

Interview – Joshua Busby

Written by E-International Relations

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Dr. Joshua Busby is an Associate Professor at LBJ School of Public Affairs at the University of Texas at Austin (UT) and a Distinguished Scholar at the Robert S. Strauss Center for International Security and Law. In 2016, he joined the Chicago Council on Global Affairs as a non-resident fellow, and in 2018, he joined the Center for Climate & Security as a Senior Research Fellow. Prior to UT, he was a research fellow at the Center for Globalization and Governance at Princeton's Woodrow Wilson School (2005–2006), the Belfer Center for Science and International Affairs at Harvard's JFK School (2004–2005), and the Foreign Policy Studies program at the Brookings Institution (2003–2004). He received his doctorate from Georgetown University in 2004. His current research analyzes global climate governance, the challenges of clean energy transitions in India and China, as well as the implications of climate change for security. He is currently curating a series on COVID-19 on the *Duck of Minerva*. His new book, 'States and Nature: The Effects of Climate Change on Security', is forthcoming later this year from Cambridge University Press. You can follow him on Twitter @busbyj2.

Where do you see the most exciting research/debates happening in your field?

The two areas of exciting, important research in my mind are understanding the political economy of decarbonization and clean energy transitions in the major economies, namely the U.S., China, India, Brazil, Indonesia, and the E.U. I'm also interested in the intersection of climate change/the clean energy transition and geopolitics, so work that speaks to how climate and clean energy will affect international relations is both interesting and substantively important. Finally, weak state capacity and exclusive political institutions are some of the main drivers of climate-related conflict. Whether and how external actors can help build state capacity and inclusive political institutions to prevent conflict and humanitarian emergencies is a third research area of importance to me.

How has the way you understand the world changed over time, and what (or who) prompted the most significant shifts in your thinking?

I started out more focused on social movements and the circumstances in which they could change world politics. I've become more state-centric in my thinking about which actors matter. The failure to make progress on climate change during the Bush and Trump years reinforced my sense that states (and their leaders) really are important drivers of whether certain issues move forward. Even social movements that have succeeded like the movement for AIDS treatment advocacy ultimately depended on politicians who were willing to listen to them.

While this is more about academia, I've also learned that patterns of privilege and appointments in academia, whether it be jobs or conferences, won't be disrupted automatically without conscious attention to diversity and representation. If you want to have a diverse faculty, panel, or contributors to something, you have to pursue it with some intentionality, as the tendency is for past patterns to replicate themselves. That explains the origins of manels and non-diverse faculty. So, I've realized that when I'm in positions of some influence over these processes, on job searches or choosing contributors or mentoring, then active pursuit of different voices is an important part of the job.

What are the main global security governance barriers to countries and populations who are facing existential climate risks?

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Low-lying island countries and coastal populations most clearly face existential climate risks from rising seas, storm surge, and salt water intrusion. Some areas may also become too hot for people to spend much time outdoors. The United Nations Security Council has become more comfortable addressing civil conflicts affected by climate change, but they are not yet ready to address existential risks facing some countries and communities. We also have not seen significant investment in adaptation as mitigation has commanded the lion's share of concern in climate negotiations. While loss and damage discussions, where existential risks might be addressed, have gotten some traction in climate negotiations, developed countries are not ready to really acknowledge loss and damage as it would likely imply major resource transfers or other remedies that are not politically attractive.

Other concerns have been raised by scholars such as Jon Barnett who worry that too cavalier assertions that countries or communities will become unlivable will diminish investment in adaptation and resilience programming. While some communities accept that they may need to move from areas that have or soon will become uninhabitable, that fate is not accepted in other places. Some countries in Oceania, like Fiji for example, are larger and at-risk communities can (and in some instances have) been moved further inland. Treating countries as the equivalent of “dead countries walking” can be incredibly damaging to their prospects for investment, at a time when, for many places, we still don't have a clear portrait of which countries and populations will need to move and by when. That concern shouldn't forestall a conversation about managed retreat. There are communities in coastal Louisiana and North Carolina where those discussions are accelerated, but we also have to acknowledge that uncritical acceptance of those narratives has its own downsides.

How should we think about fragile states and where should we focus the attention of climate security?

We need to identify common risk factors for negative security outcomes related to climate change. That requires us to explain what we include as negative security outcomes, what proxies for climate change we are focused on, and what those risk factors are. Most of the literature focuses on violent internal conflict as the main or only negative security outcome of interest (since interstate wars are rare). I include the risks of large-scale loss of life from climate-related weather extremes as security concerns, even if they do not escalate to conflict.

The risk factors for those negative security outcomes may vary to some extent by the hazard. Climate-related hazards like drought and cyclones happen independently of anthropogenic climate change but may be changed by climate change in terms of their frequency, intensity, or geographic distribution. They may intersect with other climate hazards, other forms of environmental degradation, or other problems to make outcomes worse. The challenge is whether it is more useful to think about all of these factors together or focusing on pieces of the problem individually. In 2018, we did a report for USAID which had a pretty extensive set of indicators for fragility divided into two categories, effectiveness and legitimacy. The fragility index was based on USAID's existing methodology which had some virtues in that most of the indicators were already collected regularly by the World Bank. On the physical exposure side, we looked at the combination of different climate hazards based on historic exposure, not projections of future change.

In a short 2018 piece in *Foreign Affairs*, Nina von Uexkull and I focused on a narrower set of risk factors for severe water deficits where we identified three chronic risk factors (1) history of recent conflict (2) high agricultural dependence, and (3) high political exclusion. We combined that with evidence of severe water deficits in the recent past or projected to have severe water deficits in the coming months. The approach Nina and I sketched out could help us identify which countries to pay attention to for that particular hazard, but if we were to carry out the analysis for cyclones, the risk factors would look different, focusing on which countries have experienced cyclones but also indicators of preparedness such as early warning systems and the number of cyclone shelters. In a world of climate change, with some deviations in the geography of climate extremes, we can and have seen very severe impacts when climate hazards affect countries that have little experience with them. Myanmar in 2008 is something of an example after cyclone Nargis killed 140,000 people in part because this region hadn't experienced anything quite like that before.

Thus, looking at which places were previously exposed to climate hazards and their risk factors for problems can be informative, but we will also likely need to complement such analysis with projections of future climate change and

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our expectations for sea-level rise, rainfall, and temperature to interrogate what places might not have historically experienced climate-related extreme weather but could in the future or will face long-run trends in rainfall, temperature, variability that could prove damaging. Country-level analysis is often insufficient to guide policy since the hazards are often location specific and countries, especially large ones, face different challenges of governance over different parts of their territory. I survey the challenges of how to think through visualizing and thinking through such risk analysis in a new working paper for the Social Science Research Council.

How have you observed the link between climate change and security changing in academia and policy?

The academic community has moved from assessing whether proxies for climate change are directly correlated with the onset or occurrence of civil wars to more fine-grained analysis of the indirect causal pathways connecting climate change to violence and social conflict broadly defined, including communal conflicts and riots and strikes. The policy community accepts that the links are complex, multi-causal and contingent and has increasingly moved on to think about what to do about the problem.

What role do national militaries play in climate security resilience, and what roles should they play?

Militaries have to prepare for risks to their own bases, training, and operations as well as how their missions will change in a world of climate change, which can include responsibilities at home and abroad. Militaries are often tasked to assist with climate-related emergencies at home and for some militaries internationally. Since militaries are embedded in wider civilian communities upon which they depend for services (such as electricity, transportation, and their workforce), they cannot ignore vulnerabilities to civilian systems outside the perimeter of bases. Climate change will also likely affect potential adversaries, transit routes, transboundary river basins, and supply chains in the global economy, which could have a bearing on sources of friction between states or global dynamics that affect stability within states like food and fuel prices. Militaries thus have to prepare for contingencies, but if this becomes a problem that is primarily a military one, then lots of other civilian and diplomatic failures have ensued. Militaries should partner with development and civilian diplomacy organizations to focus on prevention, stabilization, and how to ensure that military instruments and tools are a last resort.

In your book, *Moral Movements and Foreign Policy*, you argue that in cases where costs and values are opposing, values will win if domestic gatekeepers believe that the stakes are high enough. Has climate change won yet?

If by we winning, we mean we have advocates addressing climate change that have gotten their issue on the agenda, yes. If we mean have advocates convinced policymakers in key polities to commit to expensive actions, then no. The policies of the world's leading emitters, notably China and the United States, are inadequate and subject to policy reversals. In China's case, the country hasn't come to grips with the role of coal in its economy and continues to authorize construction of new coal-burning power plants. In the U.S. case, the appetite for addressing its greenhouse gas emissions varies by which political party controls the White House. Even when climate-concerned Democratic presidents win the presidency, they are constrained by the opposition party and some in their own party from passing legislation to address the country's emissions. The impacts of climate change are severe enough and the opportunities from a transition to a clean energy economy are large enough that the question is not simply about a dynamic for states to decide whether to undertake costly moral action. There is a fundamental self-interested choice about whether they can afford not to take action against climate change.

You have suggested in a recent blog post that we need to move beyond the discourse of 'threat multiplier' when addressing climate and security. What do you think needs to be understood about climate change as a standalone threat to security?

The threat multiplier language reminds us that climate change isn't a standalone threat but combines with other factors to make situations worse. The challenge is to know of all the potential risk factors, which ones are the most important to pay attention to. There is a tendency to kitchen sink our models of vulnerability and put more into them, but sometimes, spare models may be more useful because it allows us to focus on a handful of indicators that we

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think are meaningful. But that requires having an evidentiary base that surfaces factors that are thought to be important. Factors that are important in one period or in some geographies may not remain so evermore. So, we need to try to surface what those common risk factors are but keep asking whether they continue to be the risk factors of importance to monitor.

Looking to COP26, what questions do you think need to be answered to move climate security forward?

I'm not sure the COP is the place where climate security concerns get much traction or emphasis. With more states pledging midcentury decarbonization targets, the core challenge this year is whether states will ratchet up their near or medium term ambition to reduce emissions in their Nationally Determined Contributions (NDCs). At the same time, the meeting could produce more credible pledges of finance for developing countries. If implemented, lower emissions and more climate finance, particularly for adaptation, will have a bearing on climate security, but I'm not sure the climate security impacts will be discussed at COP26, except broadly to say climate change is threatening security.

What is the most important advice you could give to young scholars of International Relations?

Study problems that are substantively important. Ask bigger questions, not smaller ones. Pursue questions and issues that you are normatively passionate about. Otherwise, you can get stuck asking small, narrow questions that are methodologically tractable but offer trivial guidance about things that aren't all that important. You will also have to live with research projects for as long as a decade, so you have to not be bored by the subject matter. Be willing to stretch yourself in terms of new topics, subjects, expertise, places, methods, and allow yourself to be uncomfortable much of the time. Permanent imposter syndrome. There will always be people who know more about the topic/method than you. Be prepared to learn but also partner with others who can complement your skillset.

Treat people with respect, dignity, empathy, particularly research subjects but also fellow academics and support staff at your home institutions. Avail yourself of options like the Summer Workshop on the Analysis of Military Operations and Strategy, the New Era Workshop, the Institute for Qualitative and Multi-Method Research, the Inter-University Consortium for Political and Social Research, the International Studies Association, and the American Political Science Association, to build a community of peers around the country and world. Those folks will likely be your support community for endeavors down the road.