Climate engineering reconsidered

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Stratospheric injection of sulfate aerosols has been advocated as an emergency geoengineering measure to tackle dangerous climate change, or as a stopgap until atmospheric carbon dioxide levels are reduced. But it may not prove to be a game changer that some imagine.

In the 1992 Framework Convention on Climate Change, virtually all the world's countries agreed to stabilize concentrations of greenhouse gases (GHGs) in the atmosphere at a level that would avoid dangerous climate change. Since then, however, international cooperation in limiting emissions has been ineffectual and concentrations have continued to rise. Recently, there has been more discussion of limiting climate change by geoengineering, a term taken here to be synonymous with solar radiation management, through the injection of sulfate aerosols in the stratosphere. The technique is even mentioned in the latest Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change's Summary for Policymakers[1].

Two powerful arguments have been made for using geoengineering: as an emergency measure[2], and as a stopgap[3]. Here we analyse both proposals from two perspectives: (1) effectiveness (would the use of geoengineering achieve the stated goal?), and (2) political feasibility (is there a reasonable prospect that the international political system would allow geoengineering to be used to achieve the stated goal?). Our main conclusion is that, when the use of geoengineering is politically feasible, the intervention may not be effective; and that, when the use of geoengineering might be effective, its deployment may not be politically feasible. Upon careful reflection, geoengineering may not prove to be the game changer some people have taken it to be.

Geoengineering's effects

Among the many options for 'global dimming' aimed at limiting global warming, the simplest involves putting sulfate aerosols in the stratosphere to scatter sunlight[4]. This form of geoengineering could reduce temperature in the lower atmosphere quickly. It would also be relatively inexpensive to deploy and could be done unilaterally, without the need for international cooperation. Ironically, however, this is one of the problems with geoengineering: its use might harm some countries (for example, by altering the monsoons) even if it were expected to help others. Geoengineering, particularly the use of stratospheric aerosols, poses a challenge for governance.

Of all the arguments against geoengineering, perhaps the one most frequently advanced is that knowledge of geoengineering's ability to cool the climate will reduce the incentive to cut emissions[5]. However, theory and laboratory experiments suggest that the failure to cut emissions can be explained by free-rider problems, including those associated with uncertainty about the true threshold for dangerous climate change6. Belief that geoengineering could serve as a cheap and quick fix might further dampen the incentive to cut emissions, but it seems unlikely that this belief will, by itself, cause concentrations to exceed dangerous levels. In any event, knowledge of geoengineering cannot be erased.

It is important to understand that geoengineering cannot be used to preserve today’s climate. Sunlight scattering would act on shortwave radiation, and GHGss affect long-wave radiation. In theory, atmospheric aerosol injection could be used to limit mean global temperature change to a specific level, such as 2 □C, even as concentrations continue to increase. However, it could not be used to limit changes in temperature and precipitation independently[7]. Moreover, no matter how geoengineering might be targeted, it could not preserve the spatial distribution of either temperature or precipitation, let alone the historical pattern of ocean circulation[7]. Finally, geoengineering would have environmental effects unrelated to the climate. Some of these, such as stratospheric ozone depletion2, are reasonably well understood, but geoengineering might have other effects that are currently unknown. A climate disturbed by elevated CO2 concentrations and geoengineering would be very different from the current climate (see Fig. 1). How human societies behave in this altered environment will also matter. For example, though the combination of CO2-fertilization and global dimming might increase agricultural yields for certain crops on a global scale8, the local effects are likely to be highly variable, with uncertain implications for land use change, crop selection, and food prices.

Averting disaster

Would geoengineering be useful as a last resort? The idea seems comforting, but what kind of emergency could be prevented or alleviated by geoengineering? Stratospheric injection of sulphate aerosols would cool surface air temperatures quickly, but if the West Antarctic Ice Sheet were to disintegrate, the cause would likely be oceanic rather than atmospheric warming, and it would take centuries for geoengineering to reverse the process leading to this catastrophic collapse[9]. Sunlight scattering would also be ineffective in addressing other polar climate emergencies, not least because it cannot directly or quickly affect temperature in the polar winter[10]. Geoengineering could probably help to reduce melting of the Greenland Ice Sheet[11] and rises in sea level, but these are slow processes that might be better addressed by adaptation, which can also be done unilaterally but without creating significant new risks or arousing geopolitical tensions.

A related problem is the timing of deployment. If countries waited too long before intervening,
some geophysical processes might prove impossible to reverse. Early warning signals could help to avert some catastrophes[12]. However, early warnings might be unreliable or come too late to allow geoengineering to avoid catastrophic climate change[13]. A case could be made for using geoengineering before any warning signs appeared, to avoid crossing an approaching but uncertain climate tipping point. However, doing so would introduce new dangers (Fig. 1), and it is not clear that the reduction in climate change hazards would justify the risks associated with geoengineering. It is also not clear that countries would approve the use of geoengineering as a precautionary approach to addressing climate change.

The temptation to use geoengineering to address a regional emergency, such as an altered

monsoon, might be harder to resist. However, geoengineering could not be counted on to prevent every regional climate crisis. For example, it probably could not prevent Amazonian forest dieback due to drought conditions. Moreover, countries that expect to be harmed by geoengineering would surely act to prevent it from being used. They might offer assistance to the countries contemplating the use of geoengineering, in exchange for these countries agreeing to refrain from deployment. They might also threaten trade sanctions, a military response, or
use of counter-geoengineering—the injection of particles designed to warm rather than to cool the Earth. Geoengineering might prove more acceptable if, by agreement, any 'losers' were to be compensated for their losses. However, attributing particular changes to geoengineering rather than to natural variation would be difficult if not impossible.

Buying time

Should geoengineering be used as a stopgap? The idea in this case would be to deploy stratospheric aerosol injection soon, initially at a low level, and then to turn it up gradually over time, the goal being to limit temperature change while more effort is put into abating emissions and developing new technologies for reducing emissions3. Once concentrations had returned to a 'safe' level, geoengineering could be scaled back and eventually stopped. This approach would limit the risk of climate change while also limiting the risk of geoengineering. However, the assumption that countries will overcome free rider incentives when geoengineering is used, despite having failed to do so when geoengineering was not used, seems implausible. The proposal to use geoengineering as a stopgap lacks credibility.

Indeed, it seems at least as likely that, rather than scale back the use of geoengineering, countries might instead choose to adapt to the combined effects of both climate change and geoengineering. Liming might be used to protect sensitive coral ecosystems from future ocean
acidification. Commercially important fish species might be engineered to withstand warmer ocean temperatures[14]. Crops might be engineered to benefit both from higher CO2 concentrations and from the more diffused light created by sunlight scattering. Use of one form of geoengineering might only beget the use of a multiple of other forms of 'nature engineering'.

If geoengineering were used over a number of decades, and GHG concentrations continued to rise all the while, turning geoengineering off abruptly would cause rapid climate change[1]. It seems more likely, however, that countries will someday cut the amount of reflective aerosols currently emitted by fossil fuel burning, causing regional temperatures to rise. In this situation, the ability of sunlight scattering to lower temperatures rapidly could be an advantage. The bigger risk to using geoengineering, we believe, is not that countries will turn it off abruptly but that, having begun to use it, they will continue to use it and may even become addicted to it.

Thinking again

Analysis of the possible use of solar radiation management in plausible scenarios (see Table 1)
suggests that, when its use is politically feasible, geoengineering may not be effective; and that, when its use might be effective, its deployment may not be politically feasible. The many
problems with geoengineering—its inability to address every 'climate emergency', the risks associated with its use, the geopolitical problems that would be triggered by its use, and the

prospect of its use becoming addictive—all suggest that contemplation of geoengineering does little to diminish the need to address the root causes of climate change. If anything, the prospect of geoengineering should strengthen the resolve to tackle climate change by limiting atmospheric concentrations of GHGs.

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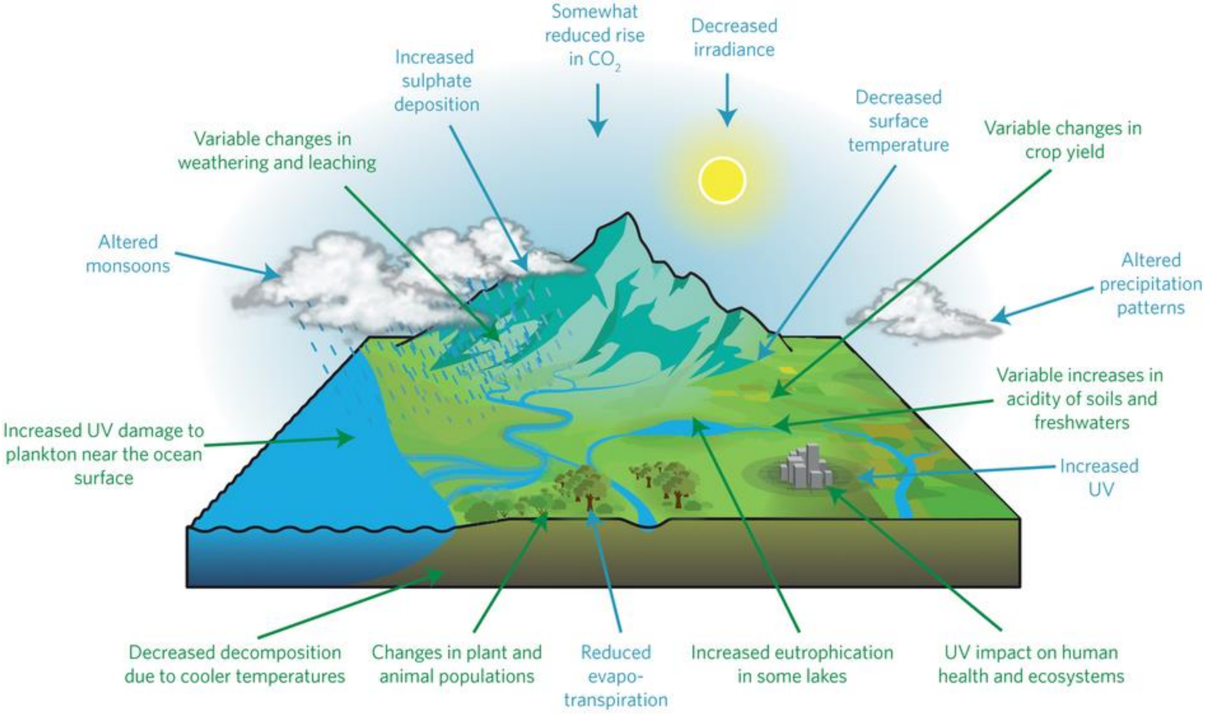
Figure 1. Solar radiation management using sulphate aerosols: ecological effects.



The schematic shows change in the drivers of ecosystem responses that are likely to arise from using sulfate aerosols, compared with not using sulfate aerosols, given current trends of increasing GHG concentrations, and the probable ecosystem responses. Drivers that are likely to change include temperature, precipitation, irradiance, monsoons, and sulfate deposition[15]. Ecosystem responses will be complex, with implications for food production, freshwater supplies, soil and water chemistry, and human health. They will also be spatially variable, creating both winners and losers, and uncertain, possibly causing large changes in ecosystems and in the availability of resources.

Table 1 | Evaluation of criteria for use of solar radiation management using sulphate aerosols for key scenarios.

Scenario	Criteria for deployment effectiveness	Political feasibility
Global emergency	Low for ocean warming and the West Antarctic ice sheet, but higher for Greenland ice sheet and for sea-level rise	Relatively high, but perhaps less preferred than adaptation
Regional emergency	Perhaps high for altered monsoon, but low for Amazonian die-back	Low, as probable to induce retaliatory response
Stop gap	Low due to weakened incentives to cut emissions	Fear of addiction may undermine consensus