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Mega-Cities and Climate Change

In our world there are still people who run around risking their lives in bloody battles over a name or a flag or a piece of clothing but they tend to belong to gangs with names like the Bloods and the Crips and they make their living dealing drugs.

FRANCIS FUKUYAMA, *The End of History,* 1992[1]

As Fukuyama looked with optimism at the West's liberal triumph in the early 1990s, there was also anxiety about whether a lack of anything serious to fight about would lead it into a soft decadence. The Bloods and the Crips were two famous Los Angeles street gangs. The Bloods were formed at first to resist the influence of the Crips in their neighbourhoods. They later came to be known for a 'take-no-prisoners' attitude and violence. During the 1980s they had divided up into smaller sets and began to compete for control of different neighbourhoods. Their involvement in narcotics led them to grow in size and take their rivalry across the United States, often in alliance with other city gangs.[2] Gang warfare pointed to an important feature of contemporary violence that would grow in salience, although it was normally discussed as if it had little to do with actual war.

Edward Newman, writing when analyses suggested a definite decline in the numbers of civil wars, argued that this focused on a 'classical' model of civil war which essentially involved major forces in competition, those of the government versus those challenging it for anti-colonial, ideological, or secessionist reasons. What was neglected and excluded, he

warned, were 'a broad phenomenon of political and social violence characteristic of low-intensity conflict, low-level insurgencies, and state weakness.'[3] The statistics of war only acknowledged deaths that occurred in battle, but battle accounted only for a moderate percentage of the annual tally of violent deaths—some 17 per cent of the total between 2010 and 2015. By contrast intentional homicides counted for 69 per cent. While it was the case that countries racked by civil war were dangerous places to live, even more so were many Latin American and Caribbean countries that, strictly speaking, were not at war. This was the only region in the world where rates of lethal violence increased after 2000. It was also the most urbanised part of the world, with 80 per cent of the population living in cities. Some forty-five of the fifty most dangerous metropolises in the world were in Latin America. In general internationally, while rural violence had been in decline, urban violence was rising.[4]

A focus on cities developed as the international organisations concerned with development found the concept of 'fragile state' more useful than the loaded concept of 'failed state'. If the problem was seen largely as one of disorder and violence then military coups and repression could be presented as solutions, not least by those responsible, even though this was rarely peaceful or durable. A fragility framework, by contrast, could take in a range of issues, keeping a sharp focus on issues of governance. A fragile state was one lacking representation and accountability, stable legal standards, and checks to coercive action by the state, combined with an inability to control territory and borders.[5] It also took in economic management and social cohesion. As states were examined for signs of fragility, and by these standards most states had some, it became apparent that in many cases the fragility was concentrated in particular spaces, especially cities. The growth of cities was a striking trend that was set to continue. According to the United Nations in 2016, there were 512 cities around the world with at least 1 million inhabitants, and 31 megacities with at least 10 million inhabitants. By 2030 these numbers were projected to grow to 662 and 41 respectively.[6] More than half of the world's population lived in cities. As the bulk of population growth took place in cities this number would grow.

By and large urbanisation was a positive development, promoting

economic growth and bringing people out of poverty. There were reasons why people gravitated to cities as places to find work and enjoy life. Much of the urban growth was in medium-sized cities that coped well. Yet there were places where this rapid urbanisation resulted in a miserable, stressed environment damaging the inhabitants. Tensions were generated as people became compressed into relatively confined urban areas, competing for scarce resources in ramshackle housing, amidst poverty and poor sanitation, without effective governance and ineffectual policing. Violence was an unsurprising result. Robert Muggah described cities as 'the new frontier of warfare.'[7] Cities have long been the setting for insurrections, mob violence, and crime, but this was reaching a new level. Christopher Coker noted how the fate of their inhabitants was compared with junkyards and waste-disposal, and, with extreme wealth often being found not far away, of being 'supersaturated with Darwinian competition'.[8] In 2003 Richard Norton wrote of 'feral cities', defined as 'metropolises with population of more than a million people in a state the government of which has lost the ability to maintain the rule of law within the city's boundaries yet remains a functioning actor in the greater international system.' In many cases not only was effective policing absent but also the police force had 'become merely another armed group seeking power and wealth. Citizens must provide for their own protection, perhaps by hiring independent security personnel or paying protection to criminals.'[9] In such settings gangs controlled the slums and shanty towns, whether in the form of structured criminal organisations, groups that just hung about together, watching over their territory, or vigilante groups put together by local communities who had given up on the police.[10]

Most had little interest in directly challenging the state, so long as they were left alone, but those with both muscle and wealth, often because of drug trafficking, could challenge governments. When insurgencies did develop they were suited to urban areas. Battles have tended to be rural affairs. As we have noted already cities had always been seen as trouble by advancing military forces, which is why they went out of their way to bypass them or else relied on frustrating sieges. The equipment and tactics of sophisticated armies usually worked better in the open.[11] Yet the issue of cities could not be avoided. In any war with North Korea one of the

South's greatest vulnerabilities was the location of its capital and mega-city Seoul close to the border, within artillery range. Even if the urban fights in the invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq had proved to be less demanding than anticipated this was not the case with the subsequent insurgencies. When it came to terrorism, prosperous cities offered many targets, with an outrage likely to shut down city centres, close down transportation networks, and gain early media commentary as those on the spot distributed details almost immediately. This was far more than could ever be achieved in a rural outpost. Refugees, especially if they had been forced out of city homes, tended to pour into other cities when possible, putting a strain on public services and potentially creating new tensions. This could be seen in the impact of the Syrian War on Jordan and the Lebanon. The latter hosted 1.1 million registered refugees, compared with a total population of 4.4 million, and the influx threatened the balance of sectarian power within the country.

A US Army study described megacities as 'becoming the epicenters of human activity on the planet and, as such, they will generate most of the friction which compels future military intervention'. The study looked, inter alia, at two Brazilian cities: São Paulo in May 2006 when over 1,300 attacks were launched by individuals associated with First Command of the Capital (PCC) drug gang and, at the same time, riots occurred in seventy-three prisons. The government found itself negotiating with the prison drug gang in Rio in November 2010 when over 3,000 police officers and military personnel were required to end city-wide violence emanating from a single favela (slum community) out of the city's 600.[12] San Pedro Sula in Honduras regularly appeared as one the most violent cities in the world. The reason for this was that so much economic activity was channelled through the city, offering rich opportunities for extortion, and so it became a place where criminal gangs fought each other for the privilege. It was also vital to trafficking in cocaine, and so engaged other gangs, including from neighbouring countries. In Mexico, which could never be considered in any way a failed state, there was horrific violence resulting in well over 120,000 deaths, connected with government attempts to crack down on drug trafficking syndicates, responsible for the bulk of the cocaine reaching the United States. The potential interaction

with political violence could be seen in Colombia. There had been a full-blooded civil war from 1948 into the early 1950s, followed by fighting between left-wing guerrilla groups and right-wing paramilitaries that lasted until the 1990s, and then, after subsiding, picked up again, as the government decided it was time to crack down on the main militia, FARC, which subsidised its insurgency with drug-trafficking, and was also able to use neighbouring Ecuador and Venezuela for sanctuaries.[13]

One view was that fighting for profit came under a different heading to fighting for ideology or power. Yet, as FARC demonstrated, the categories could not easily be distinguished. Those criminal groups that moved beyond the level of street gangs to organised business with their own distribution systems, political and financial networks, and coercive means could challenge states and undermine their authority, or else become part of their power structures.[14] In an examination of the situation in Rio de Janeiro in early 2017 Robert Muggah asked whether the violence in the city had reached a stage where it deserved to be considered as 'armed conflict'. Over 6,000 people had been assassinated in 2016, a rate of 41 homicides per 100,000 residents. The military police were involved in killing 920 residents, while the casualty rate among the city's security forces was described as being higher than combatants in recent wars. As they moved into communities with armoured vehicles and assault rifles they faced well-armed groups, often fortified by former policemen who had swapped protection for extortion, and on occasion with access to heavy machine guns and rocket-propelled grenades. Stray bullets penetrate the walls of hospitals and schools. The norms of international humanitarian law, intended to protect civilians, needed to be applied as much in Rio as in any armed conflict.[15] Phil Williams observed that violence in Mexico, also comparable to civil wars elsewhere, was multi-layered. Some was personal and careless, but much related to the rivalry between criminal organisations engaged in the drug trade as well as factionalism within them. It resembled, he noted, 'Mafia clan violence in Sicily, blood feuds among criminal organizations in Albania, and the upsurge in contract killings in Russia during the 1990s.'[16] While terrorism was readily included in analyses of contemporary conflict this was less so with criminal organisations. Yet while the state might be functioning

unimpaired the society was still being damaged.

WHAT WAS DISCUSSED MUCH MORE WAS 'RESOURCE WARS'. One feature of many war scenarios involved a struggle to control energy supplies. These often assumed that oil reserves had peaked and that expanding economies (with China an important addition) were going to struggle to find what they needed. For some analysts this, as much as any other geopolitical factor, was likely to drive future conflict.[17] Countries such as Russia, with its vast energy resources, could well find itself in a pivotal position, able to dictate terms, and influence European foreign policies because it could turn gas supplies on and off. From the moment he took power, Vladimir Putin of Russia saw the country as a potential 'energy superpower' and the means by which it could be restored to its rightful place in the international hierarchy.[18]

Energy resources were not only vital to the functioning of modern economies but also a great wealth generator for those fortunate enough to be sitting atop oil reserves or playing major roles in its extraction and distribution. The distribution of oil reserves had a continuing geopolitical influence over the twentieth century. It helped identify strategic parts of the world, notably the Middle East, and also shaped military campaigns in fights to seize oil assets. It was an important aggravating factor in civil wars. Those with oil wealth were able to buy off domestic opponents and fund an assertive foreign policy, from military adventures to supporting proxies in other states. Greater risks might be taken than would otherwise be the case in addressing conflicts, such as the Iraqi takeover of Kuwait in 1990, because of the implications this might have for control of the oil market (especially if Iraq had moved into Saudi Arabia as well), or fears about control of transit routes, whether pipelines or choke points such as the Straits of Hormuz. At the most extreme, the value of oil assets provided a rare economic incentive for conquest.[19] There was an easy assumption, common among international relations students as much as radical conspiracy theorists, that oil was at the heart of the strategic calculations of the great powers.

At times when energy prices were high these concerns gained currency. This was true in the 1970s after the massive increase in the price of oil, the

coincident imposition of an embargo by Arab oil producers on some Western states following the 1973 Arab-Israeli War, and the later impact of events such as the Iranian revolution. Yet in the 1980s the price fell dramatically, even while two oil producers—Iraq and Iran—were at war with each other. During the 2000s the price rose again, encouraging Russia in its optimism about becoming an energy superpower, but then in 2014 prices fell dramatically. Russia was left facing budget deficits but also a loss of markets, as its past attempts to coerce countries using its market position had led the targeted countries to seek alternative suppliers.[20] Meanwhile, because of the exploitation of shale gas, the US had become once again a major energy producer.

There was a familiar pattern to future projections of energy security, which was to assume that supply was close to its peak while demand was continuing to grow. Such claims tended to ignore more sanguine market information, failed to think about the impact of prices on discovery of new reserves or the development of more efficient alternatives to fossil fuels, and assumed that consumers would be left helpless after supplies were cut off without being able to find alternative routes.[21] It was less straightforward than assumed to disrupt supply for a long period. If anything, the United States might be as well placed to take advantage of the oil weapon (as it was on economic measures more generally) than others.[22] So while there was an oil dimension to many conflicts it was rarely the sole reason why a country would go to war. Cases attributed to oil motives often turned out to be about other issues. At most they reflected concerns about security of supply rather than greed.[23]

Although the oil issue had long been a feature of discussions about future conflict, in the 1990s another issue began to gain prominence. This posed more general problems of resource scarcity, made worse by the consequences of climate change. In 1994 Thomas Homer-Dixon of the University of Toronto reported the findings of a major research programme into what he called 'environmental security'. It opened with a stark prediction:

Within the next fifty years, the planet's human population will probably pass nine billion, and global economic output may quintuple. Largely as a result, scarcities of

renewable resources will increase sharply. The total area of high-quality agricultural land will drop, as will the extent of forests and the number of species they sustain. Coming generations will also see the widespread depletion and degradation of aquifers, rivers, and other water resources; the decline of many fisheries; and perhaps significant climate change.

These scarcities, he warned, were 'already contributing to violent conflicts in many parts of the developing world'. This was just the early stages of what would probably be an 'upsurge of violence in the coming decades that will be induced or aggravated by scarcity'. This would not lead to interstate wars but instead violence that would be 'sub-national, persistent, and diffuse', evident most in poor societies. The immediate causes would be population movements and the impoverishment of already weak states, possibly leading to their fragmentation.[24] Over the following two decades this concern grew and became bound up with the wider controversies about the extent of global warming, its consequences, and how it should be tackled.[25]

In 2007 UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon observed that while the conflict in Sudan's Darfur region was discussed as 'an ethnic conflict pitting Arab militias against black rebels and farmers,' it was one that had begun as an 'ecological crisis, arising at least in part from climate change.' A drought lasting two decades had meant that there was insufficient food and water, and this was in part responsible for the crisis.[26] One claim from the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change was that glaciers in the Himalayas would melt rapidly (this was later disputed), affecting agriculture in Pakistan and potentially aggravating the dispute with India over Kashmir.[27] In 2011 it was suggested that a sudden rise in food prices, which reached record highs, was one reason for the waves of protest and a factor in the protests that toppled Tunisian president Zine al-Abidine Ben Ali and Egyptian president Hosni Mubarak. Researchers for the UN's World Food programme noted that while there was little evidence to link food insecurity to interstate war it did increase the risk of 'democratic breakdown, civil conflict, protest, rioting, and communal conflict'. The evidence linking food insecurity to interstate conflict was less strong, though there was some historical evidence linking

declining agricultural yields to periods of regional conflict in Europe and Asia.[28]

By 2015 the US National Security Strategy was identifying climate change as 'an urgent and growing threat to our national security contributing to increased natural disasters, refugee flows, and conflicts over basic resources like food and water'. The next year President Obama cited national security as a major reason why climate change had to be taken seriously, pointing to the refugee flows likely to result from rising sea levels and drought. He mentioned a case study that showed how 'the droughts that happened in Syria contributed to the unrest and the Syrian civil war. Well, if you start magnifying that across a lot of states, a lot of nation states that already contain a lot of poor people who are just right at the margins of survival, this becomes a national security issue.'[29] A September 2016 presidential memorandum urged more analysis of the threat,[30] while a report from the National Intelligence Council set out the issues.

> Long-term changes in climate will produce more extreme weather events and put greater stress on critical Earth systems like oceans, freshwater, and biodiversity. These in turn will almost certainly have significant effects, both direct and indirect, across social, economic, political, and security realms during the next 20 years. These effects will be all the more pronounced as people continue to concentrate in climate-vulnerable locations, such as coastal areas, water-stressed regions, and ever-growing cities.

As examples it cited how the terrorist group al-Shabaab exploited the 2011–13 famine in Somalia to coerce and tax international aid agencies, while insurgent groups in northern Mali used deepening desertification to enlist local people in a 'food for jihad' arrangement.[31]

As with energy security there was a presumption that issues of environmental security were unavoidable and were bound to intense disputes between communities and even states. This presumption was criticised as being too deterministic, not allowing for ways by which human ingenuity and economic incentives would lead to new ways of managing resources. A definite trend would have been evident in rising raw material prices, yet these had often fallen. Gloom-laden projections of

this sort were not new, and their record was unimpressive. Societies coped more effectively than anticipated. Governments were capable of recognising that in the event of shortages cooperation often made more sense than conflict. This was evident even with water shortages—an issue which was often highlighted as the most likely source of conflict. Those predicting a dark future could not point to any established causal mechanisms.[32] One study described war over water as 'neither strategically rational, hydrographically effective, nor economically viable'. Another, looking hard at the causes of African civil wars, saw no 'robust correlational link between climate variability and civil war'.[33] Studies attempting to identify direct causal links between shifts in weather patterns and conflict produced spurious results because they ignored all the highly influential contextual factors. It was not that factors such as 'deforestation, land degradation, and scarce supply of freshwater, alone and in combination with high population density' were irrelevant to future conflict. They increased the risk of it happening within states. But they were unlikely to trigger war. The evidence pointed to the importance of levels of economic development and the nature of the political regime.[34]

The need to separate factors affecting the conduct of a conflict from those causing it was evident with claims about the impact of drought on Darfur. The International Peace Research Institute in Oslo questioned the claim:

> Warlords—who foster conflict—may exploit drought, flooding, starvation, agricultural or natural disasters in their strategies, like they did in Somalia and Darfur. But what will drive their fight is not the rain, the temperature, or the sea level—they will always fight for the same goals of power, territory, money, revenge, etc.

Similarly with Syria, a broad range of factors was behind the war. Drought did play a role in the country's economic decline,[35] but this was an aggravating factor. Wars, in the end, were not responses to poor living conditions but culminations of political struggles.

The main area where there did seem to be a correlation with environmental degradation was with non-state conflict, particularly in the rural areas of Sub-Saharan Africa. Non-state conflict was between armed

groups neither of which represented the state. It was not about seeking to seize control of the state apparatus or about the overall balance of political power between rival groups within a state. It was more likely to involve local groups competing for scarce resources. When governments were weak and unable to exercise control over many areas within their notional borders, then peripheral communities coped as best they could on their own. By far the largest number of these conflicts were in Africa, often in countries suffering full-blown civil wars at the same time, and most appeared to be connected with local issues, including access to 'water, land, and livestock'. Environmental changes would be likely to trigger or aggravate these conflicts.[36] There was an obvious parallel here with urban gang warfare discussed earlier in this chapter, in forms of conflict that might not normally count in the mainstream discussions of war and peace but nonetheless reflected on the inability of some states to monopolise the legitimate use of physical force within their given borders.