



Climate Change and the Future of Geopolitics

Dan Bodansky, Sandra Day O'Connor College of Law, Arizona State University

Climate has always influenced human history and will continue to do so as the earth warms. But, at least in the age of the Anthropocene, the causal influence is not only in one direction. How climate change impacts states and international relations will depend in part on how states and international relations impact climate change.¹

All else being equal, climate change will be a destabilizing force both nationally and internationally. It will have cascading effects,

- causing coastal flooding, droughts, and more severe storms,
- heightening food and water insecurity,
- contributing to mass migration and civil unrest, and
- ultimately destabilizing governments and precipitating regional conflict.

But if the international community is successful in limiting climate change to 1.5 or 2° C, as the Paris Agreement calls for, then these climate change impacts will be much less than if national and international efforts are unsuccessful and the world warms by 3 or 4° C.

Similarly, climate change will tend to weaken some states and strengthen others, at least in relative terms. Fossil fuel exporting states, such as Saudi Arabia, will lose power as the world decarbonizes. States vulnerable to drought, tropical storms, and coastal flooding will suffer physically and economically. Conversely, countries with

abundant renewable energy resources or an abundance of the raw materials needed to generate, distribute, and store renewable energy (e.g., rare-earth metals, lithium, and cobalt) will gain power. Russia will be helped by the opening of the Arctic, even as it is hurt by the declining value of its natural gas.

But geography is not necessarily destiny, as the success of resource-poor Singapore demonstrates. For many, if not most, countries, the impacts of climate change will depend to a significant degree on the climate-related policies the country adopts. For example, will it move aggressively to capture the growing market in clean technologies? What will it do to adapt to climate change?

Many other factors could also affect how climate change, as well as the response to climate change, impact international relations: domestic politics (Do the Republicans regain the White House in 2024? Does democracy survive in the US?), the state of international relations more generally (Is it multipolar, bipolar, or unipolar? How conflictual is the US-China relationship on non-climate issues?), and discrete crises such as the COVID-19 pandemic or the 9/11 attacks. Given these numerous, uncertain variables, the impact of climate change on international relations is unpredictable.

In place of predictions, let me offer four scenarios, which define a range of possible futures.²

The first is a liberal institutionalist scenario, in which the Paris Agreement succeeds in limiting climate change

significantly. Countries progressively ratchet up the level of ambition of their mitigation efforts and decarbonize their economies by mid-century. Rich countries help finance this transition in poorer countries and fossil fuel-dependent states. The transition to renewable energy leads to greater energy self-sufficiency and reduces conflict. And the success of the UN climate change regime bolsters the credibility of international organizations more generally.

The second scenario is a more constructivist one. Social movements succeed in changing public consciousness, winning lawsuits, and otherwise pressuring corporations to decarbonize. As in the liberal institutionalist scenario, climate change is limited to relatively modest levels and does not hugely impact international relations. But unlike the institutionalist scenario, change comes from the bottom up, despite rather than because of international institutions. Even as social movements gain success, the UN climate change regime remains mired in procedural arguments and seems increasingly irrelevant. As a result, international institutions lose prestige and influence.

A third scenario is “realist.” International climate policy fragments. Countries taking action to reduce emissions impose trade restrictions on countries with weaker policies, leading to trade wars and increasing economic nationalism. Global emissions remain high, and global temperatures rise by 3° C or more. Some states disappear altogether as a result of sea level rise. Others experience droughts and floods, leading to civil unrest and mass migration. Ultra-nationalist, populist parties gain power in countries inundated by climate migrants and seek

to close their borders. The growing tide of nationalism and populism weakens international institutions generally.

A final scenario assumes that the international community continues to muddle on, at least for the foreseeable future. States continue to take haphazard actions to mitigate and adapt to climate change. The global temperature continues to rise, causing forest fires, droughts, more extreme tropical storms, and migration, but not fast enough for the frog to jump, metaphorically speaking. Climate change exacerbates existing international tensions but does not fundamentally alter international relations.

Which of these (or other) scenarios is most likely? As an international lawyer rather than a futurologist, I leave it to others to speculate.

Endnotes

1 [Simon Dalby, “Rethinking Geopolitics: Climate Security in the Anthropocene,” Global Policy 5\(1\) \(2014\).](#)

2 For a somewhat similar set of scenarios, see [Andreas Goldthau and Kirsten Westphal, “How the Energy Transition Will Reshape Geopolitics,” Nature 569: 29-31 \(2019\).](#)