



In Perspective

Global warming ignites borders as well

By Manuel Manonelles, IPS

The Russian news agency TASS has calculated oil reserves in the Arctic at over 10 billion tonnes.

Little by little, it is being confirmed that the melting of the polar ice caps, whether in Antarctica or the Arctic, is happening significantly faster than initially predicted.

The consequences of this for peace, one of the main victims of climate change, are enormous. Glaciers and areas of high-altitude mountains that were previously considered zones of perpetual snow are now melting.

A paradigmatic case is that of the alpine border between Switzerland and Italy where during a recent routine verification, certain sections of ice or perennial snow that had been on the map since 1861 were found to be missing. In this case, the two countries have enjoyed long periods of peaceful coexistence and are approaching the problem in a logical and cordial fashion, forming a commission to find a technical solution.

However, the possible implications of cases like this in other geographical areas are very worrisome. The destabilising potential of a similar development on the India-Pakistan border would be enormous, particularly in the zone of Kashmir or the Siachen glacier, where more than 3,000 soldiers of both countries have died since 1984. The same is true of the tense China-India border, or the deeply problematic border between Afghanistan and Pakistan, which will grow increasingly porous with melting, contributing to a rise in destabilisation in what are already two of the most unstable countries on the earth.

Opening of shipping lanes

Another major effect of global warming is the gradual opening of major global shipping lanes in areas that had previously been impassable because of ice. The Northeast Passage along the north of Russia, used recently for the first time in history, shortens travel between the ports of China, Japan, and Korea and Hamburg, Rotterdam, and South Hampton by 4,000 kilometres. With the Northwest Passage along northern Canada, travel between the China and the ports of the eastern United States is similarly shortened. The opening of these new routes will completely change the dynamics of intercontinental trade and might render irrelevant places that until now were considered geostrategically essential, such as the Panama and the Suez Canal.

Add to this the draw of massive reserves of raw materials expected to be present in the Arctic, ever more accessible as the ice recedes, which is provoking a race for control of the area. The Russian news agency TASS has calculated oil reserves in the area at over 10 billion tonnes. Last year Canada approved an extraordinary 6.9 billion dollar arms bill to strengthen its military presence in its arctic zone, while Russia has resumed tactical flights of nuclear bombers in its polar region, triggering the protests of numerous countries.

This also explains, in part, the speed with which the European Union is processing the application for EU membership of bankrupt Iceland, which would place the body in the best possible position for future negotiations and territorial claims in the area with regard to future access to the 'Arctic banquet'.

Rising sea levels

The melting of the ice caps is also the major cause of rising sea levels, which have other

irreversible territorial, social, and economic consequences, such as the physical disappearance —partial or total — of certain small island states of the Pacific likely to occur within a few years — the Maldives, Samoa, Kiribati, among others.

Obviously the implications are vast, including the political and legal status of future states that have no territory.

The principal components of the global infrastructure, from ports and refineries to airports and nuclear plants, are also seriously at risk, and will find themselves near or at or even below sea level.

It is important to note in this context that the majority of the global population lives in areas close to the sea, starting with megacities like Mumbai, London, New York, Shanghai, Tokyo, and Buenos Aires, and densely-populated areas like the Ganges delta in Bangladesh, where rising sea levels are already wreaking havoc in the form of water pollution and related effects. Recent studies indicate the possibility of some 200 million new environmental refugees in coming years. The Global Humanitarian Fund issued a report this year that shows unequivocally that climate change today is responsible for some 3,00,000 deaths per year. Numbers for the medium and long-term are even higher. In this context, the urgency of fighting climate is a pre-condition for a peaceful future. Therefore, the international community has no other option, specially after the fiasco in Copenhagen, to spring into action as soon as possible. It is about climate, but also about peace and human lives.

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