

## How Progressive Realism can help the Democratic World in the fight against the Security Implications of Climate Change

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### Information YCST

*Climate change will be one of the largest security threats in the (near) future. Yet, in recent years, little to no attention was paid towards climate change in the security domain. We understand the importance of supplying future decision makers with knowledge and skills to understand climate change and negate the challenges which it will bring. Hence, YCST was created in November 2021. The YCS Research Team was founded in September 2023, to further build upon this project. The Research Team gives young professionals and students the opportunity to write about climate security related topics and put their articles into public discourse.*

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During conversations with colleagues, friends, family or others, one may encounter the topic of the consequences of climate change in the near and far-future. Most people perceive this part of the future without much optimism. [A recent poll by Ipsos](#) found that worldwide seven out of ten citizens anticipate a severe impact of climate change in their region in the upcoming decade and more than a third expects to be displaced in between now and 25 years. Citizens in the global South expect to encounter the implications of climate change to be more severe than the citizens in Western countries.

While these concerns grow, other geopolitical problems tend to further hinder the actual process of solving the consequences of climate change. An expected swing to the right in the European elections (whom tend to do not want to enforce the same policies as climate-ambitious parties), as well as the possible return of Trump – including even more American isolationism than during his first presidency – and a new changing global order do not predict a future in which global solutions and effective policy to climate change, its implications and other border-crossing problems can be solved effectively.

However, this pessimism should not reach the upper hand. In this paper I present a perspective, approach, discipline, paradigm, or however one wants to call it, through which the democratic world can tackle the security implications of climate change (and other border-crossing problems) named: *Progressive Realism*.

*“Speak softly and carry a big stick; you will go far!”*  
– Theodore Roosevelt

### **What is Progressive Realism?**

*Progressive Realism* combines aspects of the modern version of Realism – a perspective, lens and paradigm in international relations, geopolitics and multilateral diplomacy – with a focus on pursuing pragmatic and reasonable results regarding the promotion of progressive goals, such as strong international institutions, free trade and respect for international law, while simultaneously keeping a Realist perspective on security concerns and democratic interests. *Progressive Realism* combines aspects of *Soft Power* and *Hard Power*, meaning that there should be a strategic use of diplomacy, while simultaneously acknowledging the necessity of strong military capabilities and action. This can be described as *Smart Power*.

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## Examples of Progressive Realism

Approaches in multilateral diplomacy which are similar to *Progressive Realism* have been presented before throughout history, most noticeable are problems solved by using *Smart Power*. One of the earliest examples of *Smart Power* is the foreign diplomatic stance of US president Theodore Roosevelt, whose [Big Stick Ideology](#) focused on forward planning and taking decisive action in advance of crises by acting justly, never bluff, allow the enemy to avoid humiliation in defeat, and foremost: When you strike, strike prepared and strike hard.

In one of the latest episodes of the Dutch podcast [Boekestijn en de Wijk](#), the Dutch parliamentarian Derk Boswijk discusses Roosevelt's approach on foreign policy throughout his presidency, what we can learn from Roosevelt, as well as Boswijk's own vision on what the Netherlands (as well as the EU) should be prioritizing in contemporary geopolitics.

Boswijk's modern Realist perception is an exemplary approach of a lens through which global border-crossing issues should be perceived. His arguments that the liberalization of autocracies through the liberal open-market is not effective, that the rules based international order should be respected along with being treated non-hypocritical by the democratic world, and that EU's open-market should be used strategically to benefit democratic and progressive aims worldwide, are central to the approach of *Progressive Realism*.

But Boswijk is not alone regarding this paradigm-shift. David Lammy – the Shadow Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs of the UK – discusses *Progressive Realism* way more directly. He advocates in his article [The Case for Progressive Realism](#) for the use of Realist means to pursue progressive ends. Lammy states that the government must acknowledge a multilateral world order and approach the power-shift with a Realist lens. However, Lammy argues that this must be done not solely to benefit national interest, but in service of promoting collective democratic ideals, advance global economic development, and maintain the rules based international order.

Lammy introduces and explains his perception of *Progressive Realism* in great manner. Nevertheless, I would like to add something to his definition: Recognizing and adequately preparing for the (contemporary and future) environmental and societal security implications caused by climate change.

## The Security Implications of Climate Change

The exact consequences of climate change are uncertain. The future can never be predicted precisely and anyone who claims they can, should not be trusted. What is certain however, is that the climate will change significantly. Draughts will occur more often in already vulnerable regions, the sea level will rise, there will be more severe storms, and there will be warmer temperatures. These conditions will bring forth societal problems such as significant food shortages, increased poverty and displacement of large communities, and in sum unstable societies.

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As a result, these environmental and societal consequences will develop into security implications. As our world order is changing – thus aggravating multilateral diplomatic relations – the domestic implications of climate change will not help the situation.

A perfect example of what can be more severe due to the climate change is the level of migration, a topic which is perceived as an enormous issue in contemporary Western political discourse. Climate change will displace more communities through the environmental and societal problems mentioned before, resulting in mass-migration from vulnerable regions to the democratic world... and who can blame the migrants if extreme weather conditions and food shortages are becoming more common?

We will most likely encounter environmental conditions which will weaken the stability of countries most affected by climate change and will cause societal problems in the broader region; this can enforce a chain reaction that (to some extent) can have a negative effect on societies across the globe.

### **The call for Progressive Realism**

The democratic world must encounter contemporary and future climate change related security problems through the lens of *Progressive Realism*. The domestic electorate should be addressed with directness and honesty when dealing with situations they are concerned about (with a special focus on migration, since this problem is already dominating political discourse while more migration is set to happen), and *Smart Power* should be used more extensively when dealing with democratic and non-democratic states when solving border-crossing problems.

What is furthermore important is to respect international law without bluffing and being hypocrite. If the democratic world wants to solve climate change inflicted problems, it has to work together with the governments of former colonies, whom can flee into the hands of autocracies if the rule based international order is not respected and when the democratic world is still vulnerable for the argument of treating the rule based international order with double standards.

Democratic governments should eradicate hypocrisy in international relations, take decisive actions and stop bluffing without following up on their promises. Only then we can start having liable partners across the globe, which is necessary in solving environmental disasters, societal problems caused by climate change and other border-crossing problems which can and will affect the safety, security and prosperity of the democratic world.