

National Security and the Dangers of Climate Change

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Climate change will have serious consequences for not only the livelihoods of citizens around the world but for the security interests of states as well. In particular, the United States should have a vested interest in mitigating the effects of climate change, as there are a number of dangers climate change poses towards national security. Although the military has recognized climate change as a threat, the United States still has much ground to cover in ensuring the continued protection of the nation from the widespread impacts of the climate crisis.

Introduction

Rising waters, melting glaciers, drier seasons — the dangers of climate change have been perpetually preached to the public, but are yet to see any real sense of urgency in politics or our day-to-day lives. Perhaps this is due to how gradual climate change is or because people cannot feel its effects to the point where they are concerned. In the words of climate scientist Dr. Shahir Masri, “if you are only following things in your own neighborhood, you might only be noticing one observation that is different from what it was 10 years ago. It is really when you are looking at the global picture ... that you start to really have a clear and compelling picture of what is going on.”

It is undeniable that climate change is real and will start negatively affecting everything from food supply to land availability. Prime among climate change’s varied impacts is one oft-overlooked: its effect on national security. At a first glance, the two may seem distantly

related; but, the cascading effects of climate change pose a looming threat to the country's protection.

National Security and Climate Change

One of the most obvious examples of how national security would be at risk lies in the location of our military bases. The United States has bases around the world, of which many are located near the coast ("The Climate Crisis..."). Needless to say, once above-ground land starts receding as sea levels rise, it spells trouble for those locations ("The US Military..."). On top of that, increasingly extreme weather can cause major destruction to military equipment ("The Climate Crisis..."). The aftermath of Hurricane Michael in 2018 left fighter jets unable to regain their regular operating schedule for nearly a month (Silliman), and wildfires in California forced thousands to evacuate a base just last December (AP (b)). According to a report issued by the Department of Defense in 2019, 67% of bases surveyed had issues with recurrent flooding, while 76% reported that this could create vulnerabilities in the next 20 years (Silliman). Weather disasters in and of themselves are extremely costly as well – Hurricane Michael alone caused \$5 billion in damage to two small Air Force bases, while a large base could require much more in repairs (Silliman).

The destabilizing effects of climate change are not just on military installations; rather, it poses substantial security risks internationally as well, for example, due to the melting Arctic. The Arctic Circle has been melting twice as fast as the rest of the world, thawing its permafrost, icebergs, and glaciers ("Climate Change in the Arctic"). Precious resources lie underneath the surface of the Arctic, fueling competition for control of the region, which has already begun – Russia has already deployed cruise ships and opened factories in the region (Lamothe), while China has plans for a so-called 'Polar Silk Road' and has invested heavily in arctic-adjacent countries like Iceland (Conley). Meanwhile, the United States lags behind in economic control: significant infrastructure in the Arctic does not exist to stimulate economic development in the region, with the closest port being over 800 miles from the Bering Strait (Conley). Before leaving office, the Trump administration loosened restrictions on drilling in the American Arctic territory for economic development; however, the Biden administration is set to issue a moratorium on such activities (AP (a)). America is unlikely to pursue activities directly harmful to the environment under the new administration, so resource extraction and economic development in the Arctic will likely be stalled for the foreseeable future (AP (a)).

This leaves the United States with a growing security dilemma it must keep in check: Russia and China's expansion of influence in the region. Arctic military exercises have already begun, with Russia conducting one in 2017 and NATO holding one in response the following year (Conley). Russia has invested heavily in bases and weaponry in the area, while China has plans for a nuclear-powered icebreaker (DHS). A great power competition is not unlikely in the future, especially when the United States is suspicious of their motivations and projects, but has no policies in place to counteract their influence (Conley). On that front, a recent report by the Department of Homeland Security published under the Biden administration has recognized the threats and has proposed actions such as procuring icebreakers, bolstering infrastructure, and engaging in cooperation with allies to secure the region (DHS). Nonetheless, what policies the Biden administration will put in place, if any, and thus the future of American involvement in the brewing conflict in the Arctic remains to be seen.

Domestic Security Concerns

Heightened tensions may not be the only political threat the United States faces in the future from the effects of climate change. Rather, instability looms from within our own borders. There are many factors that contribute to political instability, but climate change is, perhaps surprisingly, a huge contributor (Worland). A change in temperature of one standard deviation has correlated with a 2.3% rise in interpersonal conflict rates and a 13.5% increase in intergroup conflict rates, according to a study published in *Science* (Hsiang et al.). Climate change has the ability to dramatically exacerbate existing problems such as economic and structural inequalities (Hsiang et al.). It is not hard to imagine why — environmental disasters, destruction of coastal housing, and food shortages would all affect the poor and marginalized much more than those who can afford to move or buy more expensive things on the market. Climate change also increases psychological stress, resulting in an increase in the likelihood of crime, as well as the use of extreme force by police, which would undoubtedly fuel the already-tense relations between police and the communities they serve (Worland). Increased polarization and internal division have been proven to have devastating implications for national security; international agreements fall apart (Schultz 19), allies become disillusioned and distrustful of U.S. support (Schultz 19-20), and America's ability to bargain with adversaries is undermined (Schultz 20). An even more divided America would make protecting the homeland all the more difficult, especially when confronting the rise of opposing powers such as Russia and China.

Another significant domestic concern for America is the possibility of a resource shortage. The beginning of the COVID-19 crisis showed how the public might panic and stockpile goods when faced with a (perceived) shortage. Toilet paper, groceries, and disinfectants all vanished from supermarket aisles as people rushed to hoard them (Picchi). Resource shortages caused by climate change could include decimating food supply, which would not only cause chaos in America but around the globe (Flavelle). The economy would likely suffer, as was the case during the oil shortage of the 1970s (Ryssdal), which increases the possibility of polarization and strife (Wolf). Hence, averting a resource shortage should be one of America's top interests when dealing with the climate change crisis.

Finally, with resource shortages, receding land, and more extreme weather comes the displacement of marginalized populations. According to a study published in 2017 in *Land Use Policy*, a staggering 1.4 billion people could be considered "climate refugees," people displaced by climate change-related events, by 2060 (Geisler and Currens 324). Changing weather patterns will make some places uninhabitable, while others would be forced to leave due to overpopulation and resource shortages (Tetrick 4). This mass migration of people would cause problems for countries across the globe, including the United States, especially when no climate refugee protections or policies have been put in place (Tetrick 4). Countries will have to decide how to deal with those waiting at their borders, who no longer have a home to return to, which may cause a litany of different problems. Conflict between opposing ethnic and religious groups has already risen in places affected by the early onset of climate-induced migration, such as in Nigeria ("The Climate Crisis..."). Fear of refugees and immigrants overall is not an uncommon sentiment in some areas in Europe and the United States (White 26), and politicians have benefitted from proposing policies against irregular migration such as refugees (White 39). Consequently, the risk of a security dilemma is high, for the rejection of climate refugees in one country will have profound implications for its neighbors and allies (White 39). The United States needs to recognize this as a true threat to national security, and implement policies to mitigate its effects, such as recognizing climate refugees as legitimate migrants and establishing amicable immigration policies regarding such refugees (Tetrick 26). Importantly, the action in this sphere must be diplomatic and humanitarian as opposed to aggressive and militarizing (Busby).

Conclusion

All in all, climate change poses considerable security risks to the nation, both inside or outside of the borders of the United States. The threat is real, and it is coming. The military has known about the dangers of climate change since at least 2010 and has been taking preventative measures such as reducing reliance on fossil fuels and using more renewable energy (Klare and Ward). President Biden has recently signed several executive orders restoring policies the Trump administration repealed (such as rejoining the Paris Climate Change Accords), but more comprehensive policies could face opposition by members of Congress in the future (Newburger). The United States has much ground to cover — the results of the upcoming COP26 climate summit will be integral to how nations will address climate change in the near future (Busby and Sharma). Global cooperation will be key to addressing the foundations of climate change, and the United States can lead the world once again in doing so. Policies aimed at addressing some of the potential security dilemmas isolated would be a great start in getting not only America but the rest of the world on track to mitigating the global phenomenon of climate change.

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