



CLIMATE CHANGE IS MORE THAN A CHANGE IN THE CLIMATE

By Pere Torres*

“It is natural for a country to want to be independent. We do not feel ourselves part of Europe - we are an Arctic people- but our way of life is changing and we have to change with it...Then, we could not strike out alone because we were so heavily dependent on Danish money, and we still are, but we can change that by exploiting our natural resources to achieve financial and political independence”. These are the words of Aleqa Hammond, member of the autonomous government of Greenland, quoted in an article published in the Guardian, the 7th of October 2007.

Is this a case of another political leader of a minority nation advocating independence for their people? It probably is, but this is a special case: the outcome depends on climate change. The sequence is clear: the increase in temperature leads to the ice melting and this allows the exploitation of new finds of oil and minerals. The profits from the activity will provide sufficient economic resources to allow for the independence of *Ka-laallit Nunaat* (the country’s name in Greenlandic). Not everyone is so optimistic, however. There are those that warn that mining fever could attract so much immigration that the indigenous culture of its sixty thousand inhabitants would rapidly dissolve. Whatever happens, a new state could emerge thanks to climate change.

Let us travel to the other end of the world, in the middle of the Pacific, to Polynesia. Here we





find the tiny archipelago of Tuvalu, independent since 1978. The highest point is no more than five meters above sea level. Here too there is a clear sequence: melting of the ice caps and glaciers causes the sea level to rise. If the more pessimistic scenarios are correct, the whole of Tuvalu will be engulfed by the ocean. There is speculation that there are evacuation plans to send its scant population of twelve thousand people to Australia or New Zealand, but the government denies it. In any case, a young state could disappear thanks to climate change.

These two examples serve to illustrate how the vision of this phenomenon has evolved. It began as an academic curiosity, a working hypothesis of a handful of climatologists. Over time it began to be adopted by the ecological movement as definitive proof of their critique of the development

of the industrial mentality. Later, certain political parties that were orphaned by other inviting revolutions saw the opportunity to unite under the banner of ‘the new fight against capitalism’. It was a time in which this unexpected threat moved on the periphery of society, without actually penetrating it.

THE SEQUENCE IS CLEAR: THE INCREASE IN TEMPERATURE LEADS TO THE ICE MELTING AND THIS ALLOWS THE EXPLOITATION OF NEW FINDS OF HYDROCARBONS AND MINERALS

In the last two or three years the situation has changed. Now climate change has become the new creed and the new urgency, at least rhetorically. It is true that there are still voices that reject it in its entirety, but they are fed more on ideology than opposing arguments. For this reason, the politics of climate change are increasingly removed from environmental agencies and closer to the hands of economic bodies. It is no longer a case of caring for the environment, but rather of looking after the health of the economy, which may become a victim of global warming if we only limit ourselves to passively observing how the debate heats up. Since the Stern Review (2006), that estimated the costs related to climate change, calculations have shown that the effects of changes in the climate have economic costs that are much higher than investments in greenhouse gas reductions. Not all economists are in agreement with the analytical methods used in the study, nor with its conclusions, but an irreversible step has been made from a debate on environmental terms to a debate on economic terms.





At the same time it does not appear as if the economic focus is to be the final stage of this debate. Arguments based on the security question have been gaining ground. Perhaps the first example of this came from the Pentagon in 2004. President Bush had not yet taken up his sceptical position when the military administration produced a secret document that was conveniently leaked to the press, as is common in such cases. The Observer took notice on the 22nd of February of that year. Essentially it argued that the most serious consequences of climate change would arise from economic and political instability suffered by countries vulnerable to climate change. Alarming words such as ‘chaos’, ‘anarchy’ and ‘war’ stood out.

WILL IT ALSO REDRAW POLITICAL MAPS? THIS IS THE GREAT UNKNOWN

At the recent European Union Spring Summit (13th – 14th March 2008), it was Javier Solana himself, as the High Representative for the Common Foreign and Security Policy who presented the *Climate Change and International Security* report to the heads of state.

We should keep in mind that the sources of some 200 rivers are shared by two or more countries. There are a wealth of examples of the severe tensions that stem from the distribution of water when it becomes scarce within a state. It is easy to imagine, therefore, what would happen if those fighting over this resource are neighbouring states! Another ‘threat’ comes from the massive human migrations brought about by the advance of desertification. Recently a lecturer in politics at the University of Indiana, Rafael Reuveny, published *Climate Change-induced Migration and Violent Conflict* (Political Geography, 26:656-673, 2007). He listed 38 cases of migrations that occurred in the 20th century that can be directly put down to climate change. He concludes that half of them resulted in noticeable conflict between the receiving country and the displaced group.



Climate change is, therefore, starting to be seen as a security problem. To look ahead somewhat, it is also a factor that may influence the distribution of power in the future, which is to say the control of resources, commerce and political influence. There are a great deal of preparatory (and prophetic) movements in this sense.

There are movements by both large and small countries: Russia has sent a submarine to place a flag on the continental shelf beneath the Arctic ice, claiming the area as its own. Meanwhile, Iceland is calculating the profits it can expect from being more centrally placed with respect to the major maritime shipping routes.

These are movements that could bring collisions between friends and rivals: the US and Canada are playing a dangerous game to see who will dominate the Northwest Passage shipping route. It would be a clear alternative to the Panama Canal. Meanwhile, negotiations between Syr-



countries that can see a window through which to breathe thanks to intelligent, timely policies that adapt to the new climatic conditions. In this way they will be able to continue generating wealth while the most reticent will be forced to take emergency measures.

The nations that are able to take agile decisions, with stronger social cohesion could emerge in a better position. Everything seems to indicate that it will be easier for the smaller countries than the larger, which are often prone to bureaucratic inertia and hampered by geo-strategic equations. In whatever case, it will be easier for those countries and societies prepared to act to meet this challenge than for those prone to the classical ‘wait and see’ response.

It is clear that a new factor has been introduced that significantly alters the international rules of play. To ignore it or underestimate it would be a grave mistake. In fact, if we look at history, we will see that it is not a particularly new phenomenon. Many civilisations and cultures of the past have seen a reduction in their viability thanks to climatic changes that have threatened their social and economic organisation. Jared Diamond gathers many examples in his work *Collapse: How Societies Choose to Fail or to Succeed* (Viking Adult, New York, 2005). Learning from the past is a good piece of advice.

To summarise, climate change is redrawing classic reference maps (rainfall, crops, vegetation coverage and so on). Will it also redraw political maps? This is the great unknown. There are countries, however, that have chosen not to wait for someone else to solve the problem for them.

ia and Israel regarding the Golan Heights make no headway because, aside from the Palestinian conflict, water resources are in dispute (half of Israel’s water comes from this area).

At the same time we should not only look on the negative side, climate change is also a source of opportunity. It offers the possibility of a reshuffle in the global political arena. There are countries which could learn to become more autonomous in their energy production and, through the application of new technology, reinforce their development and become a lot more internationally competitive. There are

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