

A New Challenge: Climate Security

The Geopolitical Implications of Climate Change

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After the Russian-Ukrainian gas crisis of 2009, energy supply security was pretty much on top of the European Union's energy agenda, which ultimately culminated in pursuing a cohesive strategy of "Energy Union" in 2015. Since then, the EU has markedly improved its energy security situation. Now, another challenge – a more universal one – is emerging that must be urgently addressed: climate security, that is, mitigating and managing the geopolitical implications of climate change. Unfortunately, this challenge has not been given the attention it warrants. Indeed, climate change has become a threat multiplier that is exacerbating volatile situations around the world with dire geopolitical implications.¹

For many, climate change poses an existential threat, while for others, at least in the short term, it can become an advantage. Just one flashpoint to consider is the Arctic and Greenland.

The Arctic and Greenland

Rising global temperatures are melting our polar ice caps. Over the last three decades, the Arctic has experienced some of the most rapid climate changes on Earth, almost twice the global average. As ice fields, glaciers, and sea ice continue to melt, countries are increasingly recognizing their potential to unlock vast tracts of natural resources like oil, natural gas, and minerals. The Arctic accounts for about 13 percent of undiscovered oil and 30 percent of undiscovered gas.²

The opening up of the Northeast, Northwest, and other passages due to the melting ice gives rise to new questions about who has the right to control seaways or exploit vast undiscovered natural deposits. These questions raise serious geopolitical concerns, and rightly so, given the history of tensions in the region between the five Arctic coastal states (Canada, Denmark, Norway, Russia, United States), as well as other actors like NATO and China.

The U.S.' Renewed Interest

Recently, President Trump played with the idea of buying Greenland. While his proposal elicited global astonishment and widespread ridicule, it was, in fact, not a completely outlandish idea. Greenland has long been important militarily given its key position between Russia and North America. In 1940, the U.S. seized control of Greenland to prevent the island from being used as a springboard for an invasion of North America. During the Cold War, Greenland's strategic geographic location was used by the United States to track Soviet submarines and place bombers and later missiles that could attack enemy targets, as well as position missile early warning radars at the American air base in Thule. Today, Greenland remains as important as ever for the United States and NATO, particularly in light of Russia's enhanced military capabilities and China's growing economic clout.³

Russia's Enhanced Military Capabilities

In 2007, Russia staked its claim to Arctic territory by planting its flag on the North Pole seabed. Fast forward to 2019, and its interest in the region has only grown. In November 2019, Russia conducted a major military exercise in the Arctic involving 12,000 soldiers, five nuclear submarines, fifteen warships, and 100 aircraft, as well as the launch of the world's first "combat icebreaker."⁴ Moreover, it has five nuclear-powered icebreakers, currently the only country to have any, and is also upgrading its military installations at its northernmost airbase in Nagurskoye,⁵ which will give Moscow advanced capabilities to defend its territory and the ability to strike Thule Air Base, the U.S. Air Force's northernmost base, and thus cause significant damage to its missile defense and early warning systems. In geopolitical terms, Russia's increased activities in the Arctic have two key aims: 1) to gain a strategic military position with strike and defense capabilities against potential adversaries in the region and 2) to bolster Russia's claim to around 1.3 million square kilometers of the Arctic.

China's Growing Economic Clout

The opening up of the Arctic has also become of interest to countries not usually associated with the region. In its 2018 white paper, China launched its Polar Silk Road Initiative, which aligns Beijing's Arctic interests with the Belt and Road Initiative. In the paper, China describes itself as a "Near-Arctic State" and makes it clear that it has a strategic interest in being involved in natural resource extraction as well as commercial activities, including shipping.

Already, China has sought to project its economic influence through commercial forays in Greenland. A Chinese state-owned company has invested in a rare earth elements (REE) and uranium mining project at Kvanefjeld in southern Greenland,⁶ while another Chinese investment company has expressed interest in purchasing a former naval station.⁷ In 2017, the Chinese government applied for permission to build a satellite receiving station. As trade starts to pick up with the melting ice opening up the seaways, it is likely that China will attempt to increase investments in the region. Eventually, Chinese capital could make up a significant share of the island's economy, giving Beijing leverage that could be used to pursue not only commercial, but also geopolitical interests.

For instance, if China decides to develop major infrastructure along the Polar Silk Road, it will warrant close attention. Such facilities could easily be re-purposed for military use with strike capabilities against both the United States and Russia, a significant development at a time when the U.S. is reducing its international engagements while Beijing simultaneously seeks to be recognized as a major power with a growing global reach.

Conclusion

Whether in discussions about melting ice, rising temperatures, or extreme and unpredictable weather patterns, links are being made between a changing climate and geopolitical developments. And it is truly a global problem. Emissions produced in the United States lead to melting the icecaps in the Arctic, which in turn is detrimental to Pacific island states and has security and economic implications for the five Arctic coastal states and beyond. As the manifestations of climate change increase and become more extreme, their effects will play an increasingly important role in discussions of security and geopolitics.

Although these challenges represent a relatively new field, comprehensive strategies need to be developed to respond to climate-induced security threats and geopolitical instability both nationally and around the world. The Paris Agreement is a good first step in pushing us to commit to curbing emissions and drafting climate adaptation action plans. But pledges and promises alone are not enough. We need to step up and turn them into concrete action.