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The Meltdown of the Global Order

Rising sea levels. Bigger storms. Withering crops. How climate change is transforming the ground rules of power politics.

By Keith Johnson

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Just over a century ago, in a lecture to the Royal Geographical Society, British geographer Halford Mackinder laid out the fundamental tenets of a new discipline that came to be known as "geopolitics." Simply put, he said, international relations boiled down to the intersection of

unchanging physical geography with the vagaries of human politics. Only one constant was ever in that equation: "The social movements of all times," he said, "have played around essentially the same physical features."

But here's the thing: Today the "geo" in "geopolitics" is actually changing, chiseling away at one of the core principles that has guided foreign policy in the United States, Europe, and Asia for the past 100 years. Oceans and islands are appearing where they weren't before, once-constant coastlines face a salty dissolution, and formerly fertile breadbaskets are doomed to be barren. So what do we do when both parts of Mackinder's equation are in flux?

Sure, nations and empires have disappeared from history plenty of times. And, of course, wrenching natural transformations have happened before (12,000 years ago, the Younger Dryas cooling snuffed out the first shoots of global civilization, for instance). Humans themselves have intentionally been dramatically reshaping the natural geography of the world for centuries (just see the massive canals that tore continents asunder). But watching entire countries become submerged beneath the waves will be a novel experience.

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Today's changes, which will become only more apparent in the decades to come, are both man-made and unintentional. They've created a shifting Earthscape that promises an uncertain revolution, affecting the way states relate to each other and to the world around them. This, in turn, has the power to reshape everything from international law to the makeup of the world's militaries.

The geopolitical upheaval is most evident in the South China Sea, long a flash point where an ascendant China is now meeting nervous neighbors and a wary American hegemon. The region is nearly alone in seeing a collision of unintentional climate-related changes with drastic man-made geographical alterations. Here, sea levels are rising almost a centimeter a year, nearly three times the global average, and the Pacific trade winds that for centuries dictated the course of empires are showing unprecedented strength. Waves and water driven westward now threaten to erase tiny nations like Tuvalu and the Marshall Islands, which rise just a body's height above the sea. And increased moisture in the air over the Western Pacific, many scientists believe, is intensifying tropical storms, like the ones that keep battering the Philippines.

Coming on top of these unnatural changes are frenetic, artificial geographical transformations. Over the past year, China (as well as, to a lesser extent, Vietnam) has embarked on an unprecedented campaign to create islands out of reefs, dredging up and piling on millions of tons of sand and spending billions of dollars to physically stake its claim to what until recently was just watery blue. Thanks to this reclamation effort, China has essentially, if not legally, expanded land in the Spratly and Paracel island groups and has effectively pushed out the Middle Kingdom's borders—and its military—hundreds of miles from its coast. (Vietnam, on a much smaller scale, has also built up reefs into possible military waypoints.)

This dredger-fueled muscle-flexing has already spurred alarm in Southeast Asian capitals and in the U.S. Defense Department. Within its broader rebalance to Asia, the United States is trying to

pivot more specifically toward the South China Sea—an effort that includes more-robust military alliances with Australia, the Philippines, and Japan, in addition to much closer ties to Vietnam. Meanwhile, China's actions potentially have huge implications for international law: Reefs, rocks, and islands each confer vastly different benefits on their owners, with issues of sovereignty and the title to billions of barrels of oil yet to be decided. Were China's outposts legally deemed islands, Beijing could take hundreds of square miles of energy-rich waters currently claimed by other countries.

The developments here and elsewhere are also pushing militaries everywhere to reinvent themselves. In fact, China's official justification for building 10,000-foot airstrips in the middle of one of the world's busiest trade routes was its need to better respond to stronger typhoons and other climate-related disasters. Just the specter of climate upheaval in the Western Pacific, in other words, gives land-grabbing Chinese leaders an excuse to create their own geographical realities and burnish their own geopolitical fortunes. More broadly, humanitarian assistance and disaster response have become increasingly important missions for militaries around the world, including those of the United States, the United Kingdom, and Australia. Preparing to respond to widespread devastation is shaping decisions about what platforms to build (more hospital ships or multimission coastal vessels), where to deploy them, and even what kinds of troops best fit into expeditionary forces in disaster-prone areas, though new missions tend to strain already overburdened forces. Australia's navy, for instance, is building its biggest vessels ever—amphibious assault ships—with just such humanitarian missions in mind. As China learned to its chagrin a decade ago after the Indian Ocean tsunami, countries like the United States that have the tools and the reach to rapidly respond to disasters can reap geopolitical dividends for years.

On the other side of the globe, climate change is already tearing open the Arctic, raising the curtain on a new stage of potential conflict among Russia, the United States, and even would-be Arctic nations that have no business there in the first place, such as China. Now that massive and formerly inaccessible oil and natural gas reserves are thawing out, countries everywhere are scrambling to resolve long-dormant border disputes and establish a new framework for international coexistence in a place where it simply never mattered before.

The mutating landscape isn't only about a scramble for resources, but is sometimes also about a race for survival. The Ganges and Nile river deltas, long two of the Earth's most fertile regions, are threatened by the double whammy of rising sea levels and rising salinity. That could put millions of people at risk of not just losing their homes, but their daily bread. Up to 20 million Bangladeshis could be displaced by the middle of the century. Dealing with hordes of refugees was hard enough in times past—just ask Indians about the impact of Bangladeshi refugees during the 1971 liberation war. But this wave will likely accelerate a fundamental rethinking of how to integrate new climate norms—or lack thereof—into the canons of international refugee law.

As the very game board of international affairs is redrawn, it's inevitable that politicians and policymakers will have to jettison some old certainties in order to survive in a world that's busy remaking itself—and is being remade. "[W]e should expect to find our formula apply equally to past history and to present politics," Mackinder concluded in 1904, long before the maps he so confidently pointed to began to morph. Past history, perhaps; present politics, not even. To the future world, little doubt remains.