assess the implications of the "expected" climate scenario, based on a 1.3 °C (2.3 °F) average warming and 0.23 meter (0.75 feet) average sea level rise by 2040. They assume this level of change is embedded into the climate system already due to the levels of GHGs already emitted to date, and argue that it is "the best we can hope for and the least we ought to prepare for." Podesta and Ogden point out that the United States government will be called on to be the first responder for the disasters and humanitarian crises around the world, and the implications of this for the U.S. military could be significant. They also caution against the risk of "desensitization" on the part of the developed world to climate disasters overseas.

Leon Fuerth assesses the implications of the "severe" climate scenario, based on a 2.6 °C (4.7 °F) average warming and 0.52 meter (1.7 feet) average sea level rise by 2040. He begins with the assumption that nonlinear climate change will produce nonlinear political events; consequently this world is significantly more unsettled than the previous scenario. Sea level rise may mean "strategic withdrawal" from U.S. coastlines, leaving coastal assets to deteriorate as populations move inward. Fuerth also warns of increasing nationalism and authoritarian ideologies from China to Russia to Latin America, as democratically-elected governments fail in the face of the environmental and economic hardships climate change will bring. Interestingly, Fuerth's is the only chapter addressing the moral implications of government inaction. Delay in meeting the threats posed by changing climate could result in the collapse in public confidence in a solution.

Finally, Sharon Burke assesses the implications of the "catastrophic" climate scenario, based on a 5.6 °C (10.1 °F) average warming and two meter (6.6 feet) average sea level rise by 2100. With a time horizon nearly a century ahead of the present, her job is the hardest: to paint the consequences of a scenario separated from the present by over ninety years of human choices, human reactions, and human development. Short of generalities like "world political disequilibrium," there is little that can be verified at that level of distance; however, she recognizes the transformative effects of both scientific and technological development and, more grimly, global catastrophe itself in resetting the human equation.

James Woolsey's distinction between "malignant" threats such as climate change that derive from nature, and "malevolent" threats that derive from an evil-intentioned enemy, results in an interesting thought experiment: the ghosts of conservationist John Muir and General George Patton, summoned to discuss how the two types of threats can be mitigated simultaneously, agree on energy efficiency and development of new non-oil sources of energy as key to both climate change mitigation and national security. Julianne Smith and Alexander Lennon summarize the recent

positions and progress on the part of the largest three emitting nations and regions. The European Union has been the leader in climate change mitigation policy, especially Germany, France, and the UK; both politicians and public opinion in the EU are solidly in favor of addressing the problem. The United States, while not exactly repentant for its previous inaction, has shifted its stance on climate change policy largely due to four things: the 2006 congressional elections, giving control of both houses of Congress to the Democrats; the release of the IPCC Fourth Assessment Report in 2007; the increased focus of both businesses and religious evangelicals on environmental issues; and a raft of state and local-level climate initiatives. China, meanwhile, is beginning to recognize climate change as not just an environmental issue, but as a threat to its own economic development and political stability. Finally, Kurt Campbell and Richard Weitz summarize the volume's findings and conclude that climate change, if not dealt with proactively, could surpass any security or foreign policy challenge the United States has yet faced.

Much has been written by the IPCC, national governments, and other organizations about the effects of climate change around the world. The welcome contribution of this volume is to follow these effects to their security and foreign policy conclusions. Fuerth's chapter, the best at addressing the political and moral aspects of climate change, points out that the intersection of global environmental problems and international politics is complex, a fast-moving target that has rendered the distinction between the domestic and international policy spheres increasingly meaningless. The most striking gap in the book was the lack of recommendations. The book's conclusions seem to focus on how and why nations should mitigate climate change in pursuit of security. What the book doesn't do, and what would have been particularly appropriate in making the Muir-Patton conversation flow in both directions, is mention how the United States or any nation can adapt its security apparatus to face climate-related threats. Overall, however, Climatic Cataclysm will hopefully open the door to the sort of "sustained analytic effort" critical to making the best foreign policy and security decisions now and in the future.