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BOOK REVIEW

Climate wars

by Gwynne Dyer

Scribe Publications: Melbourne, 2008, 256 pp., ISBN 9781921372223, RRP \$32.95 (paperback)

At our Anniversary Dinner in 2007, Professor Alan Dupont forecast that global climate change would pose extraordinary challenges to 21st century society and become **the** international security issue of the century¹.

Since then several books have been published that expand on this theme. They vary in quality, but this is one of the best. Gwynne Dyer is an Australian freelance journalist whose international affairs column is published in 175 newspapers in 45 countries.

Dyer's starting point is the 2007 report of the United Nation's Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) which, as he correctly points out, is a very conservative assessment of the science published in the peer-reviewed literature prior to 2006. The latest evidence suggests that climate change is more advanced than the IPCC report established, although there remains much uncertainty about how effective the global political response will be and when and how quickly positive biophysical feedbacks (which will speed up the process) will kick in². Dyer augments the published science with interviews he conducted with some 50 or more of the world's leading biophysical (especially climatological), social and political scientists and military strategists over the last twelve months, so as to gain an up-to-the-minute understanding of both the state of the science and projections of how different societies may react to climate change as its effects – water shortage, famine, disease, permanent flooding of low-lying land, and the like – become manifest.

Globally, there will be “winners” and “losers”, as the

positive and negative effects of climate change will not be distributed uniformly. Powerful nations will seek to secure the natural resources (arable land, water, oil, uranium *etc.*) that they need to survive – indeed, they are already doing so; “loser” nations may ultimately resort to warfare in an attempt to secure their people's needs; and there will be mass movements of “climate refugees” as those facing loss of land and/or starvation seek survival among better-off societies. Conventional and/or nuclear warfare between disputants (*e.g.* India and Pakistan over Indus River water) is quite possible. If trust among governments breaks down, it will be very difficult, if not impossible, to reach and enforce global agreements on limiting carbon emissions.

Unless the greenhouse-gas concentration can be held below 450 parts per million, the chances of preventing major climate change are very slim. The resulting climate would differ substantially from that in which the human race has flourished. It would be much less suited to human habitation, let alone maintenance of the standard of living currently enjoyed by developed nations, and would likely to lead to a major reduction in the human population over a century or two.

The book is well written and easy to read. Each chapter is preceded by a scenario which indicates how social and political scientists judge a particular society might respond to the climate change pressures on it at a particular point in time. These scenarios include Russia in 2019, the United States in 2029, Northern India in 2036 and China in 2042. Each scenario is followed by a chapter which starts by explaining the underlying science in lay terms, then goes on to explain how societies are expected to react to the pressures on them and how governments are likely to try to cope with the situations with which they are presented. Overall, it is not a pretty picture, but it is a realistic one and it is now informing the contingency planning of many nations, although their governments may be reluctant to acknowledge this.

I commend this book to all *United Service* readers, particularly to younger Defence Force officers, staff college students, diplomats and the like who want a glimpse of the world over the span of their careers.

David Leece³

¹Alan Dupont (2007). Implications of global climate change for international security. *United Service* 58 (4), 13 – 16.

²As the earth gets warmer, oceans and forests take less carbon out of the atmosphere; methane is released from melting permafrost and shallow seas; and greening tundra replaces reflective ice in polar regions. The IPCC team was unable to include certain of these feedback mechanisms in its models, as the science was not sufficiently well advanced.

³Dr David Leece is an assistant commissioner of the Natural Resources Commission of New South Wales. These are his personal views.