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Discussing Global Warming in the Security Council: Premature and a Distraction from More Pressing Crises

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On April 17, the United Nations Security Council will discuss the security implications of global warming for the first time. The issue was placed on the agenda by the United Kingdom, which assumed the rotating presidency of the Council for April. According to Foreign Secretary Margaret Beckett:

The destruction described in [the recently released summary of the Fourth Assessment Report of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change] is a threat not only to the UK's prosperity but also to international peace and security. That is why, at the UK's initiative, the UN Security Council will on the 17th April hold its first ever discussion on the security implications of climate change. We hope that this discussion will foster a shared understanding of the way in which climate stress is likely to amplify other drivers of conflict and tension, and thereby strengthen the commitment of the international community to the collective action that we urgently need.¹

The United Kingdom is wrong to foist this issue on the Council. First, the extent, source, and consequences of global warming are subject to debate, and the possible implications of global warming, particularly the security implications, are speculative. Even if these consequences occur as predicted in the IPCC report, they are not immediate security threats.

Second, numerous policy initiatives, forums, and organizations are focused on studying and evaluat-

ing the consequences of global warming. The focus of these efforts and discussions is to clarify the science of global warming and weigh the costs of action to address global warming against the risks of inaction. A debate in the Security Council is unlikely to contribute to these ongoing efforts.

Finally, the Security Council has a full docket of immediate threats to international peace and security that it has failed to resolve. Focusing on speculative threats that may arise decades in the future undermines the seriousness of the body and is an affront to those suffering from immediate crises. Worse, it distracts the Council from pressing threats to international peace and security.

The Uncertainty Surrounding Catastrophic Global Warming. Global warming is a legitimate environmental concern, but does it really rise to the level of a security crisis? British policy on climate change subscribes to the European Union position of accepting and pursuing policies based upon worst-case scenarios of global warming. Substantive political debate on global warming in the U.K. is minimal, and Prime Minister Tony Blair, Chancellor of the Treasury Gordon Brown, and Conservative Party Leader David

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Cameron are competing to out-do one another with their green credentials and proposals to tax, cap, or otherwise regulate greenhouse gases.¹

Most leading British scientists, institutions, and policy advisers support extensive, binding international regulatory initiatives on climate change. Specifically, the U.K. has ratified the Kyoto Protocol, the multilateral treaty to reduce greenhouse gas emissions. Sir David King, Chief Scientific Adviser to the U.K. Government, argues that without immediate action to address global warming, particularly by the U.S., millions of people around the world will fall victim to extensive flooding, drought, hunger, and debilitating diseases such as malaria.² King has argued that global warming is a far greater threat to the world than international terrorism. Indeed, King believes that “climate change is the most severe problem we are facing today.”³

Such certainty is not supported by the evidence. Contrary to the impression given in press coverage, considerable scientific uncertainties and debate exist. This is particularly true regarding the more alarming predictions of harm which are invoked to justify the unusual step of the Security Council addressing an issue more appropriately within the purview of the U.N. Environment Program (UNEP) and other bodies.

The Current Evidence. The state of current scientific understanding undermines the case for consid-

eration of global warming in the U.N. Security Council. A review of the evidence reveals fundamental uncertainties and projected harms that, even under worst-case scenarios, are not pressing threats requiring immediate attention by the Security Council.

- **To what extent is warming caused by human activity?** The earth’s average temperature has increased over the last 30 years, and many point to this as evidence of harmful, human-induced warming. But temperatures have risen and fallen many times in the past. For example, the Medieval Warm Period was likely as warm as the present.⁴ While it is likely that mankind’s activities have made a contribution to warming, current temperatures are within the historical range of natural variability.
- **How much of an immediate and dire threat is posed by warming?** Given that the current upward trend in temperatures is not unprecedented, it stands to reason that such minor warming will not lead to unprecedented catastrophes, and scientific evidence is independently confirming this. The planet and its inhabitants are much more resilient to temperature variability than had been previously assumed, and the warming over the last few decades has not been particularly harmful to humans or the environment.⁵ Indeed, the rise in greenhouse gas emissions and temperatures

1. “Margaret Beckett Responds to the Publication of the United Nations Report on Climate Change,” Foreign and Commonwealth Office Press Release, April 7, 2007, at www.gnn.gov.uk/imagelibrary/downloadMedia.asp?MediaDetailsID=199985.
2. BBC, “Global warming ‘biggest threat,’” January 9, 2004, at <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/science/nature/3381425.stm>.
3. *Ibid.*
4. See Edward J. Wegman, “Questions Surrounding the ‘Hockey Stick’ Temperature Reconstruction: Implications for Climate Change Assessments,” testimony before the Subcommittee on Oversight and Investigations, Committee on Energy and Commerce, U.S. House of Representatives, July 20, 2006, at <http://energycommerce.house.gov/108/Hearings/07192006hearing1987/Wegman.pdf>, and Stephen McIntyre and Ross McKittrick, “Hockey Sticks, Principal Components, and Spurious Significance,” *Geophysical Research Letters*, Vol. 32 (2005), p. L03710.
5. See, e.g., Curtis E. Larson and Inga Clark, “A Search For Scale In Sea-Level Studies,” *Journal of Coastal Research*, Vol. 22, No. 4 (2006), pp. 788-800; N.A. Morner, “Estimating Future Sea Level Changes from Past Records,” *Global and Planetary Change*, Vol. 40, No. 1 (2004), pp. 49-54; Curt Davis et al., “Snowfall-Driven Growth in East Antarctic Ice Sheet Mitigates Recent Sea-Level Rise,” *Science* Vol. 308 (June 2005), pp. 1898-1901; Philip J. Klotzbach, “Trends In Global Tropical Cyclone Activity Over The Past Twenty Years (1986-2005),” *Geophysical Research Letters*, Vol. 33 (2006), p. L10805; Roger A. Pielke Jr. et al., “Hurricanes and Global Warming,” *Bulletin of the American Meteorological Society*, Vol. 86 (November 2005), pp. 1571-1575; Kunkel et al., “Temporal Fluctuations In Weather And Climate Extremes That Cause Economic And Human Health Impacts: A Review,” *Bulletin of the American Meteorological Society*, Vol. 80 (1999), pp. 1077-1098; and P. Reiter et al., “Global Warming and Malaria, A Call For Accuracy,” *Lancet Infectious Diseases*, Vol. 4 (June 2004), pp. 323-4.

over this period has been accompanied by declining damages from natural disasters, not the opposite.⁶ In sum, the more alarming predictions—dramatic sea level rises, increased storms, wider spread of malaria, etc.—are not extrapolations of current trends, but radical departures from them. At the very least, they are highly implausible in the near term and so not an imminent threat to international peace and stability, which is the claim made to justify consideration before the U.N. Security Council.

- **Is reducing CO₂ emissions worth the costs?** China, which will soon overtake the U.S. as the world's biggest emitter of carbon dioxide, and other developing nations are exempt under Kyoto, and most of the European signatories to the Protocol are not on track to meet its requirements, with several actually seeing their emissions since 2000 rising faster than in the U.S.⁷ Britain's emissions are at a ten-year high.⁸ Even if the U.S. had ratified the Kyoto Protocol, and even if Europe and others were in full compliance with it, the treaty would avert an inconsequential 0.07 degree Celsius temperature increase by 2050⁹, at a cost to the U.S. of \$100 billion to \$400 billion annually.¹⁰ This would directly impact the public with higher gasoline and electricity prices as well as fewer jobs and other consequences. In other words, the Kyoto approach leads to great economic pain and almost no environmental gain.

Even if global warming occurs as envisioned, it is far from clear that acting now to address the

threat is the most efficient use of resources. Many of the disasters predicted by alarmists (e.g., floods, droughts, crop-failures, storms, and vector-borne diseases) will occur from time to time whether or not global warming makes them more frequent or severe. These threats should be faced directly, irrespective of global warming. Costly measures like Kyoto, however, will do almost nothing to cool the planet but would damage economies and sap resources away from more useful and direct efforts to fight these problems.¹¹

For example, the Copenhagen Consensus Conference brought together leading economists, scientists, and specialists in May 2004 to prioritize how to best allocate limited resources to address the most pressing global problems. In June 2006, the Copenhagen Consensus Conference brought together U.N. ambassadors, including the U.S., Chinese, Indian, and Pakistani ambassadors, for the same purpose. In both cases, “[Participants] agreed that the world's top spending priorities should be around the areas of health, water, education and hunger. And, perhaps more courageously, they also said what should not come at the top—financial instability and climate change ranked at the bottom of the list.”¹²

Alternative Forums. Another global forum to debate global warming is unnecessary and counter-productive. The list of international organizations and forums focused on researching global warming includes many national environmental ministries and agencies and innumerable non-governmental organizations focused on environmental issues.

6. Indur M. Goklany, *The Improving State of the World*, (Washington, D.C.: Cato Institute), 168-170.
7. European Environment Agency, *Greenhouse Gas Emission Trends and Projections in Europe 2006*, (2006) pp. 17-22; Christopher Horner, “An Assessment of Kyoto and Emerging Issues for the 12th Conference of the Parties,” European Enterprise Institute, November 2006, pp. 3-5.
8. Michael McCarthy, “British Climate Strategy in Shambles As Emissions Reach 10-Year High,” *The Independent*, March 30, 2007.
9. Thomas Wigley, “The Kyoto Protocol: CO₂, CH₄ and Climate Implications,” *Geophysical Research Letters*, Vol. 25, No. 13 (1998), pp. 2285-88.
10. U.S. Department of Energy, Energy Information Administration, “What Does the Kyoto Protocol Mean to U.S. Energy Markets and the U.S. Economy?” October 1998, p. 22, at <http://tonto.eia.doe.gov/FTP/ROOT/service/oiaf9803s.pdf>, and Margo Thorning, “A U.S. Perspective on the Economic Impact of Climate Change Policy,” The American Council for Capital Formation, December 2000, p. 2, at www.accf.org/pdf/PerspectiveACCF.pdf.
11. Indur Goklany, “A Climate Policy for the Short and Medium Term: Stabilization or Adaptation?” *Energy & Environment*, Vol. 16, Nos. 3&4 (2005), pp. 667-680.
12. Bjørn Lomborg, “Climate change can wait. World health can't,” *The Observer*, July 2, 2006, at www.copenhagenconsensus.com/Default.aspx?ID=836.

Within the U.N. system, UNEP and other specialized bodies like the World Meteorological Organization (WMO) are already dedicating massive resources to this issue. Treaties focusing on global warming include the Kyoto Protocol, which has been in force since 2005, and the Asia-Pacific Partnership on Clean Development and Climate.

Two high-level multilateral institutions are expected to grapple with the issue of global warming in the coming months:

- The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) was established in 1988 to examine the issue of global warming through joint effort of the World Meteorological Organization and the United Nations Environment Programme. The IPCC seeks to forge a consensus among climate experts on the state of climate science relating to global warming every five to seven years and present a report for consideration by world leaders. The IPCC issued assessments in 1990, 1996, and 2001. Its Fourth Assessment Report (AR4) is being released in stages this year and will serve as justification for a post-Kyoto climate treaty at the U.N. Climate Change Conference in Bali in December 2007.
- The 33rd G8 summit, hosted by German Chancellor Angela Merkel, will be held on June 6–8, 2007, in Heiligendamm, Germany and will focus on climate change. Merkel has promised to make global warming “an important issue once again on the agenda during our G8 presidency.”¹³ The agenda will build on the 2005 Gleneagles G8 Summit in Scotland, which adopted a statement on the importance of climate change and an agreement to “act with resolve and urgency now.”¹⁴ The statement concluded that “greenhouse gas emissions need to slow, peak and reverse and that G8 countries need to make ‘substantial cuts’ in emissions.”¹⁵ Gleneagles also saw the creation of the G8+5 Group comprised of the G8 and Brazil, Mexico, South Africa, China, and

India. The mission of this group is to advance deeper cooperation on climate change and trade.

It is difficult to imagine how additional debate in the Security Council will contribute to these efforts. The Security Council lacks the expertise of existing forums or of dissenting groups and scientists and can contribute little of value to the overall discussion. Between these high-level forums and incessant media coverage, it is impossible to justify placing the issue of global warming on the agenda of the Security Council as necessary to increase international awareness of global warming.

An Affront to the Suffering. In essence, the United Kingdom is asking the Security Council to replicate the work of other forums in order to discuss a threat that, even if it develops as predicted, will not result in a tangible threat to international peace and security for decades. This effort is an affront to the millions *currently* suffering from the depredations of dictatorial regimes around the world and those facing the near-term threats posed by proliferation of weapons of mass destruction, transnational terrorism, and conflict.

Consider the plight of the people in the Darfur region of Sudan or in Zimbabwe. Both situations involve millions of displaced persons and directly affect the security and stability of neighboring nations. Yet the Council has been either silent or ineffective in both cases. Similarly, the Council has long been silent on human rights violations in numerous other countries.

On the issue of the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction, the Council has proven to be a paper tiger in its dealings with North Korea and Iran, which are leading the charge toward widespread proliferation of nuclear weapons technology.

The Security Council has similarly proven unable to address the issue of transnational terrorism. It has not condemned state sponsors of terrorism despite ample evidence of links to international

13. “Merkel to Target Climate Change as G8, EU Leader,” *Deutsche Welle*, September 28, 2006, at www.dw-world.de/dw/article/0,2144,2188336,00.html.

14. “Climate Change,” G8 Gleneagles 2005: Policy Issues,” at www.g8.gov.uk/servlet/Front?pagename=OpenMarket/Xcelerate/ShowPage&c=Page&cid=1094235520309.

15. *Ibid.*

terrorist groups and has demonstrated little concern about encouraging and supporting those groups in their efforts to attack citizens of U.N. member states. The U.N. has been unable even to define what constitutes terrorism.

As of February 2007, the total number of personnel serving in 18 United Nations Department of Peacekeeping Operations-led peace operations and political missions was over 100,000 individuals.¹⁶ This number is expected to increase sharply. The U.N. has more troops deployed than any nation in the world except for the United States. The unprecedented frequency and size of recent U.N. deployments and the resulting financial demands have challenged the willingness of member states to contribute uniformed personnel in support of U.N. peace operations and have overwhelmed the capabilities of the Department of Peacekeeping Operations and other parts of the Secretariat that support peace operations. This has led to mismanagement, misconduct, poor planning, corruption, sexual abuse, unclear mandates, and other weaknesses. Yet the Security Council has been largely silent about how these weaknesses affect its decisions and mandates.

The Security Council has a full docket of immediate threats to international peace and security that would benefit from more deliberation and action. Focusing on the speculative threats that may result from global warming distracts from these vital issues and undermines the seriousness and stature of the body by reducing it to a political theatre.

Conclusion. The Security Council should not be deliberating global warming. The purpose of the

Security Council is clearly laid out in the U.N. Charter, which confers on the Security Council “primary responsibility for the maintenance of international peace and security.”¹⁷ The security implications of climate change are speculative at this point and, even if they result as predicted, would not pose an immediate threat for decades. The projected threats of global warming do not rise to the level of Security Council consideration.

The decision to raise the issue in the Council is troubling considering that such a step is often a prelude to a Council decision or resolution. A Council decision is the sole venue capable of compelling states to adopt actions to address global warming¹⁸—something that should not be contemplated without greater certainty and evidence of urgency.

While it is possible that the consequences of global warming may one day become a threat to international peace and security, the science and predicted outcomes remain subject to considerable uncertainty, and the proposed solutions raise problems of their own. Until these uncertainties are resolved, global warming will not be ripe for Security Council deliberation. The resources and attention of the Council are better spent on pressing crises.

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16. For more information, see Brett D. Schaefer, “Time for a New United Nations Peacekeeping Organization,” Heritage Foundation *Backgrounder* No. 2006, February 13, 2007, at www.heritage.org/Research/InternationalOrganizations/bg2006.cfm.

17. Charter of the United Nations, at www.un.org/aboutun/charter/index.html.

18. *Ibid.*, Article 25.