Concerned about national security? Then fight climate change!

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Climate change is most commonly thought of as an environmental and economic issue, but it is also a serious national security threat. The national security Americans currently enjoy is jointly maintained by diplomatic and military efforts, but failing to vigorously combat climate change at the national and international levels will likely lead to increased regional and global conflict, decreased military effectiveness and operational capabilities, and ultimately an America that is more vulnerable.

The US has long been considered a global leader in attempting to defuse geopolitical tensions and assisting countries mired in diplomatic and armed conflict. Providing aid to other countries in times of crisis is crucial because if conflict abroad spirals out of control it can lead to social instability, humanitarian crises, and power vacuums in which dangerous individuals can wield broad influence. To this end, the US military maintains working relationships with many nations with the goal of ensuring geopolitical stability. As climate change becomes more pronounced, however, the number of conflicts the military will be expected to help stabilize will likely increase and as such the US must consider climate change as a near and present danger.
The Department of Defense recognizes that the relationship between climate change and instability is significant (https://www.defense.gov/News/Article/Article/612710/). Secretary of Defense and retired Marine Corps Major General James Mattis said, (https://www.scientificamerican.com/article/trumps-defense-secretary-cites-climate-change-as-national-security-challenge/) “climate change can be a driver of instability and the Department of Defense must pay attention to potential adverse impacts generated by this phenomenon” and that addressing its effects “requires a broader, whole-of-government response.” In 2016, scientists reported (http://www.pnas.org/content/113/33/9216.abstract) that 23% of conflicts in ethnically divided countries coincide with natural disasters that are likely to become more frequent (http://nca2014.globalchange.gov/highlights/report-findings/extreme-weather) with climate change. In addition, regions like the Arctic, the South China Sea, and Africa will likely see more frequent conflicts over resources that will only be exacerbated by the impacts of a changing climate.

This is not only a future problem; the effects of instability from climate change are already occurring. Drought likely contributed (http://www.pnas.org/content/112/11/3241.abstract) to the current civil war in Syria and Yemen is in danger (http://www.worldbank.org/en/news/feature/2014/11/24/future-impact-of-climate-change-visible-now-in-yemen) of seriously depleting its limited water supply. In the South China Sea rising sea levels (https://www.cnas.org/publications/reports/power-and-order-in-the-south-china-sea) are adding pressure to territorial and resource tensions. In the Arctic the combination of localized accelerated warming, plentiful resources, and newly accessible sea routes is raising tensions that could contribute to a new Cold War with Russia (http://time.com/473238/russia-cold-war-united-states-artic-donald-trump-barack-obama-vladimir-putin/). Chronic issues like these can allow non-state actors like ISIS to flourish, leading to refugee crises (https://www.foreign.senate.gov/press/chair/release/corker-opening-statement-at-hearing-on-the-state-of-global-humanitarian-affairs) that create global strain on economic and social systems, and weaken the ability of the US military to respond quickly and effectively to such problems.

Rising global temperatures and increased natural disasters will also make it more expensive and logistically challenging for the US military to operate around the world and keep Americans safe. In the words (http://www.npr.org/2017/06/01/531099069/u-s-intelligence-warns-against-security-implications-of-leaving-paris-accord) of Retired General Gerald Galloway, “If you can't get your aircraft off an airfield because it's under water, if you can't land troops in a foreign country because the beach you thought was going to be something you could land on is no longer there, then it's a national security issue.”

Climate change is impacting domestic operations just as significantly as foreign operations. For example, a decade ago the Pentagon was forced to close three early warning radar sites (https://thebarentsobserver.com/en/2016/07/climate-accelerating-erosion-us-radar-facilities-artic) on Alaska’s North Slope due (in part) to climate change-driven erosion problems, and the impacts are only going to accelerate. By 2050, most of the US Armed Forces’ coastal installations will see more than 10 times the number of floods (http://www.ucsusa.org/global-warming/global-warming-impacts/sea-level-rise-flooding-us-military-bases#.WVPLTvnyvcv) they experience today. By 2070, half of the coastal sites could experience 520 or more flood events annually—the equivalent of more than one flood daily. By 2100, eight US military bases are at risk of losing 25 percent to 50 percent or more of their land to rising seas. Four US military installations—including a naval base in Key West and the famed Marine Corps training base Parris Island in South Carolina—are at risk of losing between 75 and 95 percent of their land by the end of this century. The Long Range Radar sites in Alaska and the $7B associated infrastructure are at risk from accelerating erosion that requires a $50M investment to maintain their viability.
It is time that we recognize the full effects of climate change by including national security considerations in long-term planning along with environmental and economic concerns. Climate change is poised to tilt a period of relative global stability into a period of turmoil and we as a nation need to acknowledge that climate security and national security go hand in hand. If we can adequately prepare for the myriad climate-related challenges ahead, we will be better able to safeguard our national interests as well as assist those suffering abroad.

Image credit: Michael Lavender, U.S. Navy

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