

AVI COMMENTARY

Cambodia | 07 March 2023

The Green Deal: Can Humans Conquer the Challenges of the Anthropocene?

*CHHEM Rethy**, MD, PhD (edu), PhD (his)

Defining the Anthropocene

The Anthropocene is considered a unit of geological time that describes the period during which human activities deeply impact climate and the environment. The dominant role of humans in nature has led to the destruction of forests, the acidification of oceans, the extinction of species, and the increase of carbon concentration in the atmosphere leading to dramatic global warming. Some called the Anthropocene the ‘Age of Man’ when fossil fuels were first burned to produce energy to meet the industry’s demand in the late 19th century.

Thus, the industrial revolution was the turning point for the irreversible impact of mankind on the natural environment, transforming the relationship between humans and nature and between humans themselves. For some scholars, humans have become the most powerful geophysical and biological force affecting the planet. For the first time in its history, humanity faces a global and multidimensional crisis that is strategic, geophysical, biological, and ecological. Can humans address the challenges of the Anthropocene?

Anthropocene, Industrialisation, and Wars: A Historical Perspective

Many scholars agree that the industrial revolution contributed to the acceleration of the shift into the Anthropocene; others believe that it started gradually 10,000 years ago when humans began to undertake farming for their subsistence. However, it was Great Britain that invented the first fossil fuel economy in the world in the 18th century when it used fossil fuels as a source of energy for mining activities and large-scale industrial production.

In the last two centuries, the interconnection between industrial development and wars has become the core of our planetary crisis. Industrial growth and competition for energy from fossil fuels, compounded by incessant wars across the planet, have led to a global geophysical crisis and biological disaster that will determine the future of humanity.

Several historical examples can be identified to illustrate this worldview. Russia’s early industrialisation in 1920 was made possible by energy from coal and oil extracted from the Ural Mountains and Siberia. Japan’s early industrialisation started in the Meiji era until 1912. Germany accelerated large-scale industrialisation to meet Hitler’s demand for his ‘war of races’. Above all, it is the US that plays the biggest role in the development of the military-industrial complex that contributed to the military anthropization of the planet, starting with the Manhattan Project designed to produce atomic bombs that not only mass-killed humans but also dispersed radioactive particles contaminating soil, water, and air. The dropping of atomic

* **Dr CHHEM Rethy** is a member of the Board of Directors of the Asian Vision Institute (AVI).

bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki in 1945 and the subsequent 2053 nuclear tests conducted between 1952 and 1998 represent the most significant anthropization of the planet. All these examples are key turning points in geological history and the beginning of the anthropization of the planet, which is defined as the conversion of open spaces, landscapes, and the natural environment by deleterious human actions.

After the two World Wars, the defence industry conversion enabled further industrial development to produce steel, cars, planes, and other commodities that create our modern way of life. Most of those products consume fossil fuels, further impacting our global environment. As such, the Anthropocene cannot be separated from industrialisation and war, as stressed by Bruno Latour, a philosopher and anthropologist for whom nature and society are intimately associated, forming a hybrid element. One cannot distinguish natural from artificial elements or human from non-human agents. For strategic and security reasons, especially the need to control the sources and supplies of energy, climate change will continue to worsen.

In sum, the interconnection among industrialisation, war, and overutilisation of fossil fuels as an energy source has depleted our natural resources and contributed to the destruction of our natural environment. The major global crisis calls for a new type of leadership capable of integrating knowledge from the natural sciences, social sciences, and the humanities. An interdisciplinary approach is imperative to addressing and providing solutions to such complex and compounded phenomena as climate change in the era of the Anthropocene. This leads us to the fundamental question: what types of governance and leadership are needed for the Anthropocene?

Can Humans Conquer the Challenges of the Anthropocene?

Answering this question requires a clear understanding of the debate about the Anthropocene from both the geoscientific perspectives and the narratives generated by the social sciences and the humanities. The Anthropocene is fundamentally a contested concept. Scientists, technocrats, policymakers, political leaders, and members of civil society have gone through innumerable meetings and summits, among them the United Nations Conference of the Parties or COP (from COP 1 in Berlin to COP 27 in Sharm El Sheikh). And the debate continues!

This long multilateral diplomacy on climate change shows how difficult it is to reach a consensus as vested interests come into the debate. Agreeing to an acceptable global form of governance for climate change seems out of reach after decades of high levels of negotiations. Who will lead the charge to help the planet overcome the challenges of the Anthropocene? Are they technocrats or politicians, democratic or the so-called autocratic countries? How can small and developing states bring any weight to the global debate? In this context, new diplomatic initiatives have started to appear in addition to the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (UNSDGs) programmes that have been implemented across the globe. Those initiatives include the EU Green, the ASEAN Green Deal proposed by Prime Minister Hun Sen during Cambodia's Chairmanship of ASEAN in 2022, and various other Public-Private Partnership initiatives.

Building the capacity to educate policymakers and train leaders for the Anthropocene seems vital for a global challenge of this magnitude. At the core of leadership skills is the ability to propose innovative strategies using an interdisciplinary approach for an enlightened policy. The Anthropocene challenges are multidimensional, but they can be addressed by an integrated approach called the 'Green Deal', which includes solutions to climate change, environmental

pollution, energy and food security, and pandemics, among other crises. These solutions should propose new ways to produce goods and services via green industry, green infrastructures, digital transformation, renewable energy in the context of circular economy, and other applications of green technologies, from the whole value chains to markets and to waste recycling and management.

Therefore, we need political leaders with the skills, commitment, and heart to provide stewardship and solutions to the global ecological crisis through active and constructive multilateral diplomacy. Top leaders shall aim at achieving a co-construction of knowledge via active collaboration between experts and generalists, thus enabling a cross-disciplinary exchange of ideas and solutions to the innumerable challenges caused by climate change. The UN Sustainable Development Solutions Network (UNSDSN) Leadership Council is a unique and ideal high-level forum.

Engaging actively and productively with civil society is key to the success of policy implementation to address the impacts caused by environmental destruction. However, changing the culture and mindset about economic growth takes time. Therefore, we should start early by raising awareness among our young citizens to turn them into stewards of the environment and encourage them not to repeat the same mistakes made by previous generations.

**AVI Commentary does not include references. References are available upon request from the author.*

The views expressed are the author's own and do not reflect the views of the Asian Vision Institute.