Question:

"Why have there been so few climate wars?"

Introduction

At its simplest, the phrase climate war operates to describe the presence of conflict which has been caused or exacerbated by climate change. The relationship between climate change and the occurrence of conflict has been the subject of much debate amongst scholars. In his book, Climate Wars: What People Will Be Killed For In The 21st Century, German sociologist Welzer explored the relationship between the effects of climate change and war, noting that some consequences of climate change to include "inhabitable spaces shrinking, scarce resources becoming scarcer, and injustices growing deeper, not only between north and south but also between generations." (Welzer, 2015). In exploring Welzer's definition of climate change, this essay will seek to explain why there have been so few climate wars over the last 100 years. This essay will explore this proposition on consideration of three factors. Firstly, the transitory impact that climate change has in generating the hostility necessary for conflict. Secondly, the political and socioeconomic factors which underpin the relationship between climate change and conflict. Lastly, this essay will explore the strength of claims between a causal relationship between climate change and war. On consideration of these factors, this essay will conclude on the notion that there have been so few climate wars because the supposed relationship between climate change and war are secondary to external factors which hold greater precedence in driving conflict across the globe.

The transitory impact of climate change for generating the hostility necessary for conflict

One argument which demonstrates the reason to why there have been so few climate wars, is the transitory impact that climate change has for generating the hostility necessary for conflict. This transitory impact is best captured through the swinging pendulum theory. The swinging pendulum theory originates from the philosopher Hegel who argued that events swing from one extreme to the other before eventually coming to rest at the middle (Hegel, 1837). In the context of climate change, the theory suggests that where climate change initiates suffering in the short-term; for example, the flooding of a farmer's field of crops, at some period in the future, a natural balance will be restored. A research study conducted presented some empirical evidence which highlighted that "about 70% of all riots in a sample lasted for only one day, and 91% of all riots did not last for longer than a week" (Almer et al., 2017). This study highlights that the initial effects of climate change on the incidents of violence fail to persist over time. The reason why there have been so few climate wars is due to the fact that the initial effects of climate change gradually become internalised by communities as they become accustomed to the changes to their yields and bound together to install adaptation and mitigation strategies to cope with their new normal. The short-lived nature of the incidents of violence further

supports the notion that there has been a lack of climate wars. This is because the effects of climate change lead to those affected naturally assimilating to their changed environments, which in turn restores peace.

This notion that climate change has a transitory impact on generating conflict is further supported by a second study. Findings from the empirical research point out that "rainfall shocks reduce real GDP per capita, which in turn reduces the opportunity cost of contesting for power" (Ciccone et al., 2011). This action marks the beginning of the window of opportunity hypothesis. The hypothesis indicates that environmental shocks initially cause a spike in conflicts which leads to a positive reaction from incumbents to make democratic concessions (Aidt et al., 2014). The reason why there have been so few climate wars is due to the fact that the initial negative effects brought about by environmental shocks are offset by the longer-term societal gains brought about by increased democratic concessions. A fair argument to make is that increased democratic concessions can lead to higher average incomes and translate into higher living standards which in turn reduces the propensity for acts of violence and lowers the risk of conflict. This notion is strengthened by the works of Toft who states that people "discount the present but see their fate provided for in the future" (Toft, 2006). This suggests that society is more motivated by the security of their future than the immediate burden they may have to endure. One could argue that the motivations of people differ across states, with culture, religion and tradition playing significant roles in dictating how one reacts to the effects of climate change.

Political and Socioeconomic Factors

This section of this essay will address two external factors which hold precedence over climate change in driving conflict across the world. Political and socioeconomic factors underpin the relationship between climate change and conflict. Research conducted by Buhaug on the major drivers of conflict reached the conclusion that "socioeconomic and political factors play a more significant role than climate change" (Buhaug, 2015). The notion put forward is that climate change is not the single most important factor in driving conflict. Instead, Raleigh argues that "the political and economic characteristics of a nation are the strongest indicators of conflict risk" (Raleigh et al., 2007). This reasoning makes sense since political stability and economic capacity are the cornerstones of a well-functioning state. The embedded relationship between climate change and political and socioeconomic factors means that on a macro-level, climate change does not turn local conflicts into national conflicts but merely perpetuates more local conflict. This notion is further reinforced by scholars who attest that "climate change alters the political stability of poor and underdeveloped states, as they do not have adequate infrastructure and investment in place for coping strategies" (Homer-Dixon, 1994; Baechler, 1999). This captures the point that climate change is a risk amplifier rather than a direct causal link to conflict. Through altering the political stability of a state, climate change indirectly influences the behaviours of society.

This point is further strengthened by the works of scholars who propose that "climate change exacerbates current tensions and inequalities" (Barnett, 2001; Brauch, 2002; Pervis et al., 2004). This reaffirms the point made earlier that the reason why there has been a lack of climate wars is because the effects of climate change impact localised areas and by heightening tensions and deepening inequalities already in place does not necessarily constitute to 'non-stop, inter-state wars which are characterised by ethnic cleansing" (Welzer, 2015). Further studies highlight the importance of political and socioeconomic factors. A consensus among scholars is that conflict is heavily driven by "political growth" (Homer-Dixon, 1998) and "migration patterns" (Dell et al., 2014). The reason why there have been so few climate wars is due to the fact that the constant movement of labour creates highly pressurised periods and conversely creates periods when the pressure is much lower.

The nature of the relationship between climate change and conflict

One argument in favour of the relationship between climate change and the occurrence of conflict and war is the existence of a correlative relationship between the former and the latter. One study presented in favour of this argument found that a change ranging from as little as "1% to 100% in average wheat yield, increased the predicted number of conflicts approximately up to 75 incidents" (Koren, 2018). This means that for every 1% additional yield in wheat crops lead to an increase in the threat of conflict by 0.75 incidents. It is suggested in this essay however that the correlative relationship between climate change and the occurrence of conflict and war is exaggerated and no longer persists as prominently as suggested. In his book, when describing climate war, Welzer described climate wars as consisting of "non-stop warfare, ethnic cleansing and inter-state fighting" (Welzer, 2015). For the type of warfare described by Welzer to occur then the correlation between changing crop yields and the risk of conflicts would arguably need to be much more significant than a 0.75 incident increase. It is also possible to challenge the instrumental value of such studies. A fair case could be made that changes in local wheat yields fail to provide a conclusive explanation for the hostile effects of climate change on an entire nation nevertheless globally. Furthermore, these findings highlight that the effects of climate change do not necessarily always result in equal outcomes across geographies as a result of varying natural resources, and differing levels of infrastructure.

The nature of the relationship between climate change and conflict can further be called into question when looking at a completely different measure of the effects of climate change. Results from an empirical research study conducted highlighted that a "one standard deviation decrease in the level of droughts raises the likelihood of a riot in a given cell by 8.3%" (Almer et al., 2017). In addition, further qualitative research results show that "drier conditions induce direct competition for water which in turn increases the risk of tension emerging between competing groups" (Gleick et al., 2014). The idea here can be explained using a demand-supply framework. The reduction in the supply of water as a result of a drought, imposes increased pressure on people who are dependent on that particular source,

which in turn causes tensions and potential divisions to arise. The reason why there have been so few climate wars is because the idea of a one-standard deviation shift in the level of drought triggering a full scaled conflict is inherently flawed. On a physical level, the mechanism assumes that migration patterns are fixed, which suggest that people would not be able transfer their labour to areas less affected by droughts. Similarly on a competency level, the mechanism assumes that human capital is fixed, which suggest that people would not be capable of innovating new ways to either harness water resources or discover new irrigation methods. The weakness to the claim surrounding the causal relationship between climate change and war lies in the fact that it suggests climate change presents a zero-sum game, whereby the only two options are to suffer from the effects of climate change or to incite violence as a result of enduring the adverse consequences. On consideration, the purported casual relationship between climate change and war suggested through the various empirical studies do not conclusively prove that war and conflict is derived directly from climate change.

Conclusion

This essay explored the propositions presented forward of why there have been so few climate wars. The first proposition posed was the transitory impact of climate change in generating the hostility necessary for conflict, the second proposition examined external factors: namely the political and socioeconomic factors of a nation. Lastly, the final proposition put forward evaluated the strength of claims between an existing causal relationship between climate change and war. Upon consideration, this essay reached the conclusion that the overriding reason to why there have been so few climate wars is due to the external factors holding greater precedence and significance in driving conflict across the globe.

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