

Briefing Note No. 2

“National Security and the Accelerating Risks of Climate Change”
Report by CNA Military Advisory Board, May 2014
CNA Corporation, Alexandria, VA

Summary

This 29-page report by the Military Advisory Board of CNA Corporation¹, addresses the national security implications of climate change for the United States. It is an update of a 2007 CNA report, “National Security and the Threat of Climate Change” that was key in generating policy attention in the Washington policy context at that time. CNA reports receive particular attention in the U.S. context given their direct involvement of senior retired flag officers from the U.S. military. The report describes how increased scientific certainty about climate change and its impacts dictate that the US government and its military need to take action today to prepare for the risks that climate change poses. The authors discuss both the domestic and international aspects of climate change and argue that climate change impacts are **already serving as catalysts for conflict in vulnerable regions**. The report provides six recommendations for protecting the military, economic and infrastructure aspects of America’s “National Power” and **ensuring readiness and resilience** for the country’s military forces.

In detail

The report begins with a discussion of increasing confidence in understanding the causes and projected impacts of climate change since the previous CNA report was issued in 2007. Climate change impacts are described as not merely future worries but moving firmly into the present, as evidenced by changes to fire seasons, sea levels, Arctic sea ice, and precipitation patterns. The risks associated with climate change are described as “comprehensive and accelerating”. Despite this improved understanding, the authors judge that **actions by the USA and the international community have been insufficient** in strengthening resilience to the projected impacts of climate change or finding ways to stabilize climate change.

The report notes that climate impacts such as droughts, flooding, and population dislocation are accelerating instability in vulnerable areas, including in Africa, Asia, and the Middle East. These impacts are described as already being “**catalysts for conflict**”, a sharper and more urgent description than “threat multipliers”, as they were described in the 2007 report. In this context, the report calls for the US to improve its international cooperative efforts to build resilience and coordinate mitigation efforts.

Throughout the report are quotations and “Voices of Experience” with anecdotes and commentary from US military leaders on climate science, changing geopolitics, the opening Arctic and other climate issues. These voices help build legitimacy and authority for the paper in the eyes of the target audience of US foreign policymakers.

Evolving international implications

The authors describe an increasingly complex international security environment with significant population growth, especially in coastal and urban areas, the continued rise of non-state actors, and risks to the continued development of emerging economies. The report emphasizes that the distribution of finite resources, notably those connected to the water-food-energy nexus, among a richer and more demanding global population will have increasing security implications. The impact of interrelated and cascading climate events on this security environment can contribute to the **disruption of a primary security goal**:

¹ CNA Corporation is a federally funded agency which houses the Center for Naval Analysis, an R&D institute for the US Navy and Marine Corps, and the Institute for Public Research, a non-profit research and analysis organization serving various levels of government. CNA’s Military Advisory Board consists of retired officers from the Army, Navy, Air Force, and Marine Corps.

stability. Two regions were highlighted. The first was Asia, where the USA is changing its security posture and where climate related challenges such as water-related challenges and sea level rise may contribute to instability. The second was the Arctic, where accelerating melting is expected to open the region to more traffic and economic activity. The likelihood of Arctic conflict is described as low, but the situation is expected to be complex and uncertain due to incomplete international frameworks (notably the non-ratification of UNCLOS by the USA) and a split in US defense command responsibility for the region. The authors call for the US to strengthen international partnerships and to guard against a “failure of imagination” in handling climate impacts and responses.

Domestic Implications of Climate Change

The next section of the report argues that climate change impacts will place elements of America’s “National Power” (political, military, social, infrastructure, and information systems) at risk and threaten homeland security. The authors describe how the armed forces may be expected to be busier with **disaster response work** – Defense Support to Civilian Authorities (DSCA) – potentially reducing their availability for other missions. Training programs may also be impacted by increased frequency of extreme weather events. The report describes how military infrastructure, logistics systems and supporting communities will need to improve resilience to climate change impacts, particularly since so much military infrastructure is concentrated in coastal regions (e.g. the Hampton Roads area).

Beyond the military, the report highlights how climate change impacts such as increased frequency of flooding, droughts and natural disasters threaten other aspects of US National Power. These include **threats to national infrastructure**, for which the Department of Homeland Security takes the lead on managing risks, threats to the **US economy**, and threats to **social support systems**, especially for vulnerable groups and specific vulnerable areas, such as floodplains and coasts. The report notes the need to integrate military efforts with those of federal, state, and local agencies.

Recommendations

The authors urge the US administration and Congress to take climate issues into consideration, using a long term perspective and a cooperative focus, particularly in a time of constrained military budgets. The report makes six recommendations for US policymakers:

1. Assume global leadership in preparing for projected climate change impacts (and, though less emphasized, in leading efforts to help slow climate change);
2. Factor projected climate change impacts into military planning and operations;
3. Prepare for increased access and military operations in the Arctic;
4. Take into consideration the water-food-energy nexus;
5. Projected impacts of climate change should be factored into the National Infrastructure Assessment Plan and the Strategic National Risk Assessment;
6. The Department of Defense should develop adaptation plans, with a particular focus on defense facilities and associated community infrastructure.

Additional links

- Highlight video of the report launch: <http://www.wilsoncenter.org/article/the-heat-climate-change-threat-to-national-security>
- Webcast of the report launch: <http://www.wilsoncenter.org/event/national-security-and-the-accelerating-risks-climate-change>
- Written summary of the launch event with key quotes: <http://www.newsecuritybeat.org/2014/06/national-security-accelerating-risks-climate-change-report-launch/>

- Video interview with Geoff Dabelko (Ohio University) about the report:
<http://www.newsecuritybeat.org/2014/05/report-military-leaders-calls-climate-change-catalyst-conflict/>