

## **Conflict, Borders, and Division: The Fallout from the Climate Crisis**

Article by Jef Cauwenberghs, Klaus Dodds  
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**From uncontrollable fires in southern Europe to unprecedented flooding in Belgium and Germany, the summer of 2021 witnessed a string of environmental disasters. In his latest book, *The New Border Wars*, Klaus Dodds predicts that floods will continue to ravage our continents, with devastating consequences for both people and ecosystems. In this interview, he tells Belgian journalist Jef Cauwenberghs why this is leading to a resurgence of the borders many in Europe thought had been overcome.**

The West enjoyed relative peace and freedom between the collapse of the Berlin Wall in 1989 and the attacks on the Twin Towers in 2001. According to the geopolitics professor Klaus Dodds, however, those days are definitely over, as climate change, economic power shifts, and our colonial drive for space will create more conflict than ever. For him, scarce resources, debates about migrant rights, and a major virus outbreak are just the beginning of a future fraught with international disputes.

**Jef Cauwenberghs: The first bad news, you write that the flooding we saw in Belgium in July 2021 was by no means the last major flood.**

**Klaus Dodds:** Unfortunately not. Extreme heat and uncontrollable flooding will become part of the “new normal”. Until now, we Westerners have generally thought that we would be able to withstand this with our modern and sophisticated infrastructure. But what has happened in Belgium shows that Europe will not be spared.

For some years now, geologists have been talking about the Anthropocene, an era in which we humans begin to notice the impact of our presence on earth. Long-lasting forest fires are no longer an exception in Australia and the western United States. Scientists are already talking about so called “zombie fires” - fires that partially go out in the colder seasons but start burning again in the spring. California, which has always been known for its pleasant climate, is in danger of becoming uninhabitable in the coming decades. On the other hand, other states in the US such as Florida and Louisiana will frequently have to contend with storms and flooding.

**This is the paradox of climate change. Water scarcities and excesses alike will set our international relations on edge.**

Agriculture is becoming impossible in the areas around the equator because the soil is too dry. Other countries are faced with floods, and in turn with polluted drinking water. Salinisation through rising sea levels also contributes to this. States will have to look for

other reserves, and in the process will clash with competing countries. Even now, dams are often a trigger for border conflicts. And when water becomes scarce, the tensions will only increase.

On the other hand, the melting of the polar caps will create new shipping routes. The most powerful countries will compete for newly available resources in areas that were previously inaccessible.

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**Are you hopeful about the opportunities provided by the newly proposed *Fit for 55* climate plan, the European Union's so-called Green Deal?**

What is most important is that the European Commission shows initiative and recognises the climate problem. This decade will be crucial. Will the climate plan be a success? I wouldn't stake my life on it.

The European Union consists of 27 member states with their own agendas and interests. For example, some countries still have large coal industries while others pretend to be the best in the class while still having large ecological footprints. Take Norway. The country invests heavily in the latest green energy technologies, but also imports a lot of coffee from South America. This external water consumption does not show up on the final bill, of course.

We should also be concerned about other issues. What are we doing about air travel? How do we behave as European consumers? Shouldn't we change our lifestyles?

**In your book, you focus mainly on border conflicts and migratory movements. Is it conceivable that Europeans will one day become refugees on their own continent?**

That thought was the premise of the 2004 film *The Day After Tomorrow*. In this scenario, inhabitants of the United States flee to Mexico after a snowstorm. Fiction, you might think. Until the residents of New Orleans were for the first time called climate refugees after the passage of Hurricane Katrina in 2005.

Although we still too often associate the term "refugee" with the Global South, there is no guarantee that it will never happen to us. Communities from Europe's coastal areas may have to move within a few decades, and it is quite possible that you Belgians will be dependent on others in the future.

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**Yet you write that most climate refugees will come from the Global South. Isn't it paradoxical that the political parties taking the strongest stance against migration usually pay so little attention to the climate?**

In the public forum most of these parties appear to be strongly opposed to migration, but on the other hand they are happy to receive certain migrants. Highly educated academics or low-skilled seasonal workers who are cheaper to hire are often welcome.

The fact that there is so much tough talk about strengthening borders is their form of identity politics. Many refugees will never make it to Europe, by the way. It is mainly the poorer neighbouring countries that take in the majority of the migrants. It is also a conscious strategy to keep them there. Look at what Europe has agreed with Turkey. We will pay you, and then it is not our problem.

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**This summer, the Belgian government was confronted with 409 hunger strikers demanding the regularisation of undocumented migrants in Belgium. Once again, the debate shows how sensitive the migration issue is.**

As I wrote in my book, borders are more than barriers and customs controls. They are imaginary lines that separate us as a group from an outsider. It is also easier to portray people as a problem rather than the billions in data and dollars that cross many borders each day.

As for these hunger strikers, I think there is a need for a new refugee convention that takes current challenges into account. The Geneva Conventions (1951) were written in the spirit of an impending Cold War. The criteria were drawn up according to the situation of Eastern Europeans who wanted to flee the Soviet regime. But what about future climate refugees, for example? Are they entitled to asylum? Ethical discussions about who has a right to stay will only increase. We had better be prepared for this.

**The moralistic aspect of receiving refugees is often set against the economic one. According to critics, many European welfare systems would not be able to cope with large migration waves.**

My feeling is that this is a fallacy for an uncomfortable underlying feeling of reversal. While many Europeans went to Africa under the banner of imperialism in the 19th century, many more Africans are now coming our way. In London, White Britons will soon be a minority. For some, this feels like a threat.

Sometimes I wonder: how does the extreme right see its own future in a society where everyone will have at least one emigrated parent?

**The biggest lesson about borders has been learned in the past year and a half, of course. Until that time, it was unthinkable for the average 20-something with a European passport that a simple trip to a neighbouring country would no longer be possible.**

This health crisis has done what no one ever thought possible. At one point, it even brought Schengen to its knees. Everything we once took for granted was suspended.

**What does that say about us?**

That we enjoyed “border privilege” for many years. The 1990s in particular was an exceptional decade of free travel. The Iron Curtain had just disappeared, and for Europeans it seemed as if the entire world was suddenly at their feet.

But borders are back, and we are having a damned hard time with it. Whereas for my generation Yugoslavia was the greatest goal, international travel has always been the norm for today’s young people. It is strange for them to not set foot in a plane for a few months. I think we are gradually coming to the end of that era.

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**Is this because deadly, contagious viruses will also become a regular occurrence, as you and other scientists claim?**

Yes. There is a consensus among virologists and climate scientists that new viruses will emerge with increasing frequency. Unlike people, these viruses do not respect borders. This is because international air travel and mass tourism mean that diseases can travel to the other side of the world within 24 hours, and also because our use of the planet creates new ecosystems in which viruses have free rein, so to speak. The next decade is likely to see some major health crises. We are not rid of them yet.

**That sounds deterministic. What can we do?**

We have a hard time accepting that we really do live in the Anthropocene. Instead of shooting expensive rockets into space, we should start focusing on life on this planet. We need to think about the future of global tourism, massive deforestation, and a fuel substitute for aircraft. Finally, we need to devise political systems that look beyond the next ballot box. Only a long-term approach can do this.

**Your book was almost ready to be published when Joe Biden took over the US presidency from Donald Trump. Does this give reason for optimism?**

The biggest difference is that the United States now has a president who, unlike his

predecessor, recognises the climate challenges and, more importantly, acts on them. Just recently, he presented a plan of more than three billion dollars to the Senate to enable the transition to greener power. Biden understands the urgency of the problem, and that in itself is a reason to be optimistic.

Migration remains a stumbling block. Just because Trump is no longer going on about his wall does not mean that Mexicans or other migrants will suddenly find it easier at the southern border now that Biden is president. Hard borders and repressive policies remain the rule. No Democrat wants to go down in history as a softie.

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**Billionaires like Jeff Bezos and Elon Musk are already venturing into the atmosphere on multimillion-dollar commercial trips. You warn us about this drive to expand into space.**

I don't believe in a futuristic Star Wars in which different nations fight each other with laser-shooting spaceships in a distant universe. The battle will mainly take place in the orbit around our planet.

Satellites are playing an increasingly important role in our surveillance society, and the best spots in the atmosphere are already being fiercely contested. Just think of the Starlink satellite train that Musk launched last summer. Who says that this technology will not lead to problems in the long run?

The internet is vulnerable from space. What if criminals, states, or even companies use satellites to jam signals, making communication or access to the electricity grid impossible? It is a crazy thought, but by now we know this mile-high atmosphere better than our own oceans. And yet, the challenges to our survival as a species are down below, here on earth.

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Klaus Dodds is Professor of Geopolitics at Royal Holloway, University of London and a Fellow of the Academy of Social Sciences. He completed his PhD at the University of Bristol in 1994, and thereafter took up a position at the University of Edinburgh and thereafter joined Royal Holloway. He has held a Visiting Erskine Fellowship at Gateway Antarctica, University of Canterbury (2002) and been a visiting Fellow at St Cross College, University of Oxford (2010-11) and St Johns College, University of Oxford (2017-18). In 2005 he was awarded the Philip Leverhulme Prize for Geography and in 2016 was awarded a Major Research Fellowship by the Leverhulme Trust (2017-2020) for a project concerned with the 'Global Arctic'.

He has published many books and articles concerned with the geopolitics and governance of the Polar Regions as well as the cultural politics of ice. These include: *The Scramble for the Poles* (2016), *Ice: Nature and Culture* and *The Arctic: What Everyone Needs to Know* (2019). He has served as a specialist adviser to two parliamentary select committees; the House of Lords Select Committee on the Arctic (2014-5) and the House of Commons Environment Audit Committee's Arctic enquiry (2018). In 2019. He was appointed the UK representative of the IASC's Social and Human Working Group. He has visited Antarctica on four separate occasions and travelled extensively in the Arctic region.

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