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War Climates

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Our political systems and global politics are largely unequipped for the real challenges of today's world. Global economic growth and rising populations are putting unprecedented stresses on the physical environment, and these stresses in turn are causing unprecedented challenges for our societies. Yet politicians are largely ignorant of these trends. Governments are not organized to meet them. And crises that are fundamentally ecological in nature are managed by outdated strategies of war and diplomacy.

Consider, for example, the situation in Darfur, Sudan. This horrible conflict is being addressed through threats of military force, sanctions and generally the language of war and peacekeeping. Yet the undoubted origin of the conflict is the region's extreme poverty, which was made disastrously worse in the 1980s by a drought that has essentially lasted until today. It appears that long-term climate change is leading to lower rainfall not only in Sudan, but also in much of Africa just south of the Sahara Desert—an area where life depends on the rains, and where drought means death.

Darfur has been caught in a drought-induced death trap, but nobody has seen fit to approach the Darfur crisis from the perspective of long-term development rather than the perspective of war. Darfur needs a water strategy more than a military strategy. Its 7 million people cannot survive without a new approach that gives them a chance to grow crops and water their animals. Yet all of the talk at the United Nations is about sanctions and armies, with no path to peace in sight.

Water stress is becoming a major obstacle to economic development in many parts of the world. The water crisis in Gaza is a cause of disease and suffering among Palestinians, and is a major source of underlying tensions between Palestine and Israel. Yet again, billions of dollars are spent on bombing and destruction in the region, while virtually nothing is done about the growing water crisis.

China and India, too, will face growing water crises in the coming years, with potentially horrendous consequences. The economic takeoff of these two giants started 40 years ago with the introduction of higher agricultural output and an end to famines. Yet part of that increased agricultural output resulted from millions of wells that were sunk to tap underground water supplies for irrigation. Now the water table is falling at a dangerous pace, as the underground water is being pumped much faster than the rains are recharging it.

Moreover, aside from rainfall patterns, climate change is upsetting the flow of rivers, as glaciers, which provide a huge amount of water for irrigation and household use, are rapidly receding due to global warming. Snow pack in the mountains is melting earlier in the season, so that river water is less available during summer growing seasons. For all of these reasons, India and China are experiencing serious water crises that are likely to intensify in the future.

The United States faces risks as well. Midwestern and southwestern states have been in a prolonged drought that might well be the result of long-term warming, and the farm states rely heavily on water from a huge underground reservoir that is being depleted by over-pumping.

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Just as pressures on oil and gas supplies have driven up energy prices, environmental stresses may now push up food and water prices in many parts of the world. Given the heat waves, droughts, and other climate stresses across the U.S., Europe, Australia and elsewhere this year, wheat prices are now shooting up to their highest levels in decades. Thus, environmental pressures are now hitting the bottom line—affecting incomes and livelihoods around the world.

With rising populations, economic growth and climate change, we will face intensifying droughts, hurricanes and typhoons, powerful El Nino's, water stress, heat waves, species extinctions and more. The “soft” issues of environment and climate will become the hard and strategic issues of the 21st century. Yet there is almost no recognition of this basic truth in our governments or our global politics. People who speak about hunger and environmental crises are viewed as muddle-headed “moralists,” as opposed to the hard-headed “realists” who deal with war and peace. This is nonsense. The so-called realists just don't understand the sources of tensions and stresses that are leading to a growing number of crises around the world.

Our governments should all establish Ministries of Sustainable Development, devoted full-time to managing the linkages between environmental change and human well-being. Agriculture ministers by themselves will not be able to cope with water shortages that farmers will face. Health ministers will not be able to cope with an increase in infectious diseases due to global warming. Environment ministers will not be able to cope with the pressures on oceans and forests, or the consequences of increasing extreme weather events like last year's Hurricane Katrina or this year's Typhoon Saomai—China's worst in many decades. A new powerful ministry should be charged with coordinating the responses to climate change, water stress and other ecosystem crises.

At the global level, the world's governments should finally understand that the treaties that they have all signed in recent years on climate, environment and biodiversity are at least as important to global security as all of the war zones and crisis hotspots that grab the headlines, budgets and attention. By focusing on the underlying challenges of sustainable development, our governments could more easily end the current crises (as in Darfur) and head off many more crises in the future.