Australian National Security and Climate Change

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Despite constituting one of the pioneer reports linking climate change with the national security paradigm, the 2003 Pentagon-sponsored paper by Peter Schwartz and Doug Randall (henceforth 'the report') is shown to be largely inapplicable to the Australian experience of climate change. Twelve years since the tabling of this report, it is now possible to ascertain whether the predictions of the authors have materialised, and thus, identify the report's strengths and weaknesses. Strengths of the report are indicated by the existence of an event or phenomena postulated by it. Conversely, weaknesses are indicated by the non-existence, or implausibility of such events or phenomena. The report must be viewed in the context that it purports to portray scenario-based hypotheses and not scientific predictions. Therefore, the scientific underpinning of the report is less important than the extrapolations of the perceived geo-political and social effects. To this effect, the Australian context displays a disparity between perceived consequences of climate change and actual events. Firstly, the adoption of the language of securitisation by the report will be shown to be ineffective and ultimately a failure within the Australian political sphere. Secondly, the hypothesis that the Australian Defence Force (ADF) would be deployed to subdue conflicts in the Asia-Pacific region over scarce resources will be shown to be far less of a reality than its role in administering aid during extreme weather events. Thirdly, the assertion that Australia will struggle to find trade markets for its food exports in a time of climate insecurity will be shown to be false. Finally, by contrast, a strength of the report will be shown by its correct postulation of climate change fostering the exacerbation of alarmist immigration policies and stricter border control. Overall, it will be shown that although the report has both strengths and weaknesses, it largely misses the mark in predicting the implications of climate change in the Australian context.

The report clearly links the impending impacts of climate change to an immediate security threat. This is an example of securitisation; something which has failed to gain traction in the Australian political sphere. Conceptualised by Ole Wæver in the mid-1990s, securitisation is the process which, conditional on audience acceptance, transforms a particular issue (in this case, climate change) from being represented not only a political threat, but one of national, international or human security. It firstly requires policy makers to utilise the language of security in response to non-traditional security threats. Secondly, according to the Copenhagen School, for an issue to be completely securitised, it must move out of the sphere of normal politics and become an issue capable of invoking an emergency or extraordinary measure of response. The report by Schwartz and Randall clearly uses such language to display the need for climate change issues to be addressed as matters of national security by presenting it as both a direct threat to human survival, but also as a threat multiplier – a phenomenon exacerbating current regional and international conflicts. Secondly, it envisages the need for immediate military response to consequent threats. It follows that the report is one which clearly engages the securitisation of climate change. Conversely, the Australian context displays the paradox of a clear enunciation of climate change as a security issue, but subsequent rejection of relevant policy reform by constituents. Despite the frequent use of such language by the then Prime Minister Kevin Rudd including in both the Parliament, and in every major defence security publication between 2008 and 2013, his policy responses failed to pass into law, and were arguably conducive to his removal from office. Even considerably mainstream reforms such as the introduction of the 'cap and trade' emission scheme were effectively combated by a combination of mining lobby groups, political opposition and a staunchly anti-labour media campaign by NewsCorp. Military preparedness for an emergency climate change response was practically non-existent. The Labour government never sought to pursue emergency measures and the ADF remained a reluctant securitizing actor. Although securitisation rhetoric was employed by Rudd and then Gillard in Australia, the successive labour governments were never able to transform climate change from a matter of political significance to one of national security importance.

This, in turn, portrays a weakness in Schwartz and Randall's report, showing that even when securitisation language is employed, it may not be successful in becoming an impetus for military or emergency action.

According to Schwartz and Randall, climate change has the ability to foster the rapid degradation of the geo-political sphere, with violent conflict breaking out over resource scarcity, particularly between or within nations with pre-existing ethnic or social tensions. Furthermore, they theorise that well-resourced and developed nations, such as Australia, will be compelled to use military force to quash such conflict in their regions. Firstly, the theory of climate change invoking conflict over resources has been consistently rejected by political theorists. Although it is conceded that countries will almost always act in their own national interest, the lack of empirical data linking climate change to violent conflict, as well as the lack of evidence suggesting climate change causes an increase in the incidence of violent insurgency, tends to suggest that climate change is far less threatening in terms of inter-state fighting than postulated here. Instead, climate change appears to be a major threat in respect of heightening the critical vulnerability of certain states to disease, starvation and susceptibility to extreme weather events. Indeed, the incidence of resource scarcity has been more closely linked to the spread of disease and migration than it has to the emergence of violent conflict. Although it is conceded that the earth has not yet reached the critical tipping points theorised by Schwartz and Randall, the incidence of resource scarcity is yet to produce any notable trends of large scale conflict or inter-state skirmishes. In the Australian context, the development of climate related extreme weather events has seen the ADF deployed more frequently for humanitarian missions and building the adaptive capacity of neighbouring states than calming international tensions. An example of this would be the large-scale response to the 2004 Boxing Day Tsunami, or the Australian response to Typhoon Yolanda in the Philippines. The 2013 Australian Defence White Paper suggested that although climate change wasn't a primary ADF concern, they had a role in providing assistance to neighbouring countries in the event of natural disasters and climate adaptation and mitigation. Furthermore, the concept of using military capabilities to subdue conflict over resources has been viewed as inherently counter-productive. Instead, the Australian approach has mirrored that of political theorists, in helping neighbouring states to adapt and recover from climate change induced phenomena. This promotes a space for partnership building and future capabilities in offsetting climate pressures. In relation to increasing climate change threats, the response of the ADF has been predominately involved in assisting and building the adaptive capacity of neighbouring states, and not of subduing the violent conflicts envisaged by Schwartz and Randall.

Although concurrently postulating that other nations in the region such as China will suffer food shortages and precipitation stress, Schwartz and Randall conclude that Australia will have its agriculture industry only lightly impacted, and the bigger economic hurdle will be keeping its agricultural exports profitable due to a reduction in market demand. On the contrary, the past twelve years has shown that Australia is far from immune from changes in climate, with industries reliant on irrigation flows such as horticulture and viticulture, struggling to overcome increasingly arid conditions and bushfire threat. It is true that in some ways, climate change may have a positive effect on Australian agriculture. For example, generally higher temperatures are theoretically conducive to a greater yield in grain crops. However, yields are shown to be highly susceptible to annual precipitation levels, which are unpredictable and hypothesised to decrease over the next twenty years. Similarly, the beef and dairy industries, which are the largest and third largest rural value industries respectively, are shown to be negatively affected by increasing temperatures. Climate change has increased heat stress on livestock, and facilitated a more arid climate, exacerbating the industry's already extraordinary water usage – the highest of any industry in Australia. Furthermore, we may actually see a reversal in some aspects of Australia's agricultural export and import trends. An increasingly arid climate is expected to impact on Australia's capacity to export, with some irrigated agriculture set to lose half its annual yields. Thus, Australians may be forced to rely on imports to adapt to climate change. In regard to exports, scientific literature has indicated that China, India and Indonesia will be particularly negatively impacted by climate change, and will become Australia's major export markets for agriculture. Already a dominant trade partner in beef and other livestock, climate change is set to drastically affect Indonesia's rice producing capacity, which may ultimately force its government to import grain crops from its neighbours. The predicted ten percent decrease in wheat, rice and corn yields which will be particularly acute in densely populated countries such as China, also indicate a rise in demand for agriculture, rather than Schwartz and Randall's predicted decrease. In sum, it would appear that contrary to their conclusions, Australia will experience considerable agricultural stress in a future affected by climate change, but will not lack demand for export to countries in the Asia-Pacific region.

Contrary to the weaknesses in Schwartz and Randall's report highlighted by the preceding paragraphs, a great strength of the publication is its hypothesis of an increased sensitivity to migration and state sovereignty. The report postulates that Australia, as a relatively self-sufficient and resource-rich nation, will build a defensive fortress around the country to starve off any attempts at emigration from elsewhere in the region. Short of building a physical barrier, Australia has, particularly since the Howard years, intensified its strict border security measures as it attempts to decrease and discourage refugee migration. Although climate change impacts are almost exclusively non-linear, one of the more predictable trends is sea level rise. In accordance with this, low lying coastal areas in the Asia-Pacific region may become uninhabitable or altogether non-existent, forcing their populations to internally migrate, or seek to emigrate internationally as a climate-displaced person. Of particular concern have been the small Pacific Island states such as Tuvalu, whose very existence is threatened by rising sea levels. But the problem is more widespread. Approximately fifteen million people in Indonesia may face displacement in areas less than three metres above sea level as a result of sea level rise. In this case, emigration to Australia may be a feasible option. Global expectations of 'environmental refugees' are predicted to exceed fifty million in 2020. Whether or not Australia, as one of the biggest emitters in the Asia-Pacific region, has an obligation to take environmental refugees is a question outside of the scope of this essay, but it is evident that if climate change continues to make certain areas of the region uninhabitable, there will be increasing pressure on resource-rich and economically stable Australia to allow for immigration. As this pressure mounts, it is feasible to suggest Australia's already alarmist position on immigration will exacerbate. The military, currently key players in Australia's border control, may be given broader jurisdiction over the handling of potential environmental immigrants. Furthermore, by presenting refugees generally as threats to both Australia's inherent sovereignty and national security in a post 9/11 world, conservative governments may institutionalise Schwartz and Randall's hypothesis of closed-border politics and create a non-physical equivalent of the fortress that the American report postulates.

Although the report by Schwartz and Randall constitutes one of the earliest securitisation models in relation to climate change, its hypotheses have largely missed the mark in predicting the current geo-political climate in Australia. The majority of climate change outcomes in Australia have shown the report to be weak in its theories, particularly in relation to the increase of military intervention as a result of securitisation, climate-induced violence in the Asia-Pacific region and a reduction in agriculture export demand. However, despite these weaknesses, the report correctly postulates an increased alarmism in relation to immigration and border-security in a world where emigration from climate-stressed nations seems increasingly likely.

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