

Chinese Geo-engineering

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ANDREW BLENCOWE, JUL 8 2011

As someone who has been on the job market for the past year, Steve's first post about job prospects for those of us with degrees and interests in IR was something that I have experienced first hand this past year. But rather than bore/depress everyone else with my trials and tribulations – I'm definitely not brazen enough to offer advice – I thought for my first post I might talk about an issue that I've been thinking about lately thanks to my work for The Millennium Project: Global Futures Studies & Research.

For those not aware, China has recently launched missiles containing silver iodide into the atmosphere to make it rain in hopes of relieving drought conditions in some of its more water scarce regions. This practice is an example of geo-engineering, a growing field of potential responses to the effects of climate change.

Currently, we have very little knowledge about what effect these practices might have beyond the short-term. Could they create toxic clouds? Could they alter the climate or weather that another country or region experiences? Right now we just don't know, and if there are some that do know they aren't sharing! (Recently, a panel of 60 experts met in Lima, Peru to examine the science behind different geo-engineering proposals. Rather than release their findings, the panel has submitted their findings to the IPCC for their next report, which won't be published until 2014!).

The problem that I see with this is that states can go ahead and use these methods to help relieve their own climate problems while having little idea of what they are doing to themselves in the long-term, or their neighbours. What happens if geo-engineered rainfalls in one country lead to severe drought conditions in a neighbouring country, would the affected country attack its neighbour to make it stop its geo-engineering project? What might happen if these two countries were great- or even superpowers?

This leads me to question: at what point are we willing to focus on ourselves, and our short-term needs, over long-term interests and/or the interests of others? Should we not wait to have more information before undertaking such risky behaviour? How should the international community respond to those unwilling to wait?

What do you, the readers of e-IR, think about geo-engineering and the effect(s) these practices might have on inter-state relations? Please do comment.

About the author:

Andrew Blencowe completed his Bachelor's degree at Mount Allison University and his MA in Political Science at the University of Waterloo, both of which are in Canada. Andrew has been a Contributing Editor of e-International Relations since September 2009