

# The NATIONAL STRATEGY FORUM REVIEW

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## Linking the Environment and National Security

By Eric S. Morse

The environment is a major national security issue. Although there is an academic and scientific debate regarding the cause of environmental change (global warming and climate change), natural disasters have become commonplace. The most recent consequences are monsoon flooding in Pakistan (which has affected 13.8 million people), spoliation of the Gulf Coast, severe water shortages, wildfires and droughts cause famines and shift power politics, and the mass migration of people from areas with depleted land. Oil is no longer the primary natural resource of geopolitical conflict. Today, water, land, air, energy, and food—all components and products of the environment—are vital issues of concern for national security strategy.

The U.S. is grappling with critical domestic environmental and energy security issues. Proposals for Cap and Trade, the energy efficiency of vehicles, nuclear power development, green energy, and biodiesel and ethanol are all issues being debated. The U.S. military is studying the effects of energy efficiency and its impacts on deployment logistics in various theaters of war. More efficient military vehicles, transportation routes, and food and water supplies dramatically affect the financial costs and tactics of warfare. The outcome of these debates will spell the future of America's economic security, foreign policy, and international standing.

The conceptual linkage between the environment and national security is increasingly clear. No longer the captive of special interest groups, environmental instability is at the top of the agenda for strategists in the military and U.S. Department of Defense (DoD). “Environmental security” was amplified in 2007, when a group of high level military personnel<sup>1</sup> published the “*National Security and the Threat of Climate Change*” report with The CNA Corporation.<sup>2</sup> The report argued that the U.S. military must begin to plan for the potentially devastating effects of environmental uncertainty. In particular, the report stated that:

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<sup>1</sup> Members of the military advisory board included: General Gordon R. Sullivan, Admiral Frank Bowman, Lieutenant General Lawrence P. Farrell, Jr., Vice Admiral Paul G. Gaffney, General Paul J. Kern, Admiral T. Joseph Lopez, Admiral Donald L. Pilling, Admiral Joseph W. Preuher, Vice Admiral Richard H. Truly, General Charles F. Wald, and General Anthony C. Zinni.

<sup>2</sup> The CNA Report can be found at: <http://securityandclimate.cna.org/>

Climate change can act as a threat multiplier for instability in some of the most volatile regions of the world, and it presents significant national security challenges for the United States...Projected climate change will add to tensions even in stable regions of the world. The U.S. and Europe may experience mounting pressure to accept large numbers of immigrant and refugee populations as drought increases and food production declines in Latin America and Africa. Extreme weather events and natural disasters...may lead to increased missions for a number of U.S. agencies, including state and local governments, the Department of Homeland Security, and our already stretched military, including our Guard and Reserve forces.

The CNA report offered five policy recommendations to address these issues:

1. The national security consequences of climate change should be fully integrated into national security and national defense strategies.
2. The U.S. should commit to a stronger national and international role to help stabilize climate change at levels that will avoid significant disruption to global security and stability.
3. The U.S. should commit to global partnerships that help less developed nations build the capacity and resiliency to better manage climate impacts.
4. The Department of Defense should enhance its operational capability by accelerating the adoption of improved business processes and innovative technologies that result in improved U.S. combat power through energy efficiency.
5. The Department of Defense should conduct an assessment of the impacts on U.S. military installations worldwide of rising sea levels, extreme weather events, and other projected climate change impacts over the next 30 to 40 years.

The recent *Quadrennial Defense Review Report 2010*, the chief document for U.S. defense planning and resourcing guidance, devoted a section to the environmental challenges of climate change for the first time.<sup>3</sup> The *QDR 2010* document states that, “DoD must incorporate geostrategic and operational considerations into force planning, requirements development, and acquisition processes.” The *QDR 2010* seeks to define how natural resources and climate change affect American security interests and highlights the need to conceive a comprehensive environmental security strategy. These factors not only shape the operating environment for troops on the ground and the logistics of a force dependent on fossil fuels, but also the assigned missions themselves.

Domestic environmental security concerns are evident, such as over reliance upon energy from foreign sources, but vulnerabilities to environmental security issues are also clear abroad. Environmental changes and natural resources affect geopolitics in diverse ways. Russia offers a prime example of the interface between the environment, national security, geopolitics, and the global economy. Russia recently experienced three environmental challenges: the highest recorded temperatures in over 130 years; the most widespread drought in over thirty years; and

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<sup>3</sup> The QDR 2010 Report can be found at: <http://www.defense.gov/qdr/qdr%20as%20of%2029jan10%201600.pdf>

wildfires raging across seven regions. These three factors created a shortage of Russian wheat for export, Russia being one of the largest exporters in the world. In response to the fires and drought, Moscow is using the wheat shortage to increase its political leverage with neighboring Belarus and Kazakhstan, also large regional wheat exporters. Moscow has been able to advance Russian foreign policy goals through environmental circumstances, thus affecting broader geopolitical trends.

Frequent droughts and unsustainable land use have opened Afghanistan to a high risk of deforestation and desertification, with devastating effects on the economy and population. Forest loss contributes to an increasing risk factors for floods, landslides, and other natural disasters. The security threat is critical. Land degradation hampers GDP growth and contributes to migration outflows. With only 31% of the population having access to suitable drinking water, this internal migration is also pushing water demand to unsustainable levels. 50% of Afghanistan's GDP is derived from agriculture and ranching, yet 75% of Afghanistan's land area is at risk to desertification and its remaining forests could be depleted inside of the next 30 years.

Addressing the fallout from international environmental effects is difficult. The element of surprise, high cost, and lack of apparent solutions are all major impediments to mounting an effective response. Nevertheless, international environmental disasters should remain a pillar of U.S. foreign policy and security strategy. The first step is to incorporate the environment into national security strategy. The second step is to implement foreign policy programs that target regions with environmental challenges with humanitarian and developmental aid. This should be a multilateral process.

The environmental link to national security is increasingly recognized by members of the U.S. military. The result may be that policymakers will develop a prudent environmental security strategy.

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