

A New Geopolitics for the Anthropocene

Simon Dalby

The Anthropocene requires a fundamental rethink of humanity's place in the Earth system. In the process, the traditional assumptions of geopolitics, with their premises of separate spaces and peoples in rivalry over scarce land, are superseded by a focus on producing flourishing ecologies as new peaceful habitats for humanity.

Geopolitics is a term with troubling historical connotations. Some of the most pernicious thinking of "classical geopolitics" suggested that environmental circumstances determine the character and conduct of states and their inhabitants, a series of arguments that were often used to justify European imperialism. A particularly dangerous strand of this thinking was the concept of "*Lebensraum*", which strongly influenced Hitler's policies after he attained power in 1933. According to this theory, the need for food production and access to other resources required states (*Völker*) to expand. If states fail to grow, they must inevitably be taken over by other more powerful ones. The racist and implicitly violent militaristic assumptions of this Geopolitik were rightly condemned after the collapse of the Third Reich.



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In the years since the Second World War, the number of states has increased greatly, mostly as a result of decolonisation and national independence movements dismantling European empires. This runs contrary to the idea that states have to grow or die. Likewise, the assumption that more territory is essential for success has been proven wrong by the economic and political successes of various small countries, not least the European state of Luxembourg. Rapidly expanding trade, technical innovation, and, in particular, the expansion of industrial farming techniques have belied the assumption that more food production requires more land.

Much of the [success of the European Union](#) can be seen as a direct repudiation of the premises of Geopolitik. However, partly as a result of the climate difficulties caused by this fossil-fuel-powered progress, we are now living in an increasingly disrupted world in which the term “geopolitics” is once again being used to refer to the rivalry of great powers. While some of this usage is related to xenophobic nationalism and suggestions of separate homelands for national populations, the geography in all this is also cut across by economic trade relationships and military alliances. This complicates the picture. For we are now being forced to address some of the old questions about resources, environment, and conflict, but in a very different way from the classical geopolitical mode of thinking.

In the Anthropocene

Today, it is the very success of the fossil-fuelled growth model that the Western world has followed since the Second World War that is at the heart of the difficulties that now need to be faced. The changes that this mode of economy have brought about are so immense that its increasingly recognised that we are living in a new period of earth history, the Anthropocene.

Where classical geopolitics speculated about how climates and environments shaped societies, culture, and hence

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politics, precisely the opposite processes are the key to the future in the Anthropocene. Human activities and the decisions currently being taken, mostly by the rich and powerful members of our species, will have profound consequences for the future climate of the planet. Climate is not determining the fate of particular peoples in specific places; instead, it is the

rich and powerful among humanity who, by what they decide to invest in, build, and produce, will shape the future climate conditions for us all. This is the new reality of the Anthropocene: industrial activities are now a major force shaping the future of the planet.

Regardless of the trajectory humanity takes in the coming decades, these activities will have very uneven consequences across the globe. Some societies will have an easier time of it than others, but it is clear that the future will be easier for most societies with a slower rate of climate change. Adapting to more extreme weather and less predictable conditions will be essential, but the more quickly the climate changes, the harder this will be. A rapid move away from fossil-fuel-based economic activity is imperative to slow climate change. But this will be especially difficult for states that are dependent on fossil fuel production for economic activity and state revenue. Petroleum producer states such as Saudi Arabia, for example, have been opposed to drastic action to deal with climate change.

A source of conflict?

A look to the future raises the question of whether climate disruption will cause conflict and whether this will feed into geopolitical rivalries. But a sole focus on this aspect of the discussion fails to grapple with the larger picture about what is causing climate change in the first place: the fossil-fuelled model of economic growth, the huge quantities of carbon that we are burning. This needs to remain our focus, not simply the possible symptoms of climate change, be it the extreme weather, tragedies such as the drought in Madagascar in 2021, or the political disruptions caused by numerous other natural disasters. If one concentrates on the cause of climate change within the fossil-fuelled global economy, then a second question arises: could attempts to deal with climate change also cause rapid economic change and induce conflict, and if so, where is this most likely to happen?

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Much of the recent discussion around climate and conflict has looked at the first of these questions: whether climate disruption will cause insurrections, civil wars, violence, and other forms of insecurity that may be linked in some way to great power rivalries. In U.S. thinking, it is widely believed that climate change will be disruptive and may in some cases trigger or at least exacerbate existing conflicts. There is an extended policy debate on “climate security” and the danger of climate as a “threat multiplier” in fragile states and regions vulnerable to political disruption.[1] While the social science research on this question is decidedly mixed, the case of Syria has been frequently cited as an example of what the future may hold. This argument suggests that drought in eastern Syria in the years prior to the civil war caused agriculture to fail, leading to the displacement of numerous unemployed farm workers. Many of these people, so the argument goes, migrated to Syria’s cities, triggering social stress and protests, which in turn led to violent repression by the regime. The resulting resistance spiralled into civil war. Detailed research into the origins of the conflict suggests that the drought was at best a minor factor, and that politics and failed development strategies in eastern Syria better explain what resulted.

Especially worrying is when the link between climate change and large-scale migration is made by xenophobic politicians. Images of refugees walking across eastern Europe in 2015, and of the bodies of children who drowned while trying to make the journey across the Mediterranean, highlighted these perceived dangers. If people, when forced to move, are treated as threats rather than as human beings in need of assistance, then strategies of force, violence, and containment attract political attention. This framing is likely to make things worse rather than better, both for people and for the environments in which they live. As climate change accelerates, ecosystems as well as people will be on the move. Intelligent policies will recognise these new circumstances and act accordingly. Efforts to slow climate change are key to making this new situation easier to cope with, but there’s no doubt that change is upon us. Welcome to the Anthropocene.

To return to our second question: are attempts to deal with climate change likely to generate conflict? Much of the debate on this issue is speculative, as attempts to deal with climate change have not yet begun to seriously reduce the global production and use of fossil fuels.

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Volatile commodity prices, of petroleum in particular, suggest that the repercussions of an overall rapid reduction in the use of fossil fuels might be severe. The dispute between Russia and Saudi Arabia over oil prices in mid-2020, amid

economic disruptions caused by the Covid-19 pandemic, reinforce the point that petroleum is a central, but very contentious, aspect of international politics.

The energy transition must take place over the next decade if the rate of climate change is to be slowed sufficiently to make adaptation feasible. States that depend on fossil fuel revenues clearly need transition strategies to build new economies. Failure to cooperate internationally to facilitate these pathways may lead to state collapse, or conflict. The sad case of Venezuela in recent years may be a harbinger of the consequences of relying on petroleum revenues in rapidly changing times. Collapsing states and migration away from political disasters may trigger violence, and in the worst-case scenario, political elites may resort to military action in an attempt to stay in power. On the other hand, states that move rapidly to invest in new energy economies and spin-off industries may do well out of the transition.

The legacy of eco-violence

A look at the issues of energy, transition, and geography at the largest scale of global transformation suggests that the

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relationships between place, environment, and conflict – the principal themes of geopolitics – now need to be understood very differently.

Much of the focus on security thinking is on the disruptions that climate change and climate policy may bring to the existing geopolitical order. However, it is important to circle back to emphasise the key point: it is this existing order that is the threat to long-term environmental security. Change is essential for future security. We must be able to adapt to unavoidable climate change while ensuring that societies can transition away from fossil fuels quickly and without the risk of social collapse and violence. In addition to endangering immediate human security, this would also very likely disrupt attempts to deal with climate change.

Much of the history of the expansion of European and subsequently American power over the last 500 years has been

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violent. The conquest of the Americas involved massive loss of Indigenous life. The wealth brought to Europe – whether from the mines of Latin America or plantation agriculture producing tobacco, sugar cane, and most obviously cotton worked by slaves – involved both environmental devastation and the destruction of human life on an immense scale. These practices of extractivism continue at

the colonial frontier of the contemporary global economy, as the deaths of environmentalists and Indigenous people who stand in the way of “development” sadly emphasise. The conversion of forests and rural areas into production units for the global economy is often a brutal business, and conventional conservation is frequently inadequate for both peoples and their places.

In the same way, the expansion of the global fossil-fuelled economy involves many violent processes, and most of those who suffer directly are distant from where its products are consumed. Now climate disasters are bringing this destruction home, as it were, to the cities of the Global North. Environmental insecurity is no longer a matter of disasters in distant places and political disruptions in the former colonies. The floods in Germany and Belgium in the summer of 2021, as well as the damage to eastern American cities from hurricanes and to large parts of California from fire and drought simultaneously, make this point clear.

Towards ecological security

While traditional notions of environmental protection remain valuable, we need to think much more explicitly about

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industrial activity and the economic forms that promote it, rather than simply protecting environments from the worst disruptions caused by changes in land use, wildlife habitat destruction, and pollution. Thinking of industrial humanity as a geological-scale change agent, which is what

we have effectively become, requires a focus on what the rich and powerful parts of humanity produce. In the long run, Earth will work differently if we manufacture electric bicycles and solar panels rather than internal-combustion-powered

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private automobiles. If vast quantities of carbon dioxide continue to be generated, the future seems likely to be much more violent. Instead of concentrating on the short-term disruptions caused by disasters and the political disruptions that frequently go with them, we should adopt a long-term focus. This is key to thinking intelligently about ecological

security.

A focus on ecological security – creating flourishing habitats, with permacultures, agroecology, and diverse landscapes as key goals of production – rather than engineering ever-larger concrete and asphalt structures or building fences to make migration even more difficult, promises a saner and more sustainable planetary future. Thinking of and planning in ecology as part of the human project in which we all live, rather than focusing on distant environments that are protected only insofar as they provide resources for consumption, is a very different formulation of what needs to be secured. The Anthropocene, which makes clear that old notions of humanity separate from an external environment are dangerously wrong, requires just these kinds of new thinking.

The key question is how investments in this ecological future are to be secured. Many fossil fuel divestment movements have started down this path, insisting that funds need to be put to productive rather than destructive uses and shape the future of the Earth system in ways that do not involve the burning of fossil fuels. The development banks that are finally phasing out investments in fossil infrastructure and coal-powered electricity generation also point the way. This investment push is much bigger than the still largely underdelivered green development funds that will supposedly be provided to states especially vulnerable to the impacts of climate change under the Paris Agreement.

Beyond that is the even bigger question of how central banks view their responsibility to initiate much greater transformations within finance. Kim Stanley Robinson's recent novel *The Ministry for the Future* is fascinating here [\[read more in this interview\]](#) for its suggestion that "carbon quantitative easing" might be a new policy tool linking money supply to the reduction of carbon fuel use. If central bankers were able to understand the new conditions of the Anthropocene and act to ensure their states' survival, regardless of the agendas of populist politicians, then financial policy could be dramatically different. The Ministry for the Future underlines the important role to be played by Europe in making such key changes.

Making a policy priority of regenerating ecological systems and transforming industrial activity in ways that transcend the nationalist chauvinisms, competitive political rivalries, and xenophobia that haunted earlier understandings of the relationships between peoples, places, and their ecologies is urgently needed.

Given the history of violence and disruption at the heart of old-fashioned European Geopolitik in the 20th century, it would indeed be fitting if Europe were to generate the new ecological thinking and the policies needed for a peaceful geopolitics in the 21st century.

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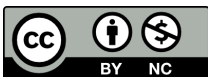


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