



Using Strategic Investment to Address the Climate and Security Problems of Tomorrow

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Climate change is altering the things we, as humans, take as “given,” like the snowpack needed to feed the arid western U.S. or freshwater from the Himalayan glaciers. These “givens” have been the underpinning of strategic relationships for centuries. I offer three points on climate change and the possible implications for strategic rivalry.

First, making predictions is difficult. Few experts predicted that the rising price of wheat would trigger the Arab Spring, destabilization in the Middle East, an immigration crisis in Europe (and elsewhere), and the rise of nationalism in Western politics. But if predictions are so difficult, why even try? Because to have any chance of an effective response to a rapidly changing world, we must use all available time. Given the difficulty of predictions, we must be modest about our ability to predict how climate change will affect strategic rivalry.

Second, climate change will likely have a major effect on global rivalry. The monsoons are becoming less predictable and Himalayan ice is becoming scarcer, affecting millions of South Asians. China controls the sources of 10 major rivers that flow from the Himalayas through 11 countries, many of which border important sea lanes and supply [1.6 billion people](#) with water. As the planet warms, the ice will become scarcer and more precious, and China will need more of it. Will China’s influence over freshwater for South Asia help it gain influence and control over sea lanes vital to American allies in Asia, such as Japan, Korea, and Taiwan?

Third, time isn’t on our side. The strength

of China’s navy is [growing rapidly](#), making it increasingly difficult for the U.S. to defend sea lanes vital to American allies and our interests. The military isn’t the only domain where time isn’t on our side; technology is another. The U.S. is heavily dependent on China for clean energy technology. China has a stranglehold on many of the [rare earth elements](#) needed for clean energy technology, and it would take the U.S. a long time to scale up production at home or develop sources abroad.

The U.S. can catch up to China through strategic investment, but we must start now. Strategic investment serves three purposes, 1) it improves U.S. companies’ competitiveness vis-à-vis Chinese competitors, strengthening U.S. relative power, 2) it offers countries an alternative to Chinese developed technology, and 3) it helps reduce U.S. carbon emissions. An ancillary benefit is that through the investment in clean energy technology, the U.S. can demonstrate climate leadership and bolster alliances.

All countries will suffer, to varying degrees, from climate change. America’s relative strength—economically, politically, and militarily—has been in decline since the 1990s. This decline is not solely a result of China’s rise, but a result of self-inflicted wounds: lack of strategic planning, waning investment in the future, the deterioration of domestic politics. Climate change may well hasten the U.S.’ loss of influence worldwide. How the U.S. chooses to mitigate the threats posed by climate-induced strategic rivalry will determine how much influence and time we have left.