

How has climate change impacted formal and practical geopolitics in the last century?

This essay will argue that climate change significantly impacts both formal and practical geopolitics through imagined geographies of threat, opportunity and by exacerbating the dichotomy between developed and developing states. Analysing the impact of climate change on practical geopolitics is of central importance, due to the potential impact of government action, while discussion of formal geopolitics is necessary, as this provides the reasoning behind government decision-making. This analysis is crucial due to the increasingly popular scholarly assumption that human civilization is reaching the Anthropocene.¹ The focus of this analysis will be framed through imagined geographies, which influence how states see other states and themselves. Firstly I will argue that, influenced by climate change, scholars have contributed to an imagined geography of threat, which has impacted how policy-makers have viewed the issue of climate change.² Then I will discuss the impact of climate change on the scholarly debate between developed and developing states and how this has impacted the way states act, with developing states holding feelings of resentment towards developed states.³ Lastly, I will argue formal geopolitics has contributed to an imagined geography of opportunity, which has significantly impacted how states now view climate change and their actions as a result.⁴ European aspirations for global superpower status following US reluctance to commit to climate change initiatives are demonstrative of this.⁵

¹ Joyeeta Gupta and Eric Chu, 'Inclusive Development and Climate Change: The Geopolitics of Fossil Fuel Risks in Developing Countries', *African and Asia Studies* 17:1-2 (2018) p.91.

² Charles F. Parker and Christer Karlsson, 'The European Union as a Global Climate Leader: Confronting Aspiration with Evidence', *International Environment Agreements: Politics, Law and Economics* 17:4 (2017) p.445.

³ Sanjay Chaturvedi and Timothy Doyle, *Climate Terror: A Critical Geopolitics of Climate Change* (Basingstoke; Palgrave Macmillan, 2015) p.77.

⁴ Achim Maas and Alexander Carius, 'Territorial Integrity and Sovereignty: Climate Change and Security in the Pacific and Beyond', in Jurgan Scheffran et al., *Climate Change, Human Security and Violent Conflict: Challenges for Societal Stability* (Berlin; Springer Publishers, 2012) p.660.

⁵ Joe Barnett, 'The Geopolitics of Climate Change', *Geography Compass* 1:6 (2007) p.1368.

It is first necessary to differentiate between formal and practical geopolitics. Formal geopolitics is primarily concerned with geopolitical discourses formulated by intellectuals and characterised by ‘description and debate’.⁶ Whereas practical geopolitics relates to discourse from policy makers, generally found in speeches and policy documents.⁷ However, it is important to note that practical geopolitics also incorporates everyday assumptions that often unconsciously guide the actions of policymakers. Formal geopolitics provides much of the legitimacy and basis of practical geopolitics, though it should be acknowledged that practical geopolitics can result from elsewhere.⁸ This is where imagined geographies come in, as formal geopolitics formulates imagined geographies, which then heavily influence the development and implementation of practical geopolitics. Said’s Orientalism underpins this concept, discussing it as a set of assumptions forming the West’s understanding of the Orient and the way this influenced responses to the region.⁹ Many scholars view imagined geographies as inevitable because ‘in order to engage practically with the world...we need understandings’ and it is these understandings that affect geopolitics at both formal and practical level.¹⁰ Therefore, imagined geographies, reproduced by intellectuals, ‘fuel and create assumptions of who people are, as a result of where they live or the state they come from.’¹¹ In the case of climate change, they affect which imagined geographies are formulated and the impact this has on policy makers. It is also necessary to define the concept of the Anthropocene, as the foundation of much formal geopolitics stems from this notion that

⁶ Gearoid O. Tuathail, ‘Geopolitical Discourse: Practical Geopolitical Reasoning in American Foreign Policy’, *Political Geography* 11:2 (1992) p.194

⁷ Gearoid O Tuathail, ‘Geopolitical Discourse’ p.194.

⁸ Mirja Schroder, *EU Gas Supply Security: A Geopolitical Vision of the Southern Gas Corridor* (Baden-Baden; Nomos, 2019) p.91

⁹ Edward W. Said, *Orientalism* (London; Penguin Books, 2003) p.12.

¹⁰ Kevin R. Cox, *Political Geography: Territory, State and Society* (Oxford; Blackwell Publishers, 2002) p.161.

¹¹ Scott F. Johnson, ‘Real and Imagined Geography’, in Michael Maas, *The Cambridge Companion to the Age of Attila* (Cambridge; Cambridge University Press, 2005) p.413.

‘human civilization is now entering the Anthropocene’.¹² The Anthropocene marks the tipping point in the Earth’s capacity to handle human activity, this has helped foster an imagined geography of threat and has therefore influenced practical geopolitics too.¹³

Imagined Geography of Threat

The clearest example of an imagined geography is an imagined geography of threat, emerging as a result of scholarly concern surrounding climate change and the assumption of an impending Anthropocene.¹⁴ Climate change has long been seen as a concern by scholars, with even classical geopolitical thinkers such as Haushofer referring to ‘the dependence of all political events on the enduring conditions of the physical environment’.¹⁵ However, the perception of climate change has escalated recently, leading to a return to Malthusianism, arguing that ‘unchecked population growth would inevitable exhaust available resources’.¹⁶ Kaplan discussed the climate threat too, when he argued that the ‘environment [should be seen] as a hostile power’.¹⁷ Although many other scholars have argued that Kaplan ‘painted a particularly depressing picture of the future’, there is a general consensus that the environment does now pose a significant threat to national security.¹⁸¹⁹ Homer-Dixon and Levy support this view that ‘because environmental stress is worsening, we can expect an increase in the frequency of conflicts with an environmental component’.²⁰ This is the type of

¹² Joyeeta Gupta and Eric Chu, ‘Inclusive Development and Climate Change’ p.91.

¹³ Nigel Clark, ‘Geo-Politics and the Disaster of the Anthropocene’, *The Sociological Review* 62:51 (2014) p.21.

¹⁴ Joyeeta Gupta and Eric Chu, ‘Inclusive Development and Climate Change’ p.91.

¹⁵ Gearoid O Tuathail, ‘Geopolitical Discourse’ p.192.

¹⁶ Colin Flint, *Introduction to Geopolitics* (London; Routledge, 2016) p.248.

¹⁷ Robert D. Kaplan, ‘The Coming Anarchy’, *The Atlantic*, February 1994, <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/1994/02/the-coming-anarchy/304670/> [accessed on 20/12/19].

¹⁸ Simon Dalby, ‘The Environment as Geopolitical Threat: Reading Robert Kaplan’s ‘Coming Anarchy’’, *Ecumene* 3:4 (1996) p.472.

¹⁹ Joe Barnett, ‘The Geopolitics of Climate Change’ p.1361.

²⁰ Thomas F. Homer-Dixon and Marc A. Levy, ‘Environment and Security’, *International Security* 20:3 (1996) p.191.

formal geopolitics that contributed to an imagined geography of threat, which then influences how politicians see climate change and how they act as a result. There is a growing recognition amongst scholars that climate change poses a direct threat to the low-lying Pacific islands, framing them as ‘disappearing’, ‘drowning’ and ‘sinking’.²¹ This formal geopolitical assumption clearly contributed to an imagined geography of threat, influencing practical geopolitics in the region.

This was seen in 2014 when ‘Tuvaluan Prime Minister Enele Sopoaga...likened the impact of climate change on Pacific Island nations to a “weapon of mass destruction”...[here] the tone of and tenor of his narrative of climate change are visibly marked by a geopolitics of fear’.²² Scholars have also discussed the Pacific Islands reliance on foreign aid for their GDP.²³ This creates a precarious situation even in normal circumstances, but ‘the effects of climate change could provoke a more inward political orientation in the United States, European Union or Japan as their respective populations demand their governments deploy national assets solely for domestic disaster assistance’.²⁴ This creates an additional aspect of threat, as climate change will create the need for additional funds to deal with environmental disasters. Yet if the states typically providing these funds slash foreign aid budgets, this could create a serious problem. As such this has formed part of this imagined geography and is likely to influence political action. This influence on practical geopolitics was seen when ‘island states are already negotiating relocation options with New Zealand and Australia...[while] others, like Nauru see the relocation of entire populations as a possible

²¹ Sonali Narang, ‘Imaginative Geographies of Climate Change Induced Displacements and Migrations: A Case Study of Tuvalu’, *Journal of Alternative Perspectives in the Social Sciences* 7:2 (2015) p.274.

²² Sonali Narang, ‘Imaginative Geographies of Climate Change Induced Displacements and Migrations’ p.268.

²³ Matthew Dornan and Jonathan Pryke, ‘Foreign Aid to the Pacific: Trends and Developments in the Twenty-First Century’, *Asia & the Pacific Policy Studies* 4:3 (2017) p.386.

²⁴ Paul J. Smith, ‘The Geopolitics of Climate Change: Power Transitions, Conflict and the Future of Military Activities’, *Conflict, Security and Development* 11:3 (2011) p.319.

future necessity'.²⁵ The idea that political leaders have acknowledged the real possibility of having to give up sovereignty demonstrates they have been influenced by an imagined geography of threat. The impact on practical geopolitics has been noted when 'the Department of Homeland Security incorporated climate change into the homeland security framework of analysis'.²⁶ As a result of this understanding of climate change, 'the Pentagon now considers climate change as a "legitimate national security concern"'.²⁷ This acknowledgement is almost a direct result of scholarly arguments that 'climate change could endanger core American values and are therefore direct threats to U.S. security interests'.²⁸ Klare echoed the view that climate change has impacted practical geopolitics on a wide scale, 'since 1990 almost every major government...has assigned greater strategic significance to economic and resource concerns in the post-Cold War era'.²⁹ Therefore, climate change has pushed a formal geopolitics which has created this imagined geography of threat, influencing practical geopolitics.

Dichotomy between Developed and Developing States

Another area where formal geopolitical assumptions influence practical geopolitics is the dichotomy between developed and developing states and how climate change impacts their view of each other. The contemporary racist stereotypes that are often found in representations of climate change are also important here, which broadens our understanding of threat beyond just climate change itself but also to address various problems that might arise as a result of climate change, particularly in the global south. For formal geopolitics,

²⁵ Achim Maas and Alexander Carius, 'Territorial Integrity and Sovereignty' p.658.

²⁶ Kent Hughes Butts, 'Environmental Security and Climate Change: A Link to Homeland Security', *Journal of Homeland Security and Emergency Management* 11:2 (2014) p.276.

²⁷ Hans Gunter Brauch et al., *Coping with Global Environmental Change, Disasters and Security: Threats, Challenges, Vulnerability and Risks* (Berlin; Springer Berlin Heidelberg, 2011) p.64.

²⁸ Thomas F. Homer-Dixon and Marc A Levy, 'Environment and Security' p.189.

²⁹ Michael T. Klare, *Resource Wars* (New York; Henry Holt and Company, 2001) p.10.

this is underpinned by ‘Northern support and Southern rejection of the climate agenda’, which refers to general support from the global developed north for emissions reductions targets confronted with the Global South’s rejection of these measures.³⁰ There is a general consensus that this is illustrative of ‘common but differentiated responsibilities’, which shows how climate change has influenced formal geopolitics to consider the preservation of this dichotomy.³¹ Some scholars link this to colonial geopolitics, arguing that due to their colonial heritage ‘developed countries hold a historic responsibility for all major emitters’.³² The idea that developed states are responsible for developing states’ emissions reinforces this distinction. It has also been argued ‘climate change has introduced a new pivot in human development’, referencing Mackinder’s classical geopolitical assumptions.³³ This implies that developing states claiming climate change is not their responsibility, reflects their inability to adapt to the issue. Therefore, whether a state is developed or not clearly impacts their reaction to climate change. Perhaps orientalism is also at play, with developed western states possessing a sense of superiority regarding their ability to adapt compared to developing states.³⁴ The dichotomy was formalised in practical geopolitics through ‘The Right to Development [which] was adopted by the United Nations General Assembly in 1986, and argues that developing countries have the right to develop and that this allows them some leeway in their behaviour at international level’.³⁵ Placing these distinctions reiterates these separations and ensures that states view each other as either part of the same ‘club’ or as something different altogether, again linking to orientalism where Western or developed states hold certain assumptions about developing states.³⁶ Some scholars have argued this

³⁰ Sanjay Chaturvedi and Timothy Doyle, *Climate Terror* p.77.

³¹ Paul J. Smith, ‘The Geopolitics of Climate Change’ p.312.

³² Charlotte Streck and Maximilian Terhalle, ‘The Changing Geopolitics of Climate Change’, *Climate Policy* 13:5 (2013) p.533.

³³ Charlotte Streck and Maximilian Terhalle, ‘The Changing Geopolitics of Climate Change’ p.533.

³⁴ Edward W. Said, *Orientalism* p.14.

³⁵ Joyeeta Gupta and Eric Chu, ‘Inclusive Development and Climate Change’ p.93.

³⁶ Edward W. Said, *Orientalism* p.14.

distinction is receding as policy-makers become aware of the crisis. Nonetheless, while it is true that in the context of the Anthropocene, being able to develop without regard for the environment is not a luxury for either developing or developed states.³⁷ This dichotomy is still at play because developing states commitments are almost always ‘on their own terms, not those dictated by Europe, the United States or Japan’.³⁸ This suggests that these formal geopolitical assumptions and this distinction will continue to impact practical geopolitics too.

Typically, developing states argue they ‘are more worried that [climate change agreements] might hamper their economic development than they are about climate change’.³⁹ This links to the earlier idea of climate change being a pivot in human development, which developing states have not reached yet, feeding into the idea of distinction between developed and developing countries. Developed countries are generally less concerned by the impact of climate change agreements on their development, as they are able to explore sustainable energy options. This assumption is supported by the notion that ‘Asian economies simply do not possess cheap and viable fossil fuel alternatives that can be deployed without risking their economic development and energy security’, which further supports the idea that developing states possess different priorities and abilities.⁴⁰ As such, it can be argued that ‘current climate negotiations are affected by a fundamental conflict of interest between the developed and developing worlds’.⁴¹ Leading on from this, many scholars have noted it is ‘the OPEC group [of developing states] are the most vociferously opposed to efforts to reduce

³⁷ Joyeeta Gupta and Eric Chu, ‘Inclusive Development and Climate Change’ p.94.

³⁸ Sanjay Chaturvedi and Timothy Doyle, *Climate Terror* p.75

³⁹ Shannon O’Lear and Simon Dalby, *Reframing Climate Change Constructing Ecological Geopolitics* (London; Routledge, 2016) p.2.

⁴⁰ Nur Azha Putra and Han Eulalia, *Government’s Response to Climate Change: Selected Examples from Asia Pacific* (Singapore; Springer Publishers, 2014) p.2.

⁴¹ He Gang, ‘Engaging Emerging Countries: Implications of China’s Major Shifts in Climate Policy’, in Nur Azha Putra and Han Eulalia, *Government’s Responses to Climate Change: Selected Examples from Asia Pacific* (Singapore; Springer Publishers, 2014) p.12.

greenhouse gas emissions [and have sought to delay legislation]...until there is a parallel process to compensate them for potential loss in oil revenue'.⁴² This reinforces the idea that developing states see themselves as being owed something for committing to climate change measures despite these regions being at high risk from climate change, suggesting that these states see developed states as privileged regarding this issue. This shows that climate change has clearly reinforced the distinction between developed and developing state both in scholarly debate and through practical geopolitical rhetoric.

Imagined Geography of Opportunity

In contrast to the negative connotations of climate change, there has also been an increasingly prominent imagined geography of opportunity. One example is European aspirations to emerge as a major superpower, following US reluctance to commit to climate change agreements such as the Kyoto Protocol, which many believe has strengthened European leadership desires.⁴³ Several scholars have referred to the idea that the Kyoto Protocol has a 'Eurocentric basis and bias', clearly suggesting that Europe has established itself as a climate change leader.⁴⁴ This demonstrates both that formal geopolitics has been impacted by climate change to see as an opportunity. Europe is likely to see it this way even more now due to its dominant position. However, it is not only Europe that sees climate change as an opportunity to assert its global leadership position. In 2006 Australian Prime Minister Howard claimed that he 'wanted Australia to become an energy superpower'.⁴⁵ Both of these examples

⁴² Joe Barnett, 'The Geopolitical of Climate Change' p.1370.

⁴³ Joe Barnett, 'The Geopolitics of Climate Change' p.1368.

⁴⁴ Sanjay Chaturvedi and Timothy Doyle, 'Geopolitics of Climate Change and Australia's 'Re-engagement' with Asia: Discourses of Fear and Cartographic Anxieties', *Australian Journal of Political Science* 45:1 (2010) p.106.

⁴⁵ Sanjay Chaturvedi and Timothy Doyle, 'Geopolitics of Climate Change and Australia's 'Re-engagement' with Asia p.102.

demonstrate that formal geopolitical assumptions that help formulate and inform imagined geographies and practical geopolitics can be impacted by climate change.

China also may see climate change as an opportunity to assert its dominance over the United States, in a region historically under American hegemony, the Pacific Islands. The region is in constant need of investment to develop and cope with climate change. In recent years, China has recognised this and the idea that ‘if relatively small investments allow Beijing to gain influence over a number of governments in the region [it allows China] access to or even control of vast waters of vital strategic importance to the US’.⁴⁶ This demonstrates that Chinese practical geopolitics is being informed by formal geopolitical knowledge of the region’s need for investment and how a new source of funds could destabilise American dominance in the region. Therefore, China clearly operates through an imagined geography of opportunity, representing the desires of China as they see the issue of climate change as a way to assert their dominance.⁴⁷ In this case, that appears to be China establishing itself as the superpower in the international arena.

The Arctic has provided an additional aspect to this imagined geography. There has been much intellectual debate surrounding the potential impact of climate change on the Arctic. With the melting of ice caps and glaciers, the wealth of natural resources below is more accessible, which is increasingly important given the growing scarcity of natural resources elsewhere. As such, there is a general consensus that the Arctic is now a ‘globally embedded space’, holding importance for the international arena.⁴⁸ This is reinforced by Obama in 2012 making ‘the first-ever official visit of a sitting US president above the Arctic Circle in the

⁴⁶ Kathrin Hille, ‘Pacific Islands: A New Arena of Rivalry Between China and the US’, *Financial Times*, 9 April 2019, <https://www.ft.com/content/bdbb8ada-59dc-11e9-939a-341f5ada9d40> [accessed on 27/12/19].

⁴⁷ Sonali Narang, ‘Imaginative Geographies of Climate Change Induced Displacements and Migrations’ p.268

⁴⁸ Kathrin Keil and Sebastian Knecht (eds.), *Governing Arctic Change* (London; Palgrave Macmillan, 2017) p.4.

state of Alaska in American history'.⁴⁹ Russia is another state whose practical geopolitics has been heavily influenced by this imagined geography of opportunity. In 2007 'the Russian government deployed two submarines to the North Pole where they...planted a Russian flag'.⁵⁰ This action following a statement to the UN that Russia has claim to a significant portion of Arctic territory, demonstrates that Russia sees Arctic climate change as an opportunity to reassert its global power and access additional resources.⁵¹ Additionally, Russia has recently stated that the 'Russian Government will 'use the advantages' of climate change'.⁵² Other states have acted through this imagined geography, US Defense Secretary Robert Gates demonstrated this clearly, when he argued for the 'need for the US to acquire more ice breaker ships in light of 'receding Arctic ice and the possibility of that shipping area being open''.⁵³ Therefore the Arctic demonstrates further how formal geopolitics has contributed to an imagined geography of opportunity which impacts how states act, as a result of how they see climate change.

In conclusion, climate change has had a significant impact on both formal and practical geopolitics. Scholars have expanded more traditional geopolitical assumptions, to incorporate the idea that climate change is both a serious threat to national security but that it can also provide some opportunities for states, while acknowledging that it is able to influence contemporary colonial discourse. This in turn has contributed to imagined geographies, which has informed the practical geopolitics of various states through action and rhetoric. The discussion within this essay highlights that while climate change is able to and

⁴⁹ Kathrin Keil and Sebastian Knecht (eds.), *Governing Arctic Change* p.1

⁵⁰ Paul J. Smith, 'The Geopolitics of Climate Change' p.319.

⁵¹ Paul J. Smith, 'The Geopolitics of Climate Change' p.320.

⁵² Theo Merz, 'Russian Government to 'Use the Advantages' of Climate Change', *The Telegraph*, 5 January 2020, <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2020/01/05/russian-government-use-advantages-climate-change/> [accessed on 05/01/2020].

⁵³ Paul J. Smith, 'The Geopolitics of Climate Change' p.320.

increasingly does impact both forms of geopolitics, formal more than practical, it is likely to be a contributing factor in the geopolitics of states rather than the deciding or sole factor. As such, there are three central areas where climate change has had a fundamental impact on both formal and practical geopolitics: imagined geographies of threat, opportunities for states and by exacerbating the existing dichotomy between developed and developing states. This analysis demonstrates that it is essential for formal geopolitics to recognise that environmental factors are critical to security, and for practical geopolitics this is demonstrates that politicians need to increasingly adapt to respond to this issue.

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