



P E R S P E C T I V E S

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The Fog of War

We can "Walk and Chew Gum"

Russia's invasion of Ukraine has captivated, as well it should, our general news coverage, our hearts, our minds, and our ability to clearly see the greater peril which is momentarily being obscured by the war. That is understandable on many levels when we see our fellow human beings, average Ukrainian civilians, targeted as victims of ongoing war crimes; or, alternatively one of over 1.5 million refugees (as of last Sunday) literally fleeing for their lives. In the heat of the battle, it is common to overlook critical issues that are swallowed up in "the fog of war."

That expression is a paraphrase of a sentence uttered by Prussian military genius Carl von Clausewitz who said, "War is the realm of uncertainty; three-quarters of the factors on which action in war is based are wrapped in a fog of greater or lesser uncertainty." He was relaying the uncertainty which surrounds judgements made by commanders in the field during military engagements. He was highlighting the necessity for a transparent and complete as possible set of facts being a precondition for success in a battle. He was right.

Unfortunately, the most important issue facing human civilization at the moment is being lost to public action by the Fog of War.

As a friend observed when he encouraged the writing of this piece, "The frenzied focus on the current war in Eastern Europe has drowned out perhaps the single most important story for our children and grandchildren." He was thinking of climate change and the incredibly frightening story that was reported on February 28, 2022. You may have heard about it briefly before it disappeared from the headlines as yet another casualty of the Ukrainian war. That was the day the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), a group comprised of the top 2,000 climate scientists, released its most recent report.

You may have missed the IPCC Report. Most people did or only thought about it for a few moments as the Fog of War absorbed all the "oxygen" in the newsroom and left folks without a sense of the incredibly dire picture the Report painted.

Many in the environmental community have been trying to keep this report in our awareness, but it is a challenge. One nonprofit organization American Rivers wrote, "The IPCC report released today is yet another urgent alarm bell, urging us to wake up to the real dangers of climate change that communities across the globe are already experiencing." Jennifer Hoffner, Vice President of River Conservation Strategies for the nonprofit went on to add, "What is clear is that the climate crisis is a water crisis. Failing dams, flooded homes and dried up rivers will be our future."

For those of us in California, we know another corollary to water imbalance is that the San Joaquin Valley has begun to literally collapse due to water table depletion. Hoffner could also have added forest fires to that litany, which we are very sensitive to around these parts – yet another effect of climate change. Many

scientists around the world volunteered that this Report was the “bleakest warning yet” for how we are making the biosphere unsustainable for humans!

The Guardian’s Fiona Harvey summarized it by concluding that the “Report says human actions are causing dangerous disruption, and the window to secure a livable future is closing.” She points out that our current trends in greenhouse gas emissions will certainly allow more than the 1.5C temperature rise the Paris Accords set as a limit, and certain impacts will be irreversible: “These include the melting of ice caps and glaciers, and a cascading effect whereby wildfires, the die-off of trees, the drying of peatlands and the thawing of permafrost releasing additional carbon emissions, amplifying the warming further.”

Look at what Hans-Otto Pörtner, a co-chair of the IPCC working group that issued the Report gave as his warning: “The scientific evidence is unequivocal: climate change is a threat to human wellbeing and the health of the planet...Any further delay in concerted global action will miss a brief and rapidly closing window to secure a livable future.” That’s strong stuff.

And just to round out the dismal assessments, António Guterres, the UN secretary general offered this thought: “Today’s IPCC Report is an atlas of human suffering and a damning indictment of failed climate leadership.” He went on to conclude that everywhere and everyone is going to be increasingly affected by the tragedy of climate change and that “About half the global population, between 3.3 billion and 3.6 billion people— live in highly vulnerable areas.”

Millions of people are already suffering food and water shortages at current temperature levels. Soon that number will be in the hundreds of millions on its way to billions. This will be accompanied by mass species die-offs; coral die-offs; ocean acidification; trees dying off by the hundreds of millions; ice masses in the Himalayan high plateau that feed the five great rivers of Asia rapidly melting into insufficiency for all of Asia’s water supply. They are already headed this way. Worse still, the Report paints an immediate future that will be “cataclysmic” for small islands as they literally disappear below the ocean’s waves. Whole nations will cease to exist. In fact, the first islands are already being drowned. Sorry to be the bearer of such terrible news.

Hopefully, you’re now really understanding the gravity of the situation we face. Hopefully, you’re beginning to understand how the Fog of War has occluded our ability to see that a far bigger crisis is happening and we’re not even paying attention to it. Well, folks, we can walk and chew gum at the same time—and we must.

Without taking our eyes off the evolving Russian-created crisis in Europe, we must also urgently address the climate crisis that is underway. We have no choice. Literally, the fate of humanity hangs in the balance.

Unlike the terrible Ukrainian war which could have many outcomes, some admittedly terrifying such as a European-wide conflagration or even a nuclear exchange, those are all only possibilities. Climate change on its current path is not a “maybe”. It is a certainty—climate change will end human civilization as we know it in the modern western democracies and in rural developing pockets of geopolitical instability. We have no choice.

Let’s work together to force Russia out of Ukraine, and at the same time let’s reverse climate change which only got worse today than yesterday. We must not lose sight that both require immediate action to fix.

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