SUMMARY

CLIMATE OPPORTUNISM: GEOPOLITICAL AND SECURITY IMPLICATIONS

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The Defence and Climate Observatory, launched in December 2016, aims to study climate-related security and defence issues.

It is coordinated by IRIS as part of the contract carried out on behalf of the French Ministry of Armed Forces's Directorate General for International Relations and Strategy (DGRIS). The Observatory's multi-disciplinary team includes researchers specializing in international relations, security, defence, migration, energy, economics, climatology and health. It is directed by Mathilde Jourde and François Gemenne.

The Observatory has initiated numerous collaborations with European partners (Netherlands, Luxembourg) and international partners (Australia, United States, India), international NGOs and national and international public bodies. These initiatives have strengthened cooperation on climate issues and their security implications.

The Climate and Defence Observatory produces reports and notes, organises restricted seminars and conferences open to the public, and hosts the podcast "On the climate front".

www.defenseclimat.fr/en

The Ministry of Armed Forces regularly calls upon private research institutes for outsourced studies, using a geographical or sectoral approach to complement its external expertise. These contractual relationships are part of the development of the defence foresight approach, which, as emphasised in the latest White Paper on Defence and National Security, *"must be able to draw on independent, multidisciplinary and original strategic thinking, integrating university research as well as specialised institutes*".

Many of these studies are made public and available on the Ministry of Armed Forces website. In the case of a study published in part, the Directorate General for International Relations and Strategy may be contacted for further information.

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The consequences of climate change on inter-state relations are ambivalent: climate change can foster cooperation between states as well as rivalry between actors. As inter-state relations harden, climate change appears to be increasingly instrumentalised as a strategic lever. **States integrate climate issues in a variety of ways.** Some, such as **China**, use climate as an instrument of diplomatic influence or economic development. The **United States** has adopted contradictory positions, asserted climate leadership while maintained a carbon-intensive economic model. The **European Union** positions itself as a leading normative power, while the **Gulf monarchies** use climate change as a lever to diversify their economies.

Analyses of how states integrate climate issues tend to focus on these countries. By contrast, other states, such as Russia, remain comparatively understudied. Yet Russia stands out for an approach based on exploiting the opportunities created by climate change. This paper describes this approach as **"climate opportunism", to capture how Russia subordinate's climate policy to its objectives of domestic power and international standing.** The climate rhetoric and policies of the Russian government, and of President Vladimir Putin in particular, pursue three main ambitions: ensuring the longevity of his regime and of the elite that supports it; restoring Russia's power on the international stage; and weakening coalitions of states likely to obstruct these ambitions, first and foremost the Western powers. **Climate issues are harnessed to these ends, so their integration into public policy shifts with the objectives pursued and varies across periods and geographical levels.** This paper analyses how Russia incorporates climate change into a logic of "climate opportunism" in pursuit of its strategic objectives.

I. ENVIRONMENTAL CONSEQUENCES AND CASCADING EFFECTS OF CLIMATE CHANGE IN RUSSIA

A –The environmental consequences of climate change

Slow-onset effects of climate change in Russia: rising air and ocean temperatures

Climate change in Russia manifests itself through **slow-onset events. Rising air temperatures** are causing **permafrost,** which covers nearly 65% of Russia's territory, mainly in the north, to thaw, and soils to degrade. Seasonal thaw is increasing across Russia and has considerable environmental consequences, releasing greenhouse gases into the atmosphere and reducing snow cover. The country is also experiencing increasing soil drying and desertification. Meanwhile, **rising ocean temperatures** are contributing to **sea level rise**, resulting in more frequent and more intense flooding and in shoreline retreat along the Russian coast.

Sudden-onset effects of climate change: extreme weather and climate events

Climate change also manifests itself through **sudden-onset events,** with **extreme weather and climate events increasing in both frequency and intensity**. Russia is facing more frequent **heatwaves**, increased flooding linked to the melting of the cryosphere, and a rise in wildfires and peat fires. Finally,

polar cyclones, to which the northern coastal regions and the Barents, Kara, Laptev and Chukchi Seas are particularly exposed, **have also changed in intensity and duration over recent decades.**

B –Cascading effects: consequences of climate change

Agricultural consequences

In the short term, climate change will have mixed effects on Russian agriculture. Regions at middle or high latitudes could see their growing season extended by 5 to 10 days. Climate change could also make new land suitable for cultivation, notably along the border with Kazakhstan and in the northern part of the Black Earth region. Conversely, southern regions would suffer from a more arid climate, adversely affecting agricultural production. I**n the longer term, however, losses caused by rising temperatures will outweigh these gains.** Some impacts will be episodic: changes in precipitation, late frosts and rising temperatures will reduce crop yields. Others will be more lasting: climate change will exacerbate droughts and heatwaves in the south of the country, which could lead to a shift of agricultural activity towards the north. **Changes in Russian agricultural production would have global repercussions,** given that Russia, the world's largest wheat exporter, accounted for around 20% of global wheat exports in 2024.

Economic consequences

Climate change has economic consequences for Russia. Weather-related hazards such as floods, droughts and wildfires carry **direct economic costs:** flood damage alone cost Russia between 0.1% and 0.13% of its annual GDP over 2003–2022, and these losses could rise without adequate adaptation policies. **Slow-onset events also have economic impacts.** By weakening the ground, permafrost thaw could threaten 20% of Russia's infrastructure by 2050, at an estimated cost of €70 billion. The energy sector is particularly exposed, since 90% of the country's gas is produced in Arctic and sub-Arctic regions, as are transport networks, notably railways and roads. Beyond the direct damage, climate change disrupts the extraction of certain resources, particularly fossil fuels. Indirectly, the energy transition driven **by global climate action is also weighing on an economy heavily reliant on hydrocarbon exports.**

Health and social consequences

Climate change poses growing health, social and environmental risks in Russia. By releasing pathogens, the melting of the cryosphere could contribute to the periodic resurgence of diseases known as zoonoses. These epidemiological risks are compounded by **the direct consequences of extreme weather and climate events**: under a high-emissions scenario, heat-related excess mortality in Russia could rise by 80% by 2050 compared with 2000–2004. **Permafrost thaw has also caused ecological disasters.** The "red tide" that occurred during the 2020 Norilsk disaster, for example, involved the spillage of 21,000 tonnes of diesel into the Ambarnaya River and its tributaries. **Migration patterns could also be transformed** as living conditions deteriorate.

II. CLIMATE OPPORTUNISM AT THE INTERNATIONAL LEVEL: A STRATEGIC ALIGNMENT OF CLIMATE AND FOREIGN POLICY

Since the 1990s, Russia's stance on climate issues appears to have followed the three main phases of the post-Soviet era: from 1990 to 2012, from 2012 to 2020, and from 2020 to the present. The first period appears to have been marked by a desire to integrate into the world order, and the second by a hardening of anti-Western foreign policy. The third began with the 2020 constitutional revision, which laid the legal groundwork for the invasion of Ukraine and cemented both the break with the West and the revival of anti-colonial rhetoric. **Russia's position within climate multilateralism can be interpreted in the light of these periods.**

A – A relative climate commitment in pursuit of global integration: performative climate engagement

During the first period (1990–2012), Russia's stance on climate issues appears to have been aligned with its drive for modernisation and rapprochement with the West. This integration into climate multilateralism was **already evident in the 1990s,** in the process leading to the adoption of the Kyoto Protocol. **Russia's ratification** (it accounted for 17.4% of CO_2 emissions in 1990) made it possible to reach the threshold of 55% of total 1990 emissions required for the protocol to enter into force. **This engagement should, however, be put into perspective:** the targets were unambitious for Russia, as they had already been met when the country ratified the protocol. Its commitment to the protocol also followed a **transactional logic,** since ratification allowed Russia to benefit financially from emissions trading. Beyond Kyoto, **there is little evidence of any further** Russian commitment to climate issues.

Dmitry Medvedev's accession to the presidency in 2008 continued this pattern, as he repeatedly presented Russia as an exemplary climate actor. This rhetoric was, however, opportunistic and largely presentational, as few of his initiatives produced tangible results. During this period, **Russia thus displayed a performative form of climate engagement with a strong transactional dimension.**

B – Hardening of foreign policy: climate as a tool against the West

The second and third periods have been marked by a hardening of Russian foreign policy and growing anti-Westernism, in response to a context shaped by the growing importance attached to tackling climate change, the rapid development of renewable energy and the deterioration of relations between Russia and the West. Accordingly, climate change is no longer presented solely as a tool for international cooperation, but also as a tool used by others to harm Russia. This shift is particularly apparent in the 2016 and 2023 Foreign Policy Concepts, which describe climate change as a means of constraining states' economic development, and Russia's in particular.

Despite an apparent change in rhetoric, Russia has remained engaged in climate multilateralism, illustrating its climate opportunism. It ratified the 2015 Paris Agreement in 2019 and set a goal of

carbon neutrality no later than 2060 in its 2023 Climate Doctrine. These commitments should nevertheless be qualified. Russia's signature of the Paris Agreement can be explained by the absence of any binding provision on phasing out fossil fuels, and the scientific community judges its climate targets to be insufficient and unambitious. Its continued presence in climate forums, despite patchy implementation of its commitments, **thus reveals their essentially diplomatic and presentational nature,** which brings Russia political benefits while limiting the investment and domestic transformation required.

Russia's participation in climate multilateralism also has **an offensive dimension, particularly towards Western countries.** Moscow exploits the fight against climate change to deepen divides between Western countries and the Global South, through anti-colonial rhetoric that portrays global climate policies as a tool of control. This strategy slows down climate negotiations and risks widening the gap between Western countries and the Global South at the Conferences of the Parties (COPs).

One hypothesis is therefore that Russia's participation in these forums serves three objectives: (1) to deny its own responsibility for climate change while highlighting that of Western countries; (2) to use climate change to deepen certain divides, particularly between the Global North and the Global South; and (3) to slow down negotiations in order to preserve the hydrocarbon rents on which the Russian economy depends. This **offensive climate agenda** shows that Russian climate opportunism must be understood in the light of Russia's broader foreign policy agenda, which is at times entirely disconnected from environmental concerns.

III. CLIMATE OPPORTUNISM AT THE NATIONAL LEVEL: PERCEIVED STRATEGIC BENEFITS AND THEIR DEFENCE IMPLICATIONS

Russian rhetoric on climate change varies from one level to another. While climate issues appear to be integrated into Russia's broader foreign policy, they do not seem to be addressed through a coordinated policy at the national level. **Their place in domestic policy has nevertheless evolved, from genuine integration of climate issues** in the 1990s under Boris Yeltsin's presidency to more limited consideration during the terms of Dmitry Medvedev (2008–2012) and Vladimir Putin (2000–2008, then 2012 to the present).

A – Russian climate opportunism at the national level: the perceived benefits of climate change

At the domestic level, climate change **features very little** in official rhetoric and doctrinal documents, **where it is described as both a risk and an opportunity.**

Strategic documents have framed climate change as a risk since 1994. The risks identified on national territory relate mainly to permafrost thaw, wildfires and health. Yet although these climate risks are clearly identified, their operational consequences appear to have been insufficiently explored, and no emission reductions have been introduced.

The perceived strategic advantages of climate change also date back to the 1990s, which may be explained by a sometimes partial understanding of the phenomenon and by the political gains derived from such rhetoric. **Three main strategic assets are emphasised: the availability of agricultural land, rising air temperatures** and **the gradual opening of shipping routes in the Arctic Ocean**. However, there is no scientific consensus on these positive effects, which reflect a fragmented view of the **systemic nature of climate change.**

B – Implications of climate opportunism for the defence apparatus: securing in the absence of stratrgic foresight

Russia's climate-opportunist approach at the national level has implications for defence. The perception of certain opportunities, combined with the greater accessibility of certain areas, notably the Arctic, to other state actors, has led to the securing and militarisation of these areas.

Increasingly securing: deploying the armed forces to protect Russian interests

The increasing efforts to secure of the Arctic stems from a combination of geopolitical and climate factors. First, Russia perceives its sovereignty in the Arctic as being challenged and threatened, which prompts it to secure the region. Second, the economic, agricultural and energy opportunities that Russia associates with climate change, particularly in its northern territories, also contribute to this process. Climate opportunism is reflected in Russia's gradual return to the Arctic, which has been noticeable since the early 2000s. At the heart of its Arctic strategies lies a developmentalist vision that seeks to capitalise on the region's economic opportunities. The combination of these factors has made Arctic securitisation a priority, resulting in a build-up of Russian military capabilities in the region.

Since the late 2000s, and particularly since the early 2020s, Russia has undertaken a major overhaul of its naval power, closely tied to its strategic objectives for the Northern Sea Route and to regional tensions, notably through the acquisition of icebreakers. **Anticipating larger deployments in extreme cold, the Russian armed forces are also testing their capabilities in harsh conditions**.

A lack of strategic foresight: a climate opportunism approach overlooking the adverse effects of climate change on the defence apparatus

Permafrost thaw is among the phenomena with the greatest impact on civilian and military infrastructure, with both direct and indirect effects on the armed forces. Damage to, or the destruction of, energy infrastructure could undermine logistical support and energy supply for the armed forces. Military infrastructure is also directly threatened: five military bases are located in areas at risk from thaw by 2050. **The Russian navy is particularly exposed to the effects of climate change.** Arctic navigation is becoming more complex as the ice pack breaks up, and more dangerous as sea conditions grow increasingly unstable. Ocean warming could also affect the acoustic detection of submarines by creating acoustic shadow zones or zones of increased transparency. Finally, **extreme weather events affect military and energy infrastructure:** in 2021, **wildfires** in the Russian Far East came very close to a major hydroelectric dam in the region.

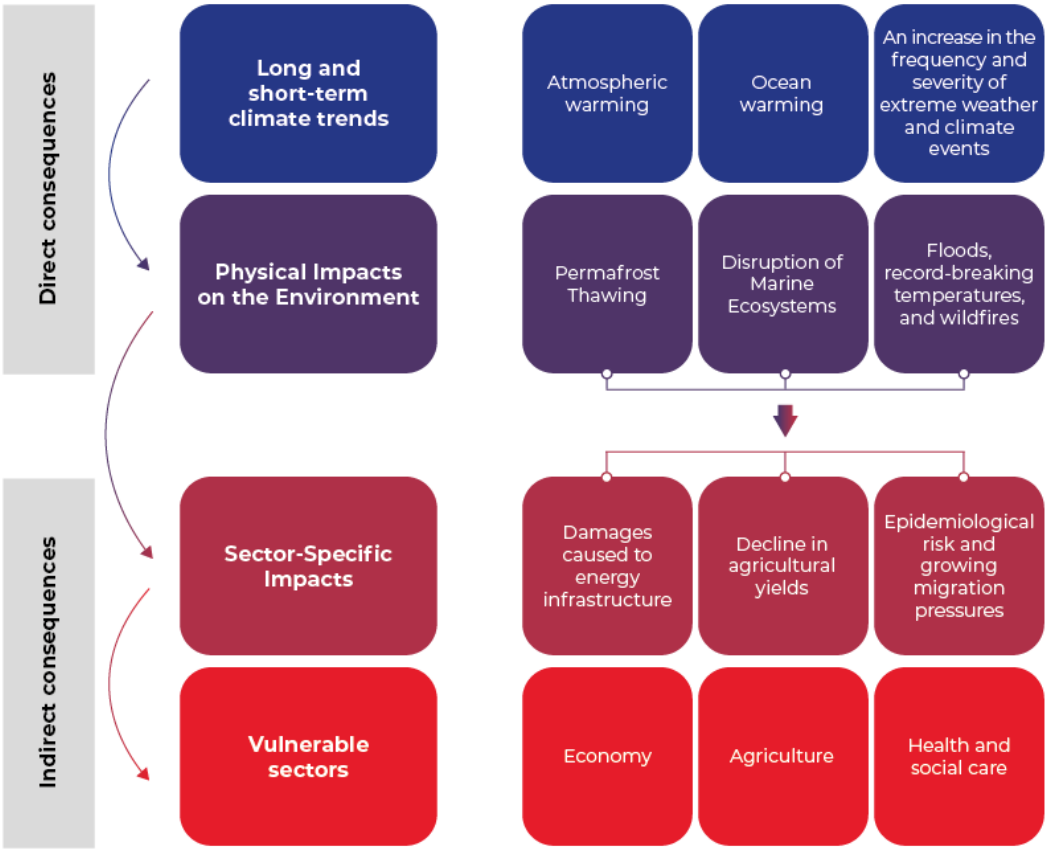
Beyond these capability issues, **extreme weather and climate events also have operational consequences.** In this respect, the armed forces regularly assist the population during floods or wildfires, for example, **although the war in Ukraine has called their participation in such operations into question.**

Despite these various impacts, Russian doctrinal documents do not explicitly link climate change to the defence apparatus, and **no coordinated policy appears to have been put in place,** revealing a lack of anticipation and adaptation on the part of the Russian government. **The way the defence apparatus addresses climate change thus once again illustrates Russian climate opportunism:** the armed forces appear to approach climate issues mainly in terms of opportunities. The perception of economic, energy and agricultural interests has led Russia to strengthen its presence in the region, notably its military presence, to assert its sovereignty and secure its interests. Conversely, the armed forces appear to give insufficient consideration to the adverse effects of climate change.

III. CONCLUSION

Russia's instrumentalisation of climate change reflects a climate-opportunist approach in which climate issues serve its strategic interests and are subordinated to the regime's geopolitical ambitions and survival imperatives. **At the international level, climate opportunism is reflected in the way Russia's stance on climate issues has shifted in line with its foreign policy objectives.** In the 1990s and 2000s, Russia favoured a performative form of climate engagement. Since the early 2010s, climate change and the international climate regime appear to have served a foreign policy marked by growing opposition to the West**. At the national level, Russia views climate change as a lever for economic development and power projection,** through climate rhetoric centred on the opportunities that climate change is expected to create on national territory. **This perception of climate-related opportunities has security implications:** it is reflected in growing securitisation and militarisation, without being accompanied by policies to adapt the armed forces to climate change. **Russian climate opportunism thus appears to be characterised by selective anticipation: while Russia capitalises, directly or indirectly, on the perceived benefits of climate change, it fails to factor its adverse effects into its long-term strategies.** This stance reveals a fundamental contradiction. Russia seeks to assert its identity as a "thousand-year-old civilisation", yet it anticipates climate change, a defining factor of the twenty-first century, only partially and in an uncoordinated manner.

IV. APPENDIX 1. THE RIPPLE EFFECTS OF CLIMATE CHANGE ON RUSSIA



Source : authors.

V. APPENDIX 2. RUSSIA AND CLIMATE CHANGE

Russia and climate change

Permafrost extent

- continuous
- discontinuous
- sporadic
- isolated patches
- subsea permafrost

Heatwaves and wildfires (2020-2025)

- Recorded heat records

Recorded temperatures ranged from 32.5°C (Moscow) to 40°C (Rostov, Krasnodar)

- Main regions affected by wildfires

Northern Sea Route (NSR) and main infrastructures

- Northern Sea Route
- Dikson — Main NSR ports and ports undergoing modernization
- Main military infrastructure along the NSR
- Capital of the Russian Federation
- Pyatigorsk — Federal district administrative centres



Sources: Center for Research on the Epidemiology of Disasters / UCLouvain; National Snow and Ice Data Center; Izvestia; NORDREGIO

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