Natural Disasters and the Future of Foreign Policy in East Asia

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To make sense of the world, we study the past and develop theories. These theories serve as intellectual frameworks that not only help us make sense of historical events but also guide us in interpreting the present and forecasting the future. In a world characterized by increasing complexity, such frameworks are essential for navigating uncertainty. By examining patterns from past events and analyzing social, political, and economic dynamics, theoretical frameworks can provide a structure to anticipate possible future outcomes. The social sciences, in particular, make use of predictive theories as analytical tools to understand how states interact, how societies function,

and how they respond to global challenges. In this way, a good theory may act as a lens that not only helps us to interpret the past but also to construct plausible scenarios for the future. By creating a structured perspective from which we can examine events, theories enable scholars and policymakers to make informed decisions and predictions about future trends and events. Making decisions based on solid theoretical foundations allows them to pursue more informed and calculated actions. Since social behavior is more complex than simple cause-and-effect patterns, theories help simplify this complexity by emphasizing the relationships and variables that are most critical to understanding the situation at hand.

In areas such as national security and foreign policy, theories play an even more central role. These fields are inherently concerned with managing uncertainty, as threats to security often arise unpredictably and evolve in ways that are difficult to anticipate. Strategic studies, which focus on how states manage security threats, draw heavily on theoretical models to understand how different actors might behave in the face of conflict or instability. The analytical frameworks of realism, liberalism, and constructivism provide reliable ways to explain and predict state behavior in response to these kinds of security challenges. However, when it comes to the unprecedented and escalating threat of climate disasters, can traditional theories still be relevant? Many of them were developed in contexts where security threats primarily involved direct enemies and military action. Climate change, however, is a much more interconnected phenomenon, impacting not only ecosystems but also economic stability, population movements, and political cohesion. All of which have far-reaching security implications. This is particularly relevant when examining the security and foreign policy implications of climate change in East Asia, a region highly vulnerable to climate-related disasters such as typhoons, rising sea levels, and extreme weather patterns.

First, we will examine the region's current geopolitical position, which is crucial for understanding the stakes when facing climate threats. We will then look into what liberalism, through the lens of Ricardo's theory of comparative advantage, can predict, followed by realism with Wallerstein's dependency theory. Lastly, we will consider insights from constructivism and behavioral economics. Each of these theories offers a distinct perspective on how climate disasters may shape East Asia's international relations and security strategies.

South East Asia is a diverse region. Composed of an exceptional cultural and linguistic diversity, with about 2'300 languages spoken, the region varies in terms of political approaches and economic variations. The GDP per capita of Singapore is 60 times that of one of Nepal's. Despite these differences, the region constitutes a complementary and interlinked system where they share mutual trade interests. This allowed the region to develop a significant role in the global economy. As the world's trade epicenter, East

Asia occupies a unique global position, yet it is increasingly susceptible to face climate-related challenges (McKinsey & Company, 2023).

Economically, East Asia has grown spectacularly over the past decades. Since 1960, Asia, the largest and most populous of the continents, has become richer faster than any other region of the world. East Asia and the Pacific have emerged as a model of economic development, standing out as a region of remarkable progress within the global economy. This rapid expansion is not just limited to a few nations, the benefits of growth have been broadly distributed across the region. China's growth, for example, is estimated to have boosted developing countries' growth by around 1 percentage point annually during the 1995-2019 period, and by 0.67 percentage points annually during the period 2020-2023 (World Bank, 2024).

East Asia's economic strength, concentration of knowledge, and demographic power not only enable it to shape global politics but also have profound implications for security and foreign policy. (McKinsey & Company, 2023).

First, East Asia's large economy and central role in global trade and supply chains gives the area significant leverage in foreign policy. Economic power allows them to project influence through strategic investments, trade agreements, and economic partnerships. This economic advantage can be used as a tool for diplomacy, enabling these nations to foster closer ties with allies, negotiate trade terms, or, in some cases, apply economic pressure on rivals. China's Belt and Road Initiative, for instance, is a perfect example of economic outreach coupled with foreign policy goals, reshaping relationships and infrastructure networks across the world.

Second, the region's concentration of knowledge and technological innovation plays a growing role in shaping security policies. East Asia is at the heart of advancements in cyber technology, artificial intelligence and military modernization, all of which are critical for national defense and strategic positioning. The development of cutting-edge technologies not only enhances the military capabilities of countries in the region but also brings competition over control of sensitive technological advancements, cybersecurity concerns, and technological dominance.

Demographic forces further influence East Asia's security and foreign policy. The region's large populations, particularly in China, contribute to growing military capacities as nations seek to secure their borders and project influence abroad. At the same time, demographic challenges such as aging populations and shrinking workforces in some nations, impact national security, requiring adjustments in defense strategies, social policies, and diplomatic relations to maintain stability and economic growth. Countries may increasingly look for alliances to secure resources, labor, and economic opportunities, shaping their foreign policy agendas.

Climate change will fundamentally change the dynamics of the global economy, security, and foreign policy. As climate-related disruptions intensify, they will challenge economies, resources, and reshape international

relations, especially for regions like East Asia. The region faces significant challenges, including external economic headwinds, rising levels of private debt, and the growing impact of extreme weather events. East Asia is one of the most disaster-prone regions in the world, and these climate-driven disasters not only cause immediate devastation but also undermine long-term sustainable development, weakening infrastructure, disrupting supply chains, and slowing economic progress. However, according to the OECD, East Asia's economic growth is projected to remain robust, driven by strong domestic and regional demand, as well as the ongoing recovery of sectors like tourism and services (OECD, May 2024). Climate change will severely impact the region's energy and food supplies, triggering disruptions extending far beyond national borders. These disruptions are likely to displace populations and intensify competition for essential resources like water, arable land, and energy, creating new security threats. This shifting dynamic will require governments to anticipate and incorporate climate risks into their foreign and security policies.

In order to anticipate the effect of such turns of events, theories provide a framework of analysis. The first theory is Liberalism. It emphasizes the importance of cooperation, institutions, and the role of individuals and non-state actors in global politics. Rooted in the ideas of human rights, democracy, free markets, and international law, Liberalism proposes that states are not the only relevant actors in international affairs and that war is not inevitable. David Ricardo's theory of comparative advantage explains that countries should specialize in producing goods for which they have a lower opportunity cost relative to other countries, even if they are less efficient overall. By doing so and trading, all countries can benefit by obtaining goods more cheaply than if they tried to produce everything themselves. Liberalism has been especially successful in the past decades (The economist, January 2018) in economics through trade and international supply chains. The amount of Foreign Direct Investment in 2024 totaled $1.3 trillion. Politically, liberalism remains highly influential, with most countries being members of multilateral institutions such as the United Nations and the World Trade organisation (UNCTAD, June 2024). Therefore, liberalism could serve as a valuable framework for analyzing foreign policy in response to climate disasters. How might liberalism anticipate foreign policy consequences of climate disasters?

Liberalism highlights how economic interdependence between countries makes cooperation more likely and beneficial. In East Asia, where countries like China, Japan, and South Korea have deep economic ties, climate disasters can disrupt trade, supply chains, and regional economies. This interconnectedness incentivizes countries to work together to ensure that climate disruptions are well-managed. Liberalism argues that by helping other countries recover, economically interdependent states protect their own economic interests and reinforce the stability of the regional trading system. However, as stated before, climate disasters threaten key

resources necessary to the autonomy of the country and its security. A country might rightly not want to delegate their production abroad to keep control of them. According to liberalism, this could be fatal. Indeed, even though resources like food and energy are crucial, it is still more efficient for countries to focus on producing goods they are best suited to produce. The international trade system allows countries to obtain essential resources more cost-effectively than producing everything locally. Additionally, while a climate disaster could disrupt a particular region's ability to produce certain (key) resources, Ricardo would highlight the importance of diversification of trade partners. A country can mitigate risk by diversifying resource suppliers, reducing dependence on a single source, and ensuring stability through trade from unaffected regions in case of a disaster (Starvins& Stowe, 2018). Rather than viewing dependency on international resources as a weakness, Ricardo would argue that mutual dependence through trade actually creates incentives for peace and cooperation. If countries rely on each other for essential goods like food and energy, they are less likely to engage in conflict, as doing so would jeopardize their own access to these critical resources.

In a liberalist framework, states acknowledge that they face shared vulnerabilities due to climate disasters. This awareness encourages countries to engage in cooperative efforts, such as joint disaster preparedness plans, early warning systems, and climate resilience projects. This approach recognizes that no state can effectively handle the long-term impacts of climate change alone. The establishment of the ASEAN Climate Resilience Network, supported by Japan and other East Asian partners, reflects liberalism's emphasis on cooperation. It aims to improve regional capacities for managing climate risks, fostering knowledge sharing and technological exchange in disaster risk reduction (ASEAN Climate resilience Network, 2021).

According to liberals, climate disaster response can be a tool of climate diplomacy and a foreign policy tool. Liberalism suggests that states engage in climate diplomacy as a way to build soft power and improve international relations. East Asian countries often use climate change-related initiatives and disaster relief efforts to enhance their diplomatic influence and foster better relations with their neighbors. By framing climate response as part of their foreign policy, countries demonstrate their commitment to global norms and multilateralism, which in turn can improve their position on the international stage. China's initiative: the Belt and Road International Green Development coalition of 115 countries is a collective effort to promote economic development and inter-regional connectivity focusing on sustainable infrastructures. China is investing heavily in renewable energy infrastructure in partner countries, enhancing its reputation as a supporter of sustainable development, and making China a leader in sustainable investments (UNEP, 2020).

Liberalism further emphasizes the importance of non-state actors, such as non-governmental organizations, the private sector and civil society, in addressing global challenges. In the context of climate disasters in East Asia, NGOs, humanitarian organizations, and environmental groups play a significant role in disaster relief, recovery, and advocacy for stronger climate action. After major climate disasters, international NGOs such as the Red Cross and Oxfam work alongside governments to provide aid. Liberalism argues that the involvement of these actors highlights the increasing interconnectedness of global governance and the importance of multi-level responses to crises.

On another hand, Realism anticipates climate disaster's response to foreign policy quite differently. Realism emphasizes the competitive and conflictual nature of international politics. It is rooted in the belief that states are the primary actors in the international system, and they act mainly out of self-interest, focusing on power and security. According to realists, the international system is anarchic, meaning that there is no overarching authority above states, and each state must rely on its own capabilities to ensure its survival.

Realism stresses competition over scarce resources. Climate disasters can exacerbate resource scarcity such as water, food, and energy supplies, which can lead to conflict between states. For example, if climate change affects resources both in its general effects and during disaster. Water usage of the Mekong river, passing through multiple East Asian countries clearly demonstrates climate change's disruptive effects (Mekong River Commission, 2024). Additionally, a country facing significant damage from climate disasters may be more vulnerable to both internal tensions and external threats. (OECD) The 2011 Tohoku earthquake is a perfect example of that. The 9.0 magnitude earthquake and tsunami that hit Japan had devastating consequences both humanitarian and concerning energy supply. Not only did it cause huge humanitarian consequences, but it also resulted in a nuclear disaster. Energy infrastructures were shut down due to the damages. From a realist perspective, this catastrophe significantly impacted Japan's ability to maintain stability. The country had to divert massive financial and human resources towards disaster relief and recovery efforts. This further weakened its military and economic capabilities, creating vulnerabilities in terms of both internal and external security (CSIS). Similarly, many key military and economic infrastructures in East Asia (ports, naval bases, and coastal cities) are vulnerable to climate change impacts like rising sea levels and extreme weather events. From a realist perspective, the potential damage to such critical infrastructure poses a serious security risk as it could weaken a state's defense capabilities. States may therefore prioritise the protection and fortification of these assets, diverting resources towards mitigating these risks.

Furthermore, realists would highlight the security implications of mass migration due to climate disasters. It could create instability at borders,

lead to refugee crises, and strain neighboring states' resources. States might view these population movements as security threats, which could lead to stricter border controls, increased military presence, or tensions with neighboring countries over how to manage these crises. Climate disasters can exacerbate pre-existing territorial disputes, such as those in the South China Sea, where resources are already a key point of contention. Rising sea levels or more intense typhoons may make access to these contested resources even more critical, driving countries to reinforce their territorial claims (Fleishman, 2022). From a realist perspective, this climate-induced resource shortage is a direct threat to the state's sovereignty and economic security, leading to greater militarization of disputed areas.

While realism tends to emphasize competition, states can also cooperate when it serves their national interests. In East Asia, countries may engage in regional cooperation on climate disaster preparedness and response not purely out of humanitarian concerns but to enhance their own security. For instance, China and Japan both participate in ASEAN-led disaster relief mechanisms, recognizing that regional stability is crucial for their own security.

Going further, and moving away from the core realist idea, natural disasters could be used by countries to perpetuate unequal economic relationships and form foreign policy goals towards that. Wallerstein explains how global economic structures often exploit poorer countries, reinforcing their dependence on wealthier states. As richer countries are dependent on the resources of poorer countries. They have an incentive for foreign aid, especially for disaster resilience projects. Foreign aid and disaster relief can either perpetuate or challenge these inequalities, as wealthier countries may use aid as a tool to maintain influence or ensure access to resources, while poorer countries might leverage aid to address immediate needs or invest in long-term development that could shift the power dynamics. Ultimately, the way in which aid is delivered and utilized plays a significant role in either reinforcing or transforming the existing economic structures.

The last theory that can help us make sense of these dynamics is Constructivism.

It focuses on the role of ideas, beliefs, identities, and norms in shaping state behavior and international politics (Amineh And Asl, 2015). Unlike Realism or Liberalism, Constructivism argues that international relations are socially constructed and the meanings and interpretations states assign to events (like climate disasters) are crucial in understanding how states respond.

In the context of East Asia, countries may interpret climate disasters differently based on their historical experiences, identities, and the norms they follow. Moreover, global norms surrounding climate change and environmental protection have evolved, affecting how states understand their responsibilities in addressing climate-related disasters. For example, Japan and South Korea have increasingly framed climate disasters as part of a

broader human security agenda, viewing them as existential threats not just to the state, but to people and societies (UNDP, 2023). Japan's 2011 earthquake and tsunami shaped a national discourse around vulnerability and the need for resilience and reinforced Japan's identity as a leader in disaster preparedness and response. The social understanding of climate disasters as both a national and global security threat influences Japan's foreign policy engagement with regional and global institutions (Rauhala, 2011).

Constructivism suggests that states can shape and reshape norms through their actions and interactions (International Journal of Advanced Multidisciplinary Research and Studies, 2023). As climate-related disasters become more frequent, countries in the region may come to view climate cooperation as an essential aspect of their foreign policy. After the 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami and other subsequent climate-related disasters, East Asian countries (particularly within ASEAN and with partners like Japan, South Korea, and China) have contributed to the development of a "disaster diplomacy" norm (Gong, 2021).

As in constructivism, Public Choice Theory shares the same idea of discourse as a tool: disaster relief can be seen as political capital. Governments may use disaster relief efforts to enhance their political standing, both domestically and internationally. Public Choice Theory suggests that politicians will allocate resources in a way that benefits their political survival, potentially prioritizing high-visibility projects or areas with strong electoral support, rather than focusing purely on the regions most in need. Foreign aid is also a tool for pursuing national interests and fostering diplomatic leverage (J. S. Shaw). For instance, after Typhoon Haiyan in the Philippines in 2013, the government's response faced criticism for uneven distribution of aid (The Guardian, 2015). Public Choice Theory would explain this by suggesting that politicians may have prioritized aid distribution to regions where they had more political supporters, rather than the areas hardest hit by the disaster. Framing of foreign aid, both as an altruistic gesture and a strategic tool, underlines the importance on how decision-making processes are influenced both as a strategy, but also involuntarily. Behavioral economics, particularly the work of Daniel Kahneman, highlights the role of cognitive biases on shaping these decisions. In the context of climate disasters, governments, and international actors may misjudge the scale of impacts or the effectiveness of policies due to psychological factors.

The first bias would be the availability bias. It refers to the tendency to overestimate the likelihood of events that you can more easily remember. After a climate disaster, governments and international actors may be influenced by the most recent or highly exposed disasters in the media. They might therefore overestimate the frequency of similar disasters, leading to an over-allocation of resources for earthquake preparedness while potentially underestimating other risks like floods or droughts.

A second bias would be risk and loss aversion. Indeed, leaders may opt for policies that appear to minimize short-term risk, even if these policies

are less effective in addressing long-term challenges as these tend to have lower upfront costs and face less political opposition.

Theoretical frameworks are indispensable tools for understanding the complexities of the past, present, and future. They provide scholars and policymakers with structured perspectives to navigate uncertainty, anticipate trends, and develop strategies to address emerging challenges. While traditional theories have proven effective in explaining and predicting state behavior in areas like national security and foreign policy, the unprecedented and multifaceted nature of climate change demands an evolution in our analytical approaches. Climate-related threats, call for the integration of new theoretical models that address interconnected social, economic, and ecological dynamics. By adapting and expanding these frameworks, we can better equip ourselves to confront the global challenges of the future and ensure more resilient and sustainable outcomes for both states and societies.

Liberalism was the first lens we analyzed the situation with. Its emphasis on economic interdependence, multilateral cooperation, and the role of institutions highlights the importance of collective action in managing shared vulnerabilities. Initiatives like the ASEAN Climate Resilience Network and international agreements such as the Paris Accord exemplify how cooperation can enhance regional resilience. Realism provided a second contrasting perspective, emphasizing competition, self-interest, and power dynamics. States prioritize their survival and sovereignty in the face of these challenges. Finally, Constructivism, focusing on the role of ideas, identities, and norms highlights that state responses are shaped by historical experiences and collective understandings. Public Choice Theory adds that domestic political incentives often shape disaster relief, with decisions driven by political survival rather than purely humanitarian concerns. Behavioral Economics, through concepts like availability bias and risk aversion, further explains how psychological factors influence decision-making, often prioritizing immediate or highly visible risks over long-term challenges. Together, these frameworks reveal the complexity behind state actions in response to climate disasters.

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