

The Great Thaw: Climate Change and the Post-Cold War World

Written by Caitlin E. Werrell and Francesco Femia

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The end of the Cold War coincided with the beginning of global awareness about the risks from climate change. The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) was established in 1988 and the Berlin Wall fell in 1989. Since then, the world has witnessed dramatic social, political, economic, and climatic shifts, as well as incredible technological change – including improvements in our ability to predict future changes in the climate and their implications for international security (Schleussner et al., 2016). While some of these changes have caught the international security community off-guard, we have seen climate change risks coming for many decades. This combination of unprecedented risks and unprecedented foresight underscore a “Responsibility to Prepare.”

Geopolitical Changes After the Cold War

In June of 1988, over 300 scientists and high-level political leaders from 46 different countries came together for the “World Conference on the Changing Atmosphere: Implications for Global Security.” The Conference Statement was stunning in the seriousness of its warning about climate change (WMO, 1988, 292), stating: “these changes represent a major threat to international security and are already having harmful consequences over many parts of the globe.” This warning was followed up by United Nations (UN) General Assembly Resolution 43/53 (UN, 1988) which warned of climatic changes that could be “disastrous for mankind if timely steps are not taken at all levels.” The Resolution created the IPCC, a cooperative body explicitly created for understanding the common threat of a changing climate.

This event heralded a wave of unprecedented international cooperation on major issues of security, trade and the environment. On June 1, 1988, the United States and the Soviet Union agreed to eliminate their intermediate-range and shorter-range missiles as the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces Treaty entered into force (Arms Control Association, 2018), signaling a dramatic de-escalation in hostilities. In April of 1989, cooperation on trade brought 123 nations together within the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade framework to agree on improved trade dispute settlement rules and procedures (WTO, 2018), which later laid the groundwork for the World Trade Organization. On August 26, 1989, the Montreal Protocol, a global agreement involving 197 countries designed to save the depleted Ozone layer, entered into effect (United States State Department, 2018). Finally, on November 9, 1989, eleven months after the creation of the IPCC, the first segment of the Berlin Wall crumbled, setting the stage for the managed collapse of the Soviet Union and the reunification of Germany.

The wave of optimism that resulted from such cooperation, however, soon gave way to harsh and complex realities. In many ways, governments were not prepared for the more unpredictable changes to the international system that were in store. It was easy for the warnings about climate change to be drowned out amidst the clamor of a new post-Cold War world.

After 1989: Geopolitical Disruptions Divert Attention from Climate Change

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After the Berlin Wall fell, the international security environment changed rapidly and in largely unpredictable ways, diverting attention from long-term, non-traditional risks such as climate change. Though a wave of democratization occurred in the aftermath of the Cold War, the promise of an “end of history” gave way to a much more complex and unstable reality (Fukuyama, 1992). This included a wave of ethno-nationalist violence that led to mass atrocities in the heart of the European subcontinent (Yale University, 2018) and Africa (BBC, 2014), a rise in terrorist activity from non-state actors such as al-Qaeda and ISIS, stalled democratization in Russia and revanchist actions in its neighborhood (Rybak, 2017), the economic success of China followed by a reassertion of authoritarian governance, the acquisition of nuclear weapons by the rogue regime in North Korea, extraordinary population growth and urbanization coupled with increased access to information through the internet and social media, popular uprisings in the Arab world, and a rise in the political fortunes of populist nationalists in countries such as Hungary (Lloyd, 2018), Italy (Horowitz, 2018), Poland (Rohac, 2018), Brazil (Encarnación, 2018), the Philippines (Coats, 2018), Turkey (Pierini, 2018) and even the United States (Walt, 2017). These political dynamics either caught the international community by surprise or were very difficult to respond to.

Perhaps in part due to these dramatic changes in the geopolitical landscape, the early warnings about climate change from 1988 were not fully heeded, despite the materialization of global agreements such as the Kyoto Protocol, the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change, and its most recent output, the Paris Agreement. Governmental actions to curb the increasingly dangerous international security risks from climate change remain voluntary and have slowed in recent years. Though market forces may be overtaking policy-makers in creating incentives for decarbonization, this also may be happening at too slow a pace given the security implications of current emissions trajectories (Werrell et al., 2018).

While the inability of government actions to keep pace with the scope and scale of security risks is not necessarily unique to climate change, it is particularly well-defined in this case, not least of all because climate change is a risk shared by all nations. The inability to advance robust action on climate security has several causes, including issue competition from other risks in the geopolitical landscape, short-run election cycles in democratic countries that render long-term decisions difficult, powerful special interests that oppose policy actions to abate climate change, and a poor understanding of the issue in the public sphere. These dynamics reduce incentives for policy-makers to advance comprehensive policies for addressing the challenges that stem from climate change. Differences among countries in terms of risk tolerance, particularly between wealthy and poor nations also help to stymie progress. This has led many governments to put off difficult policy decisions and instead rely on hopes of technological breakthroughs for preventing a future of catastrophic climate change.

The political turmoil and regional instabilities of the post-Cold War world were in many ways unanticipated (see, for example, the popularity of Francis Fukuyama’s “End of History” thesis in 1992) and driven by identifiable state and non-state actors that could be combatted with traditional military and diplomatic means. Therefore, it is understandable that broader and less tangible global risks such as climate change would retreat from the list of international priorities. However, in recent years, appreciation of the intersection of climate change and political instability, including conflict, has risen – challenging the artificial separation of these issues. This is in part due to the simple fact that, over the past decade, studies have increasingly connected climate changes to natural resource stresses that have contributed to social, economic and political unrest. The matter is no longer theoretical. This concern has manifested itself in a number of ways, including the elevation of climate change and conflict to the UN Security Council (Werrell and Femia, 2019).

Fast forward to 2018: Security Risks of Climate Change Materialize

Thirty years after the creation of the IPCC and the first clear warnings about the implications of climate change for international security, some of the projected security risks are coming to fruition in significant ways. The Arctic is rapidly melting, creating a new ocean with new geopolitical dynamics following closely behind, as China, for example, asserts itself as a “near-Arctic” nation (Goodman and Maddox, 2018). Sea levels are rising and are set to continue to rise, increasing storm surge and water insecurity in low-lying countries and coastal areas, ranging from the Hampton Roads region of the United States, which hosts the greatest concentration of military capability in the world (Keys et al., 2018), to small island nations in the Pacific, where sea level rise presents an existential threat to their sovereignty

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(Hassan, 2010).

Evidence is also growing that climate change has already played a role in disrupting regional and global security in a number of ways. For example, three studies conducted from 2012-2015 found that climate change worsened drought conditions that helped displace nearly two million farmers and herders in Syria between 2007-2010, which contributed to political unrest prior to the outbreak of the country's civil war (Femia and Werrell, 2012; Kelley et al., 2015; Gleick, 2014). In 2016, a major study of global data sets conducted by researchers at the Potsdam Institute found that climate change significantly increases the likelihood of conflict in ethnically fractionalized countries (Schleussner et al., 2016).

This growing evidence of a connection between climate change and other social, economic and political drivers of instability bolsters the case for addressing climate change as part of broader governance goals at national, regional and intergovernmental levels. The inability or unwillingness of governments and intergovernmental institutions to manage rapid and sometimes unprecedented change in general should prompt an international search for governance frameworks that can handle these multiple, intersecting and often systemic transnational risks.

For example, many intergovernmental structures appear more fragile than they have since they were created, putting pressure on their ability to function in general, never mind in the face of a rapidly changing climate. Brexit and the rising fortunes of ethno-nationalist political forces are challenging the European Union and democratic countries worldwide. Founding members of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), such as the United States, are openly questioning its future (De Luce et al., 2018), a sentiment that would have seemed inconceivable just a few years ago. Grappling with core challenges like whether to exist or not has reduced these institutions and their capacities to adequately prepare for and reduce future risks significantly, particularly non-traditional security risks like climate change, which, to date, have not been thoroughly addressed by these arrangements.

At the same time, our technological capabilities for modeling climate change have improved and are on the verge of another leap in the form of Artificial Intelligence. The first scientifically legitimate climate change model was created in 1967, and largely, the climate is changing as the model predicted (Siegel, 2017). Further technological and scientific developments have laid the groundwork for more complex models that have produced increasingly accurate projections (Cowtan et al., 2015)

In this context, the unprecedented changes we are facing in 2018 are greater than they were in 1988, but the foresight we possess today is also greater than what it was in 1988. This underscores a "Responsibility to Prepare" that must be fulfilled in the next few years if we are to avoid the unmanageable security implications of climate change and manage the unavoidable ones.

Beyond 2018: A Responsibility to Prepare

The "Responsibility to Prepare" framework debuted on the global stage at a meeting of the UN Security Council (UNSC) in December of 2017 (Werrell, 2017). It calls on national governments, as well as regional and international security institutions, to adopt and implement policies for managing the unavoidable security risks wrought by a changing climate, while aiming to avoid the unmanageable ones. This responsibility includes, as its primary goal, "the climate-proofing of security institutions at all levels of governance – local, national, regional and international -in order to increase the capacity of states to absorb and reduce climatic stresses." Given a growing international appreciation of the connection between climate change and other drivers of instability, concerns about an unprecedented rate of change in these intersecting areas (climate change, population growth, technological risks, etc.) as well as significantly enhanced capabilities for anticipating how climatic changes will affect this complex political environment, this framework is uniquely suited for the current moment. The roadmap for this climate-proofing of international security institutions at all levels includes six core principles for nations, and regional and international security institutions (Werrell et al., 2017).

Routinizing: Climate change is not adequately addressed in the routine activities of governance organizations responsible for security. Routinizing attention to climate change in security institutions could range from providing

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decision-makers regular intelligence briefings to consistently holding dialogues and forums on the subject. At the UNSC, for example, a commitment to regular Arria Formula dialogues on climate change, more consistent measures for information flow and monitoring of critical climate and security hotspots (such as Resolution 2349 (2017) on the Lake Chad Basin) (UNSC, 2017) and more robust statements and resolutions that build on past actions on climate and security from 2007-2017 (The Center for Climate and Security, 2017), would help ensure that the issue is resilient to changing political winds and always on the UNSC radar.

Institutionalization: How climate change impacts security is not deeply understood within and across governments. The issue requires institutional centers to conduct climate security analysis and inform decision-makers. At the international security level, for example, establishing semi-independent “Climate Security Crisis Watch Centers” staffed by expert analysts watching for climate and security hotspots, and issuing regular recommendations to the UNSC could ensure that the intergovernmental security community is more prepared for both slow- and quick-onset climatic changes affecting security. These Climate Security Crisis Watch Centers could also be replicated at the regional level, within institutions such as NATO and the African Union, and at the national level.

Elevation: In some cases, warnings related to climate security risks are delivered to governments by analysts, but not at a high enough level. This is often based on these risks not being prioritized within a government or intergovernmental institution, or the issue not being presented in a fashion that appropriately contextualizes the risks as they pertain to other geostrategic priorities. In this context, elevating such issues within governing bodies is critical for ensuring preparedness. Within the UN, for example, establishing a senior Climate Change and Security position, reporting directly to the UN Secretary General, and regularly communicating with the UNSC would go a long way toward ensuring that these issues are heard at the highest levels.

Integration: In order to ensure that climate and security issues are not treated as a special-interest concern, security institutions should integrate climate change trends into their analyses of other critical security priorities. This is the “just add climate” approach, justified by the nature of the threat and the simple fact that changes in the climate, acting as a threat multiplier, will affect the entire geostrategic landscape. Practically, this could involve embedding climate and security analysts across issue siloes within governments and intergovernmental institutions, or creating interagency structures to facilitate such integration.

Rapid response: Though the approaches above are designed to facilitate preventive solutions, there will undoubtedly be future cases of climate-exacerbated risks that demand immediate attention from the security community. Developing scaled warning systems that identify long-, medium- and short-term risks, and those that include clear “triggers” for emergency action on climate and security, would help ensure that foreseeable events are acted upon with commensurate levels of urgency.

Contingencies for unintended consequences: Despite best efforts, unintended consequences of solutions to these risks may arise. Governments should seek to identify these potentialities and develop contingencies for addressing them. For example, emissions reductions commitments could increase incentives for the development of nuclear power in regions of the world with limited regulatory infrastructure, which could, in turn, increase nuclear proliferation risks. These are foreseeable possibilities that security institutions can identify and prepare for sooner rather than later. Facilitating cross-sectoral and interagency coordination to hedge against these unintended consequences would be a good start.

While implementing these principles will not be easy, as existing institutions can be sticky, this is not a Herculean task. The recipe is oftentimes quite simple: just add climate. Assess what the priorities of a given security institution are, assess how climate change will affect those priorities, and then adjust those institutions accordingly.

Conclusion

In the thirty years following the fall of the Berlin Wall, and the subsequent collapse of the Soviet Union, a geopolitical landscape that had been frozen in a Cold War for four decades thawed. That thawing led to a series of highly unpredictable social, political, and economic changes that we are still grappling with today. That same thirty years

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has also presented human civilization with the thawing of our understanding of climate change and its coincidental security risks. Both thaws have been understandably difficult for the international community to grapple with. However, in the case of a changing climate, our ability to foresee risk has improved significantly. For at least thirty years, world leaders have known that these changes were coming, that they may have significant or even catastrophic security implications, and that we have the capacity to both halt those avoidable risks and to adapt to those unavoidable risks. Given this knowledge, and the considerable security implications of not acting, a “Responsibility to Prepare” is simply common sense. This means avoiding emissions trajectories that result in unmanageable security consequences and climate-proofing our security institutions at national, regional, and international levels for those changes that are likely to occur.

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