Is Climate Change a Threat Multiplier? R2P and Environmental Disasters

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Based upon a rethinking of sovereignty as responsibility rather than a right, the*Responsibility to Protect*—joining *A More Secure World* (2004) and the World Summit Outcome Document (2005)—created an agenda, an international agreement, and a legal framework for responding to genocide, war crimes, ethnic cleansing, and crimes against humanity. The original document, the Report of the International Commission on Intervention and State Sovereignty (ICISS), released in 2001, was organized around three pillars for preventing and responding to mass atrocity: the responsibility to prevent, react, and rebuild. In addition to military intervention for humanitarian purposes, it includes a "preventative toolbox" that takes into account potential root sources of conflict that can lead to mass atrocities and a commitment to support communities after conflict and unrest. Of course, there have been new, and intensified, security challenges recognized since the Report's release. Instability and violence around the effects of climate change stand as a key example of security scenarios not specifically addressed in the original report*A More Secure World: Our Shared Responsibility*, the 2004 Report of the High Level Panel on Threats, Challenges and Change, while restating and expanding on the values and commitments set forth in R2P, does mention climate change and its attendant issues as a threat. Bundled with poverty and infectious disease, environmental degradation is recognized as an enhancer of natural disasters. The authors write that environmental concerns are rarely "factored into security, development or humanitarian strategies" and that there is no "coherence in environmental protection efforts at the global level" (High Level Panel 2004, 26). Unfortunately, this lack has improved little since 2004, as resistance to COP21 has shown the failure of the international state system to come together in truly meaningful ways to correct dangerous levels of carbon emissions, ocean acidification, environmental toxicity, species extinction and biodiversity loss, to name but few issues (Burke et. al 2016).

Now, as then, there is inadequate recognition, implementation, and enforcement at the regional and global level (High Level Panel, 2004, 26). For the most part, climate change is left of the agendas of security institutions. This article reviews how climate change (as an environmental concern) has been understood and debated in the R2P community. Should climate change be understood as a broader human security issue rather than subsumed under the aegis of R2P and its mandate to respond to specific mass atrocities? Or is it better understood as a "threat multiplier" for already existing instability and potential conflict? The first is seen as threatening and undermining the coherence of the norm of "sovereignty as responsibility" and the second aids in placing climate change squarely within the "preventative toolbox" of R2P. Moving beyond this debate, I argue that understanding climate change as a "threat multiplier" does more harm than good, and at worst, could further obfuscate approaches, methods, or tactics that could better address the challenges of climate change.

R2P and Climate Change

Gareth Evans, in a 2009 address to the American Society of International Law, cautions the international community against using the norm of responsibility to protect too widely. As one of the original authors of the Report, he writes that human security is a better "umbrella language" to bring together issues like natural disasters and environmental catastrophes (Evans 2009, 29). R2P must remain narrowly focused to do the most good.

His reason for this caution is based on two broader concerns. One, the norm is in danger of being stretched and that

"protecting everybody from everything" will result in "protecting nobody from anything." He writes that "the whole point of embracing the new language of 'the responsibility to protect' is that it is capable of generating an effective, consensual response to extreme, conscience-shocking cases in a way that 'right to intervene' language simply could not" (Evans 2009, 29). The power of R2P as a rallying cry must be preserved. The second is an oft repeated, and legitimate concern, for developing and postcolonial countries: that a broadened ability to intervene could become "thin end of a totally interventionist wedge, giving an open invitation to the countries of the North to engage to their hearts' content in the missions civilisatrices" (Evans 2009, 29).

Evans sums up his concerns at the end of the address by emphasizing that R2P must keep as its core concern only mass atrocity crimes. Any general conflict will undermine the norm's utility and environmental emergencies specifically "run a serious risk of diluting its capacity to mobilize international consensus in the cases where it is really needed. And that would be very bad news" (Evans 2009, 32).

Strengthening this earlier position, Alex Bellamy, in a 2013 publication entitled "Responsibility to Protect: A Wide or Narrow Conception," emphasizes that when debating application of R2P, we need to be clear on what Member states have agreed to and what they have not (Bellamy 2013, 39). It is not just a matter of opinion about R2P and its narrow or wide application, but rather understanding what states have actually agreed to in international agreements. Any widening of R2P could lead to renegotiation of the principle. As the negotiation and delimitation of the four crimes—genocide, war crimes, ethnic cleansing, and crimes against humanity—was difficult and lengthy, "it is reasonable to assume that renegotiation is unlikely, would take many years and a large investment of political capital, and would bring a halt to the implementation of the R2P that was agreed" (Bellamy 2013, 39). In other words, any implementation of R2P outside the agreed upon parameters could lead states to withdraw their support and potentially harm hard won concessions made by Member states when agreeing to the World Summit Outcome Document in 2005. In fact, R2P's narrow focus was crucial to its acceptance. Later in the article Bellamy uses Cyclone Nargis in Myanmar to stress that using this natural disaster to send military troops into Southeast Asia would be a serious blow to R2P. "This is more than an idle theoretical problem, " he writes, it "would make it harder to forge consensus on the preventive and protective measures needed in those cases" (Bellamy 2013, 47). Preventing mass atrocity crimes becomes more difficult if political will and material resources are lost due to widening R2P's reach.

Shifting gears from the above debates, in a 2016 commentary on the Centre's website, Simon Adams, Executive Director of the Global Centre for the Responsibility to Protect, addresses the topic of climate change and mass atrocities in a different manner. He moves from seeing climate change as a threat to R2P to argue that it could very well be used, in some cases, as a genocide and mass atrocity warning system. Adams argues that it is best to understand mass atrocities as a culmination of vulnerabilities, of which climate change can be one of the drivers. It is best understood as a "threat multiplier" or triggering factor as severe drought, water scarcity or natural disasters, for example, can destabilize an already insecure country or region.

Weak or corrupt governments can exacerbate drought or scarcity through mismanagement or poor governing and that "in the future ethnic warlords, authoritarian rulers and aspiring demagogues will undoubtedly use the consequences of climate change to mobilize support" (Adams, online). He stresses that conflating climate change and atrocities, especially through predictive modelling, can be "wildly misleading," but many have found "disturbing credible connection between climate change and deadly conflict" including Kofi Annan, Ban-Ki Moon, the US Department of State, and the Robert S. Strauss Centre for International Security and Law (Adams, online). Using Syria as an example, Adams lays out how rising temperatures and declining rainfall aggravated the consequences of political dictatorship, agricultural mismanagement, and unsustainable water policies (Adams online). In the Syrian case, "climate change helped ignite the most bitter and bloody civil war of our times, providing a disturbing portent of our potential future" (Adams online).

Adams ends the article by reminding the reader that climate change is a global problem that therefore must be addressed through international responses and organizations like the United Nations and their Sustainable Development Goals and agreements like COP21. If international action is focused on the ICISS's original commitment to prevention and early response, R2P's paradigm is not necessarily stretched by connecting climate change with atrocity or as an early driver of conflict. One could argue that issues arising from climate change could

reside comfortably within the responsibility to prevent, or Pillar One of the Report. Climate change related disasters, such as flooding or severe storms, could amplify already existing political issues and feed unrest and conflict. Preventive effort on these issues could keep later violence or atrocities from occurring. Additionally, follow-up assistance after natural disasters will add to future political stability.

Is Climate Change an Enemy?

I will spend the remainder of this article on whether the alternative of "bundling" climate change issues as "threat multipliers" is a wise way to direct action taken to respond to, or ameliorate, climate change. While it does make sense to understand prevention and response to natural disasters and environmental catastrophes as an opportunity to use "preventative toolbox" of R2P and, additionally, the threat multiplier model sidesteps concerns about environmental issues paralysing R2P's carefully argued case for action against mass atrocity, does it create other ethical complications or methodological inaccuracies? Should the climate be spoken of and treated as an enemy or a threat?

I have previously written on the power and danger involved in language choices and the effects that they can have on politics and our ethical understandings of a complex world (Fishel 2017). It is often more than a cause and effect relationship: the way we speak of things or events can aid in creating (or destroying) our ethical understanding of those things or events. Marshalling political support through the use of war metaphors is problematic. The complexity of the Anthropocene and human entanglement in biological systems cannot be reduced to a martial understanding. Conversely, if we speak of our shared planet and its ecology as the only (known) place in the universe capable of supporting our form of life, this may lead us to better care for the world (Fishel 2017, 39). The planet and its natural systems are not the enemy. We are not at war with nature. These are problematic conceptions of "nature" as something "out there" and threatening. If climate change is an enemy and nothing else, we will surely lose the coming battle. The battleground is the very place we call home.

If defined as a threat multiplier, climate change, or environmental degradation, flooding due to melting glaciers, drought, etc. disappear into a panoply of security issues that no longer take into account the root causes: humanity's (especially the industrialized North's) rapacious use and abuse of planetary resources and continued support of fossil fuel capitalism. This obscures these issues as the culmination of moral, ethical, political, and economic failings at the individual, state, and especially systemic levels.

Additionally, these are not intervention issues in the classic sense. The threats can come from within states rather than across borders of a sovereign state; threats are a linked and anonymous totality rather than a discrete occurrence. What action is threatening? And to whom? If judging threat from root causes, commissioning a new coal plant would be just as dangerous as a refusal to act on climate change mitigation. For example, US President Donald Trump and his administration's decision to remove the US from COP21 could be seen as one of the greatest attacks on global security in the 21st century.

Climate change response is not just about deploying new technologies, scientific foresight through climate modelling, or geo-engineering projects (even if internationally monitored and controlled) to meet the "threat" of ecological collapse. Our response should be focused on mitigation and adaption most certainly, but from the standpoint of the common good of all species and their survival in the earth's biosphere. Our failure to respond is a matter of ethics and justice and, more pointedly, we are faced with a moral failing of the highest order, not just a technological or systemic one. There must be an equally important and distinct rallying cry for climate change response as there was for responding to mass atrocities.

International Reform

One of the important similarities between R2P and state and global initiatives on addressing climate change is the need to reform international organizations to be capable of responding quickly and appropriately. The ICISS realized in 2001 that UN reform might be necessary to accomplish this shift to a paradigm of "sovereignty as responsibility" as more often than not the Permanent member veto was an obstacle to quick and decisive response when a situation

warranted it. This is still true today. “The most obvious failure to comply with international expectations associated with R2P,” writes Alex Bellamy “ has been in Syria, where the Security Council has been too weak and divided to lead a timely and decisive response” (Bellamy 315). Failure in Syria has double meaning in this article: both as an example of environmental disaster combined with abysmal state practices to mitigate the effects of a drought and a failure to implement R2P.

Therefore rather than seeing climate change as an enemy, climate change must be seen as a global problem that demands reformed and new forms of governance and creative solutions. While R2P has always outlined United Nations and Security Council reform to address new security challenges, it remains a state-based paradigm that insists on the sovereign state and its domestic authorities as vested first and foremost with the power and responsibility to aid and protect their citizens. Only if there is a “responsibility deficit” do international organizations step in to fill that space (49). Sovereignty remains the organizing logic behind the international system of states and state sovereignty may well be one of the greatest threats to climate security moving forward.

A redefinition of “sovereignty as responsibility” may only elide deeper institutionalized forms of violence and regimes of control.” I have previously argued that more attention should be directed toward “the complex global system of violence with an interest in deeper systemic reform rather than reaction to each instance of violence” (Fishel 2013, 205). Simply put, international law creates a system wherein the state is both the perpetrator and the enforcer, in mass atrocities as well as both the initiator and respondent for environmental disasters.

The state-focused agenda also misses other forms of security threats which include the multinational corporation: an object that does not make an appearance in R2P, regardless of its actions contributing to regional insecurity, human rights crimes, as well as pollution, climate change and ecological devastation. It is assumed that the corporation will be controlled through state regulation, but the continued neoliberalization and reliance on so-called free market logics internationally bares the disconnect between state-based control of the corporations and their ability to escape regulation and control. It is now common knowledge that Exxon knew about the dangers of fossil fuel and climate change, yet actively campaigned to hide, obscure, and disrupt scientific study and political action. In addition, oil and gas companies contribute to climate change through continued resource extraction and they pollute water and soil with pipeline and tanker leaks. Additionally, global capitalism is rarely, if ever, taken to account for its role in these crises. As Naomi Klein argues, the climate crisis is about capitalism, not carbon (Klein 2014).

Simply put, R2P is not radical enough—be it narrow or wide—but in can work in concert with other reform that will aid in climate change mitigation. Especially important is addressing the problems surrounding the veto and Security Council deadlock that demonstrate that much needs to be done to increase transparency and accountability of the Council. R2P has engaged in extended theorizing and dialogue around Council reform and this will work in favour of international climate change mitigation, too. Bellamy writes that the “Council itself needs to engage in dialogue—informally at first—about how to improve this accountability loop” (Bellamy 2017, 321). This could include sunset clauses, specific reporting requirements for those acting on mandates, specific limitations set by ruling out certain actions, direct action, and information gathering (Bellamy 2017, 321-322).

For example, a more proactive information gathering Security Council may improve climate change response. The Security Council, understanding that it is one of the important international actors that can respond to climate change, has also taken its own steps to gather information on climate change as a security issue, if only on an informal level. An Arria Formula meeting of the Security Council Members entitled “Preparing for the security implications of rising temperatures” took place on 15 December 2017. In this meeting, they discussed climate change as a driver of conflict and as an early warning for other security threats. Expert testimony agreed that models and methods are needed for placing this new security issue firmly on the Council’s agenda. While a fledging discussion focused on the basics, an important step toward placing climate changes in the Council’s purview and could lead to more attention and support for climate change issues.

Climate Change as a Global Problem

As Adams stresses, climate change is global problem, and this means that it demands a more than an international

response. By this I mean that mitigation actions must go beyond state-based initiatives and begin to build planetary responses. International environmental literature, and regulation of environmental issues at state and international levels, has given us ample evidence that the problems that we face in the Anthropocene do not respect national borders, nor will they be completely answered by sovereign state politics. We must admit that climate change cannot be completely addressed within the sovereign state system.

Simon Dalby argues that preserving the status quo is insufficient. If this status quo is the territorial integrity of the state or the international order, "it becomes harder to respond effectively to environmental change worsened by taken-for-granted elements of national and international governance…[these systems] are failing in their capacity to arrest processes of environmental change at best, and, at worst, are driving these processes of global change (Dalby 2014, 99). Paul Harris writes that any approach must also be practical and reality based. "It would reflect climate change realities rather than assuming that the problem, and all of the solutions to it, must or even can comport with the Westphalian assumptions of state sovereignty, rights, autonomy and independence" (Harris 2011, 187).

A more holistic approach is needed; the challenges and dangers of the Anthropocene demand reformed and new forms of governance and creative responses at all levels of governance. A global approach must embrace ethics and justice; it must address who can and should bear the burden of mitigation of climate change as "humanity" as a whole is not equally responsible for ecological damage, nor should all be equally responsible for attending to the damage.

R2P's expanded notion of sovereignty as responsibility may well be flexible enough to add to effective climate change response, but it certainly cannot address the ecological crises we are facing over the long term. This will take multiple communities and diverse viewpoints—human, nonhuman, ecological, indigenous, scientific—to work together toward collective action that preserves and protects the only home we have.

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