

Climate Change belongs on the Agenda for International Security*

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Today the conceptual and practical linkages between climate change and security are increasingly well understood. Those who still dispute the realities of climate change may not agree, but the majority of professionals in the security field acknowledge the powerful linkages between the consequences of climate change and a daunting set of security challenges.

Security is a policy imperative at many levels: at the nation state level, but also along a continuum from local communities to international cooperation. Most security functions - from law enforcement to military operations - operate under the authorities of nation states, but climate change does not respect political borders. Consequently, greater effort is required at the global level, and often the security institutions of states are not well suited for cooperation in a globalized world. That is why we need to deepen our understanding of how climate and security are inter-related, for wiser policymaking and for greater security, at all levels of political organization.

Historically the expert communities of climate science and national security lived on separate planets. They were interested in fundamentally different issues, and did not see the connections. Humanitarians, economic development experts and climate scientists did not want to see their issues "securitized" or captured by military and national security institutions. There was some cultural resistance and concern that any active interest by the military in their work in environmentally stressed places and climate affected communities would cause political friction, or make the work of environmental non-government organizations (NGOs) appear more linked to national security interests, rather driven by local needs.

In the large security community in the United States, both civilian and military, if we look back 25 years, there was resistance to giving climate change a prominent role in security planning at the national level, or as a topic for dialogue with allies and other security partners.

● In the 1990s, those responsible for security budgets did not want to allocate resources to this issue because it was not a national security priority and there were other centers of expertise in the government to work on climate issues.

● In some important alliance relationships, such as Germany and Japan, their elites did not want environmental issues to become the concern of military establishments. Both were still politically committed to a very constrained role for their militaries, and Green (pro-environment parties) political activists did not want to see any expansion of the role of the American military in their countries.

● At the UN, earlier in this decade, some countries resisted having the Security Council address climate as a cause and consequence of conflicts. They did not wish to see this important social and economic issue captured by the fifteen countries of the Security Council, and have pushed to create an office to deal with climate change that would report directly to the UN Secretary General, not be captured by the Security Council.

But today, few would resist the notion that the effects of climate change have profound consequences for all domains of social and political life, and can affect the stability and security of countries and regions. Many would now place the impacts of climate change for world peace and security alongside the existential threat of nuclear weapons use.

In the United States, former President Barack Obama made an important speech in 2015, declaring climate change a national security priority.

“Climate change will impact every country on the planet. No nation is immune. So I’m here today to say that climate change constitutes a serious threat to global security, an immediate risk to our national security. And make no mistake, it will impact how our military defends our country. And so we need to act -- and we need to act now.”

Even in the Trump administration, where political appointees and the president remain climate skeptics and have tried to scale back many domestic environmental regulations, parts of the national bureaucracy continue to monitor and report on the evolving dangers and risks from climate. In the

national security community, the Defense Department has recently issued a report assessing the vulnerabilities of dozens of defense installations to climate change caused floods, droughts, and wildfires, to name a few. And the leaders of the US intelligence community now routinely include climate change in their annual public threat assessments to Congress. It is not up there with geopolitical competitors China and Russia, but is on the short list of things that affect the international environment and US interests, and for which intelligence effort is required.

Within security communities, responsibilities range from very immediate operational concerns to broader, strategic objectives. One can think of the climate-security linkages along a hierarchy of policy action and ideas:

Practical Military Concerns

On the military side, climate change was first addressed in the 1990s as it related to pollution, sea level rise, and warming ocean temperatures, which could affect everything from port access to technical systems, to the requirements for sailors' or soldiers' uniforms and facilities.

Military-Military Cooperation

At least a decade ago, the US Department of Defense found that its security dialogues with partner countries in warm climates and with significant coastal zones were increasingly focused on the effects of climate. Even if it was not the US' highest priority, there was a growing realization that many small countries consider climate to be their highest security concern, more than conflict with a neighbor or some other external threat.

Climate in Conflict Analysis and Response

Considerable work has been done in the peace operations and economic development communities to conceptualize climate change as a driver or outcome of conflict, within and between states. It may be a true cause of conflict, or, most often, exacerbates other underlying vulnerabilities that make conflict more likely, more acute, and harder to bring to an end.

Climate as global driver of change

Climate change will affect power imbalances, will change the fortunes of states, with some becoming winners and others losers. It will exaggerate the disparities between rich and poor countries.

Stanford scholars Noah Diffenbaugh and Marshall Burke recently published results of empirical quantitative research showing how global warming increases global economic inequality. They looked at the parabolic relationship between temperature and economic growth, which is up in cold countries and down in warm countries, increasing the gap. The connection to security is not always

direct, but it's there, as countries facing serious slowdowns in growth can become unstable and be preyed upon by adversaries.

Climate as determinant of global assistance

Climate considerations will rise as a determinant of foreign assistance priorities, and will also shape spending requirements at home. Some EU analysts project that the EU should plan to spend over a third of its budget on climate adaptation, in all its dimensions, from infrastructure to energy to other fundamental public policy requirements.

Climate as part of the new geopolitical struggles

From the Arctic to the rise of China, climate change will be part of the way we understand new geopolitical competition, and will shape the global agenda. Its impact on security will be profound, even if indirect. The migration crisis in recent years from Africa and the Middle East to Europe and to Southeast Asia, for example, has significant climate change dimensions, which are not always explicit in defining the immediate policy challenge.

Climate scientists want to do their work in an apolitical environment, and may find it disturbing to put a security filter over their work, in terms of how research funds are allocated, or how much attention climate issues get from policymakers. But these two enormous communities of experts, officials, and concerned citizens have no choice but to engage in dialogue, hopefully mutually respectful and productive. The climate change experts have much to contribute to security debates, and security institutions and experts will play their roles as states and the international community look for solutions to the daunting challenges ahead.

* This essay is based on remarks made at the May 22, 2019, symposium hosted by the Center for Security Policy Studies-Korea, at the George Mason University campus in Incheon, Korea.