

Climate wars

January 27, 2011

The international climate change summit in Cancún in December 2010 produced an agreement that host president Felipe Calderon of Mexico declared a “success for humanity and reason”. All the major economies pledged to reduce carbon emissions and agreed to establish a ‘Green fund’ to financially help developing countries adapt to climate change. One country however, remained deeply critical of the document and refused to ratify the agreement.

Cutting a lonely figure, Pablo Solon, the Bolivian ambassador to the UN, said: "Responsibly, we cannot go along with a situation that my President has termed 'ecocide and genocide'." The Bolivians’ dissent was based on calculations that the measures agreed on could lead to an average temperature rise as high as 4C. The consequences of such a rise would be catastrophic. What such a world might look like has been vividly depicted by Canadian journalist, lecturer and historian Gwynne Dyer in his latest book, *Climate Wars*.

A geo-political analysis of climate change, *Climate Wars* is underpinned by a series of future scenarios based on military planning and scientific projections. These bleak visions portray a world of militarised borders, resource wars and natural disasters. Famine, drought and death stalk most of the planet, while those countries that avoid the worst, the US, the UK, Russia, Northern Europe, jealously guard their precarious position with nuclear weapons. I spoke to Dyer before the Cancún summit. It was the discovery that the Pentagon was advanced in its plans for operating in a climate-change-ravaged world that first drew Dyer into researching the subject. The journey he subsequently embarked on, talking to military planners, scientists, think-tanks and environmentalists, took him on a tour of possible futures that included the US military gunning down Mexicans on the border, climate ravaged countries independently releasing clouds of sulphur dioxide into the atmosphere to try and reduce global temperatures, a new cold war between the West and Russia and nuclear devastation as Pakistan and India clash over dwindling water resources.

Each of the scenarios is set in a world where the average temperature rise has exceeded 2C — the rise that signatories of the Cancún agreement have pledged to prevent. A 2C rise is widely considered to be the ‘tipping point’, at which point positive feedback, such as the melting permafrost emitting methane, will kick in and the process will spiral out of human control. Despite the prominence of the 2C target in the ‘Shared Vision’ of the Cancún text, the planet remains on course to breach the threshold. Dyer said: “If we follow the current trend which says our emissions are not shrinking, not stable but growing as the economies in the developing countries grow, we’re going to hit 4 degrees by the 2050s - that’s game over, it’s way past game over.” The source of Dyer’s pessimism is not technological or financial - he claims the necessary changes could be made with current technology and at a cost of 1-2 percent of annual GDP. Nor is it caused by political skepticism, “There is not a government on the planet that doesn’t take this seriously,” he insisted. Instead, he believes it is the competitive protection of national interests that is scuppering the chances of progress.

In *Climate Wars*, Dyer quotes David Keith, Canada research chair in energy and the environment at the University of Calgary, who said: “The sad fact is that the optimal strategy for each country is to get other countries to cut their emissions while each country does nothing.” In Cancún, agreement was only made possible by a diplomatic dance that neatly sidestepped the main obstacle. The question of the renewal of the Kyoto agreement, with its requirement that developed countries reduce emissions but not developing countries, had threatened to derail the whole process.

The final text of the agreement allowed for both sides to keep to their positions and defer a final decision. At the forefront of the confrontation between the developed and developing world are the world’s top two emitters of greenhouse gases, the US and China. In *Climate Wars’* future scenarios,

China is devastated by a decline in rainfall, a collapse of its glacier-fed river systems and escalating insurgencies in Tibet and Xinjiang. While the US just about retains the capacity to feed its people, it is rocked by civil strife as the growing Hispanic population react to the government's violently protectionist response towards the collapsing Mexico.

In Cancún, the two super-powers inched their way towards agreement, eventually reaching a compromise on the thorny issue of verifying carbon cuts. Dyer believes the Chinese are acutely aware of the dangers they face but will not publically commit to any action until the Americans do. The American situation, according to Dyer, is more complex and, potentially, more dangerous. "The Americans are almost uniquely into climate denial" he said. "They have been the subjects of a 15-year long campaign to persuade them this is all some conspiracy by 30,000 scientists trying to get grants."

In addition to a sceptical electorate, the US government has to contend with a domestic scene dominated by bitterly divided partisan politics with the opposition dominated by climate change deniers. Dyer said: "In the United States you can barely be on the right unless you publically disbelieve in climate change. It has become this sort of badge of membership." This environment, Dyer believes, has left Obama shackled and impotent when it comes to striking international deals he knows will be shot down by Congress.

Outside of the small circle of developed and developing economic powerhouses, the very objectives of the negotiations are being questioned. Bolivian president Evo Morales said: "We came to Cancún to save nature, forests, planet Earth. We are not here to convert nature into a commodity. We have not come here to revitalise capitalism with carbon markets." Morales' belief that capitalism, as the engine of climate change, cannot be trusted to now solve the problem is one shared by many in the environmental movement. It is not a viewpoint shared by Dyer. "We are going to live or die with a solution to this problem that is achieved within the present political and economical context", he said. "You are not going to change the corporate structure of the universe. You can on the other hand change the incentives, the tax structure and everything else to make it more attractive to corporations to behave responsibly about the environment. There is no point in trying to make the revolution happen next week, next month, next year, next decade."

While politicians continue to struggle to come to terms with the reality of climate change, it seems the militaries of the world are acting more decisively. According to Dyer, the nightmarish scenarios of an imploding civilisation in *Climate Wars* were constructed almost entirely from information from military sources. "That is the sort of thing they are thinking about," he said. "They all know, to a remarkable degree, what this is going to do to food production, what damage this is going to do to water availability, which countries get hammered hard, which countries get away easy." The American military is already prepared for the failure of the international community to act in time. Dyer claimed the Pentagon believes it will be ordered to close the Mexican border in the near future. "It will do it", said Dyer. "It can do it. You build a wall and you shoot people trying to come over it." It is this militarisation of borders that Dyer believes will signal the end of the window of opportunity for international cooperation and action on climate change. "The retreat into nationalism goes when the borders start to slam shut and the countries are shooting other people's citizens [then] you get a general collapse in the will to do things globally."

This is no vision of the distant future, though. According to Dyer: "That is probably ten or fifteen years away."