Mother Nature as a Geopolitical Force

By Alex Berezow, PhD — June 4, 2020

We tend to overlook how natural disasters like the coronavirus pandemic shape human behavior. Maybe that should change.

History is biased, and not just because the victors tend to write it. The study of history is largely the study of humankind – specifically, the geopolitical events that have shaped human actions (and vice versa) over millennia. It’s true that to learn from the past, we must study ourselves. But what if we’re missing a large part of the story? What if Mother Nature plays just as large a role in shaping the course of human events as mankind? After all, any force that compels specific actions by nation-states is necessarily geopolitical.

It has long been understood that geography imposes substantial imperatives and constraints on nations. Russia, for example, will always be obsessed with securing warm water ports and access to the Mediterranean via the Black Sea because accidents of geography placed the country adjacent to potential adversaries on one side and the Arctic Ocean on another, making it essentially landlocked.

But geography is just one piece of the puzzle, one that fails to account for the vagaries of natural disaster. To understand just how potent a force Mother Nature can be in geopolitics, we must expand our understanding beyond basic geography to include transitory disasters. But this raises questions that are difficult to answer. How can a geopolitical model such as ours, designed to forecast the predictable behavior of nation-states, incorporate unpredictable forces? Is there some
threshold that a natural event must cross in order to be considered geopolitically relevant? Is there a way to determine if a natural event plays a determinative role in shaping events or simply accelerates a preexisting trend? Are certain nation-states, cities or societies particularly vulnerable to natural disaster?

Throughout history, Mother Nature has radically altered the course of events, far beyond simply causing structural and economic damage and personal hardship. Indeed, natural forces have helped topple governments and destroy empires. For example, in 1755, Lisbon was slammed by an enormous earthquake and tsunami and then engulfed in an ensuing fire. According to science writer Robin Andrews, the country immediately lost roughly one-third to one-half of its gross domestic product, and the European balance of power shifted decisively away from Portugal to Britain and France. But was this event truly determinative? Perhaps not. Britain and France were already powerful, and Portugal’s empire was sunsetting.

Adding a layer of complexity, Mother Nature doesn’t always have to act locally to change geopolitics. Rather, its impact can have effects on locations far from the natural event’s origin. In 1815, Mount Tambora in Indonesia erupted, spewing so much ash into the atmosphere that it has been blamed for the bizarre climate of 1816, which became known as “the year without a summer.” Crops failed all across the Northern Hemisphere, and famine and disease were rampant. It is widely believed that the unusually gloomy year helped inspire, at least in part, the invention of the bicycle and Mary Shelley’s novel “Frankenstein,” the former being a new form of transportation and the latter leaving a lasting imprint on our culture. Once again, Mother Nature’s impact is evident but not fully clear. Surely, somebody somewhere would have invented a bicycle at some point. And “Frankenstein” was a story about the immoral and irresponsible use of technology, a story that could just as easily be written today.

Fast forward nearly 200 years, and another cataclysmic event in the Asian Pacific served as a catalyst for major geopolitical events. In 2011, an underwater earthquake triggered a massive tsunami, inundating Japan and causing a meltdown of the Fukushima Daiichi nuclear power facility. On the other side of the planet, Germany responded by phasing out its nuclear power plants, which in turn increased that nation’s reliance on Russian natural gas. About 22 percent of Germany’s energy needs are met by natural gas, and about 50 to 75 percent of it comes from Russia. This, in turn, has deepened divisions within the European Union, particularly angering some members of the Central and Eastern bloc that believe reliance on Russian natural gas poses a national security threat. But to what extent can we really blame Mother Nature for the EU’s problems? Europeans are quite capable of creating controversy all by themselves.

Geological catastrophes aren’t the only trick Mother Nature can use to influence geopolitics. Biology provides fertile ground for meddling in international affairs. In his book “Twelve Diseases That Changed Our World,” professor Irwin Sherman explains how genetic and infectious diseases radically altered the course of history. Consider Queen Victoria, a carrier of hemophilia, a disease that causes uncontrollable bleeding due to inadequate clotting. The disease can be so severe that a tiny cut or bruise becomes a life-threatening wound. While she did not suffer from the disease herself, she passed on a bad gene to her children and grandchildren. Victoria’s granddaughter, Alexandra, married into the Romanovs, becoming the wife of Czar Nicholas II and the empress of
Russia. Her son, Alexis, suffered from hemophilia. Sherman argues that, after Nicholas II was forced to abdicate, Alexis’ illness prevented him from becoming a constitutional monarch. The resulting chaos opened the door to the Bolshevik Revolution. Obviously, Queen Victoria’s genetics didn’t cause Bolshevism, but perhaps they provided the opportunity for the Bolsheviks to seize power.

The diseases that have had the greatest impact on history, of course, were infectious rather than genetic. Sherman goes on to describe how potato blight, cholera, smallpox and myriad other diseases triggered chains of events whose consequences are still apparent today. For example, the fungal pathogen that destroyed potatoes and caused starvation in Ireland drove a massive immigration of Irishmen to America, forever changing its political landscape. The devastation of Native Americans by smallpox and other diseases facilitated the exploits of the Spanish conquistadors and aided colonization by the British. Some infectious diseases came with a silver lining. Though it is responsible for the deaths of untold millions of people, the death wrought by cholera helped inspire the establishment of global public health institutions, which have played a leading role in preventing or even eradicating infectious disease. Here, Mother Nature arguably has played a much larger determinative role.

What can we learn by applying this new way of thinking to the current coronavirus pandemic? Like a lightning bolt, Mother Nature is powerful and unpredictable. Yes, we know lightning occurs during storms, but we can’t predict when and where it will strike. Likewise, microbiologists and epidemiologists have long worried about an infectious disease pandemic, but few if any thought it would be a coronavirus in the year 2020. A report from the University of Minnesota’s Center for Infectious Disease Research and Policy makes that clear:

“When severe acute respiratory syndrome coronavirus-2 (SARS-CoV-2) – the virus that causes COVID-19 – first emerged in Wuhan, China, in December 2019, even the most experienced international public health experts did not anticipate that it would rapidly spread to create the worst global public health crisis in over 100 years. By January 2020, a few public health officials began sounding the alarm, but it wasn’t until March 11, 2020, that the World Health Organization declared a global pandemic.”

By then, we now know, it was too late. The virus was everywhere. In the flash of an eye, Mother Nature commandeered the global agenda, ruthlessly and inconsiderately upsetting the lives of billions, indiscriminately wrecking democracies and dictatorships alike. She reminded us that she is still active and even mercurial in geopolitics. Our airplanes have conquered the skies, but Iceland’s volcanoes can keep them on the ground. Our doctors can save lives, but a new virus can end them. In retrospect, it is often clear to discern a chain of causal events linking nature to major geopolitical events – such as an undersea earthquake leading to friction in the EU. But such revelations only occur in hindsight. That’s why forecasting Mother Nature has been left to soothsayers and the local weathermen. Perhaps it’s time for geopolitical analysts to give it a try.

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