

Three Modes of Thinking about Climate Change and Grand Strategy

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How should U.S. policymakers think about its interests, opportunities, and strategy in light of climate change? Three quite different modes of thinking about climate change have shaped the analysis of strategy and international order to date. The first, “threat multiplier,” is most familiar to the U.S. Department of Defense, and focuses on how climate change creates increased probability of civil wars, forced migration, political violence, and infrastructure damage. The second, “issue tradeoffs,” imagines climate change as an issue area, and one that creates instrumental tradeoffs with other military and economic priorities, such as when the Obama administration in 2014 reportedly delayed a Freedom of Navigation Operation (FONOP) in the South China Sea in exchange for Chinese support for the Paris Agreement. The third, “altered landscape,” sees climate change not as an issue area at all, but as a pervasive background condition that is intrinsically connected to most other areas of interstate competition and cooperation. In this view, actors have climate-related incentives and opportunities in each conventional issue area, like carbon tariffs in international trade or development finance for overseas energy projects. None of these modes of thinking is “right” or superior to the others in all cases. Each of these three ways of conceiving the climate-and-order nexus is fruitful and imperfect, but the third is the least understood and deserves the most attention.

President Biden [issued an Executive Order](#), in his first week in office, directing

each department and agency of the United States government to formulate a climate action plan, and to better incorporate climate change into its thinking and functional processes. In doing so, climate-informed analyses and future scenarios should consider not just new threats or tradeoffs, but the whole landscape of new opportunities and incentives that might disrupt existing governing arrangements. If I were advising the State Department about how to create such a plan, for example, I would encourage each regional and functional bureau to conduct a SWOT (Strengths-Weaknesses-Opportunities-Threats) analysis of how climate change affects their realm.

Within the third “altered landscape” mode of thinking, I suggest that diplomats and analysts trying to get a handle on the manifold effects of climate change think about them across two dimensions. The first dimension is novelty, ranging from how climate change would affect existing governing arrangements or behaviors to how climate change would create new

		<i>Substantive Type</i>	
		Economic Flows	Non-economic
<i>Novelty</i>	Existing Arrangements	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Oil-for-security deals - Global finance 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Mobilized borders, military bases, pollutants
	New Situations	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Arctic shipping - Global supply chains, e.g. Canada-US battery chain 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Climate migrants

Figure 1: *Substantive Type vs. Novelty*

situations that are unprecedented. The second dimension is substantive, falling basically into two categories: economic flows and non-economic matters. Those two dimensions create four categories, which might be considered by an analyst of any geographic region (e.g., the Middle East) or functional area (e.g., human rights and democracy). Figure 1 above illustrates.

Consider an example from the first category. The United States has some longstanding relationships with countries in the Persian Gulf region, notably Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Qatar, and the UAE, that are often characterized as “oil-for-security” deals. Those bilateral relationships are about more than just oil, of course, and the world’s demand for oil will not disappear overnight. Even so, it seems likely that the global energy transition away from fossil fuels will eventually undermine the basic premises of the U.S. relationships with those countries. Moreover, the anticipation of that future could affect regional dynamics now or in the near future, as petrostates begin to reassess how best to guarantee their military security in a world where the United States is less invested in their sovereignty. From the U.S. perspective, retrenchment from the Persian Gulf due to declining global demand for oil might be a climate-related opportunity, but it also creates threats.

There is no easy recipe for thinking about the new problems, incentives, strengths, and weaknesses that climate change will bring to almost every area of world politics. U.S. analysts would benefit from drawing on all three modes of thinking about climate change and international order. Climate change is reshaping everything from finance to trade politics

to nuclear proliferation, leaving few if any “non-climate” issues that can be understood without reference to this new strategic landscape.