

Outlook

Putin's U-turn on Kyoto leaves America in perilous isolation

Climate is a security issue too

Opinion

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The Russian government's decision to submit the Kyoto protocol to the Duma for ratification will be welcomed by many. The reasons for President Putin's support are complex and mostly concerned with internal Russian politics and the direction of the Russian energy sector, although foreign relations did play some part. Putin is a master at neutralising effective criticism by juxtaposing good news with bad; the potential abolition of the barrier to foreign investors buying Gazprom's domestic shares plus ratification of the protocol, as set against his policy towards Chechnya and a tightening grip on the regions, for instance.

Our response to Putin should be to deepen our engagement with Russia so we can effectively contribute towards encouraging regional economic growth and therefore the conditions that would help address some of Russia's domestic problems. We need to construct a dialogue that is based not upon mutual demands but on shared objectives. The purchase of carbon credits is one way to contribute to this process as the money raised could be a great help in providing sustained economic growth, based upon a cleaner and more efficient use of energy.

But the real point of ratification is that it will allow the international community to re-forge the negotiating framework needed to address the problems of climate change.

Nobody ever said that the Kyoto protocol was perfect. Nothing that difficult to negotiate could be. Reducing the industrialised world's greenhouse gases 5% below 1990 levels by 2012, is only a start. But, critically, it offers for the first time a consensus-based approach which, while recognising national self-interest, also builds a dialogue to deal with an issue that requires a global response. The

most critical part of that dialogue is its legitimacy and that legitimacy has to be based upon trust.

This is what the US jeopardised by walking away from the Kyoto protocol. Its rejection upon the grounds of "national interest" sent a deeply destructive message. Not only did it appear not to accept responsibility for the environmental impact of its economy, but it also signalled that it was profoundly uninterested in any process that might tweak its hegemony and sense of identity.

Understandable, as after all we live in the comfort of the US's security blanket provided by its dominant economy. But climate change — and its attendant apocalyptic riders of exacerbated water, forestry, biodiversity and marine degradation — is a far greater threat to identity and security than the slight reduction in America's GDP caused by reducing emissions.

In many parts of the world the breakdown of ecosystem functionality, exacerbated by population growth, has led to a massive increase in migration from rural to urban areas. This places additional strain on the urban services — for water, energy, food — which are anyway hardly able to cope. Furthermore the resulting breakdown of traditional culture and the belief systems means that migrants to the new massive cities are not only economically impoverished but also frequently culturally dispossessed.

These belief systems have often acted as safety valves. Without them and faced with the impossible task of acquiring wealth, and having no easy way of reaffirming personal identity, people turn towards easily digestible forms of historic or religious iconography. From there it is an easy step to the polarised political views that often embrace fundamentalism. Fundamentalism (of any persuasion) is not the language of hope, but frequently the last articulate cry of despair before the onset of anarchy.

The case, then, for linking environment and security issues, is not for the simplistic reason of conflict over natural resources, but because environmental degradation undermines fragile ecological, cultural and economic systems and affects the structure of identity, whether personal, cultural or national.

As we are finding out too frequently, political power rests upon two legs: the ability to use force and legitimacy. Force without legitimacy is tyranny. Trying to bolt an environmental treaty, which is really a de facto trade negotiation, on to a global economic framework that appears to bolster the developed world's economic dominance, does not lend itself to legitimacy. So negotiations over the next stage in our response to climate change must reflect linkages to trade and other macro-economic instruments.

To restore economic and political stability in an increasingly ecologically unstable world, we need to change the narrative of our debate and take a systemic approach. This requires us to deepen our understanding of what drives instability and insecurity. Such a process should reinforce other efforts to enhance regional stability, governance and the rule of law. It is doubtful whether this can be carried out from within a narrow view of national interest.

Nobody expects the US, under either a Bush or a Kerry administration, to ratify the Kyoto protocol. But, if the US wants to address long-term security issues, then a way must be found for it to abandon its destabilising unipolar approach and join the rest of us in finding a global solution. Perhaps, after all, President Putin has grasped something about security that has eluded the hawks perching on Mr Cheney's eyrie. Ironic, isn't it?

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