Climate Change and National Security Through the Lens of Key Federal Publications

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As I write, the 24th session of the Conference of the Parties (COP24) to the United Nations Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) has concluded. COP24 was held at Katowice, Poland from December 3-17, 2018 and brought together representatives from 200 governments to adopt guidelines for the Paris Agreement. The foundational document for COP24 was IPCC's (Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change) *Global Warming of 1.5°C*, with 1.5 degrees Celsius (2.7F) as a goal set by Paris. The IPCC report was approved by representatives from 195 nations, including the U.S.; during COP24, the U.S., Russian Federation, Saudi Arabia and Kuwait, however, failed to endorse the report arguing that IPCC's study should be “noted” not “welcomed.”

Leading up to COP24, climate change has been linked to human security and conflict, been the subject of scientific urgency, innovative modeling, and the target of deception by the fossil fuel industry. Climate-related change is the focus of secrecy, censorship, denial, media distortion, suppression of speech, and conspiracy thinking. For example, oil companies such as Shell failed to disclose internal assessments on environmental damage caused by fossil fuels; the Environmental Protection Agency removed and discontinued providing educational information on climate change from its Web site; National Park Service archaeologist Marcy Rockman resigned, voicing concerns over the lack of protection over cultural resources affected by climate change; and the two volume peer-reviewed Fourth National Climate Assessment (NCA4) released in late November, 2018, contains a chilling forecast for humanity in its volume 2:

- Rising temperatures, extreme heat, drought, wildfire on rangelands and heavy downpours are expected to increasingly challenge the quality and quantity of U.S. crop yields, livestock health, price stability and rural livelihoods.

- Continued changes to Earth's climate will cause major disruptions in some ecosystems. Some coral reef and sea ice ecosystems are already experiencing transformational changes, affecting communities and economies that rely upon them.

- Changes in the quality and quantity of fresh water available for people and the environment are increasing risks and costs to agriculture, energy production, industry and recreation.

- Climate change will transform coastal regions by the latter part of this
post COP24, the World Health Organization's report, Health and Climate Change, recommends that the effects of “health-damaging” air pollution and greenhouse gases be integrated into fiscal and economic policies (p.17, 63). An additional recommendation made by the Organization is monitoring mitigation efforts by way of the Sustainability Development Goals (SDGs), especially Goal 13. Goal 13 is linked to the right to health as recognized by the Paris Agreement and numerous human rights instruments.

National Security (Re)Visioned

In 1977, scientist and founder of the Worldwatch Institute, Lester Brown, wrote the prescient Redefining National Security. In his essay, Brown suggests that the “overwhelmingly military character” of national security ignores natural threats to human societies and ecosystems. Brown observed these “new threats to national security will challenge the information-gathering and analytical skills of government” (p. 36). More importantly, Brown notes

the purpose of national security deliberations should not be to maximize military strength but to maximize national security. If this latter approach were used, public resources would be distributed more widely among the many threats to national security – both the traditional military one and the newer, less precisely measured ones. (p.37)

To place Brown's comments in context, a Joint Chiefs of Staff publication titled Doctrine for the Armed Forces of the United States (JP 1, March 25, 2013) describes national security historically as a

Collective term encompassing both national defense and foreign relations of the United States with the purpose of gaining: a. military or defense advantage over any foreign nation or group of nations; b. A favorable foreign relations position; or c. A defense posture capable of successfully resisting hostile or destructive action from within or without, overt or covert. (GL-9)

On the tail end of COP24, I find myself pondering Brown's ideas, especially in terms of how climate change is portrayed in major defense and intelligence
publications over the past decade. Even though the current U.S. response to COP24 favors a type of denial rooted in vested interest, I was curious to learn how certain agencies, bodies, and presidential administrations viewed climate change in their public communiques. To this end, I reviewed a number of official federal publications to discover how these entities came to designate climate change as a social problem in its own right – that is, “what people decide what is and is not a social problem by the way they react to things.” [1]

The Publications: Glacial Thinking & Hashing Out A Problem

The U.S. Department of Defense's (DOD) Quadrennial Defense Review (QDR), the Intelligence Community's (IC) Global Trends (compiled by National Intelligence Council, or NIC) Global Trends and the Office of the Director of National Intelligence's (ODNI) annually published Worldwide Threat Assessment of the U.S. Intelligence Community, and the quasi-annual National Security Strategy of the United States, published by the Office of the President, are but a few official publications where the deep connections between climate change and national security are inconsistently identified and analyzed. Below I report on how connections between climate change and national security are reported these publications.

Defense

The Quadrennial Defense Review was first published in 1997 and ceased in 2017. It is indeed a puzzlement that discussion of climate change wasn't included in the early iterations of the QDR, for as Michael Fincham reports in October 2003, "a little known think tank in the Department of Defense quietly released a report warning that climate change could happen suddenly - so suddenly it could pose a major threat to our country's national security." In response to the lack of climate discussion in the QDR, John T. Ackerman, Air Command and Staff College, Maxwell AFB, argued for DOD to include the influence of climate change on the armed forces. It isn't until the 2010 version of the QDR that climate change is identified as an "accelerant of instability and conflict" and that "extreme weather events may lead to increased demands for defense support" (p. 85). [2]

In the final volume of QDR published in 2014, climate change, food, water, energy security, and the search for new technologies are examined in an interconnected manner - in fact, this volume of the QDR distinguished climate change as a "threat multiplier," a concept used by CNA in 2007 in its report National Security and the Threat of Climate Change. The QDR observes that climate-related change is a security threat to countries worldwide:

The pressures caused by climate change will influence resource competition while placing additional burdens on economies, societies, and governance institutions around the world. These effects are threat multipliers that will aggravate stressors abroad such as poverty, environmental degradation,
political instability, and social tensions – conditions that can enable terrorist activity and other forms of violence. (p. 8)

Lastly, DoD published its Report on National Security Implications of Climate-Related Risks and a Changing Climate as part of the H.R. 4870, the Department of Defense Appropriations Act (July 23, 2015). DoD writes that this report reinforces the fact that global climate change will have wide-ranging implications for U.S. national security interests over the foreseeable future because it will aggravate existing problems such as poverty, social tensions, environmental degradation, ineffectual leadership, and weak political institutions that threaten domestic stability in a number of countries. (p. 3)

This report singled out “four general areas of climate-related security risks” as targeted by Geographic Combatant Commands (the various “COMs,” such as USCENTCOM, USNORTHCOM, etc) are outlined as:

- Persistently recurring conditions such as flooding, drought, and higher temperatures
- Extreme weather events
- Sea level rise and temperature changes
- Decreases in Arctic ice cover, type, and thickness (p.3-5)

The IC / National Intelligence Council

The National Intelligence Council's Global Trends is issued every four years since 1997 and details "how key trends and uncertainties might shape the world over the next 20 years to help senior US leaders think and plan for the longer term."


In September 2016, NIC released Implications for US National Security of Anticipated Climate Change. In this report, the Council identified that climate change “and its resulting effects are likely to pose wide-ranging national security challenges for the United States and other countries over the next 20 years” (p.3). NIC outlined the following “pathways” where national security may be compromised by the effects of climate related-change:
• Threats to the stability of countries
• Heightened social and political tensions
• Adverse effects on food prices and availability
• Increased risks to human health
• Negative impacts on investments and economic competitiveness
• Potential climate discontinuities and secondary surprises.

The IC /
Office of the Director of National Intelligence

The first Worldwide Threat Assessment of the U.S. Intelligence Community was published with a “statement for the record” by ODNI John Negroponte; the 2006 and 2007 volumes center on the contemporary problem of terrorism (ODNI Negroponte), with much the same commentary in the 2008 edition (ODNI J. Michael McConnell). However, beginning with the 2009 volume (ODNI Dennis C. Blair), climate change increasingly becomes a priority security issue alongside terrorism, cybersecurity, resource depletion, energy security, WMDs, pandemics, and mass atrocities; in the 2014 volume (ODNI Clapper), the Assessment recognizes that “extreme weather events” and a “general warming trend is probably affecting weather and ecosystems...in recent years, local food, water, energy, health, and economic security have been episodically degraded worldwide by severe weather conditions” (p.11). By the 2015 edition, climate change is singled out as a factor “in the distribution of vectors for diseases” and extreme weather events (p.11).

With the 2016 annual volume (ODNI Clapper), the Assessment dramatically shifts in its discussion in connecting

extreme weather, climate change, environmental degradation, related rising demands for food and water, poor policy responses, and inadequate critical infrastructure will probably exacerbate and – and potentially spark – political instability, adverse health conditions, and humanitarian crises in 2016. (p.13-14)

The 2017 report (ODNI Coats) is noteworthy for the IC's statement on the record that they “assess national security implications of climate change but do not adjudicate the science of climate change.” In its report, the ODNI/IC defers to science in the form of

US government-coordinated scientific reports, peer reviewed literature, and reports produced by the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), which is the leading international body responsible for assessing the science related to climate change. (p.14)

The 2018 Worldwide Threat Assessment of the U.S. Intelligence Community
(ODNI Coats) again stresses extreme weather events, a “warming climate,” and other “drivers” that raise the risk of humanitarian disasters, conflict, water, food shortages, population migration, labor shortfalls, price shocks, and power outages. Research has not identified indicators of tipping points in climate-linked earth systems, suggesting the possibility of abrupt climate change. (p.16)

The President /
The National Security Strategy of the United States

It is the National Security Strategy of the United States (NSS) that represents the official face of U.S. national security priorities. [4] The NSS is submitted in classified and unclassified versions as directed by the Goldwater-Nichols Department of Defense Department Reorganization Act of 1986 (P.L. 99-433, October 1, 1986), which states that a sitting president “shall transmit to Congress each year a comprehensive report on the national security strategy of the United States.” Per the Act, the NSS is distributed “on the date on which the President submits to Congress the budget for the next fiscal year.”

Among the information included in the annual NSS volume is “a comprehensive description and discussion of the following: (1) The worldwide interests, goals, and objectives of the United States that are vital to the national security of the United States.” NSS editions are variously titled; for instance, the Clinton administration's NSS are creatively titled National Security Strategy of Engagement and Enlargement (1994) and National Security Strategy for a New Century (1997).

It is important to note that even though mandated by Goldwater-Nichols, historically the NSS has not been annually published. Case in point, the NSS was unevenly published from the Reagan through Obama administrations; in particular, the George W. Bush and Barack Obama presidential administrations are notable for not publishing the annual NSS as required by Goldwater-Nichols.

A quick read of NSS volumes indicate that climate change was not historically a priority issue. However, certain NSS volumes compiled by presidential administrations that do include discussion of this security challenge are:

- The 1991 NSS (GHW Bush administration) briefly mentions climate change;
- The 1994 NSS (Clinton) is ambitious in its discussion of a National (Action) Climate Plan and compliance with the Montreal Protocol on ozone depleting chemicals. The idea of environmental security – that is, environmental degradation has a resulting impact on national security - has its genesis in
this NSS [5];

- **The 1997 NSS** (Clinton) suggests that climate change, associated environmental challenges, and sustainable development require global partnerships;

- **The 2002 NSS** (GW Bush) notes that “economic growth should be accompanied by global efforts to stabilize greenhouse gas emissions associated with this growth, containing them at a level that prevents dangerous human interference with the global climate.” The Bush NSS also recommends increased spending on “research and conservation technologies”;

- **The 2010 NSS** (Obama) suggests that a “global effort to combat climate change must draw on national actions,” but these efforts must be “incentivized, so nations that choose to do so their part see the benefits of responsible actions”;

- **The 2015 NSS** (Obama) perhaps goes deeper than any other NSS published during previous administrations in thinking of climate change in a ecosystems way. That is, this NSS not only notes the “accelerating impact of climate change,” but plainly states “climate change is an urgent and growing threat to our national security, contributing to increased natural disasters, refugee flows, and conflicts over basic resources like food and water. The present day effects of climate change are being felt from the Arctic to the Midwest.”

This NSS also marks international progress and U.S. contributions to the global community in targeting emissions through the Climate Action Plan, Copenhagen Accord ([UN Conference on Climate Change](https://un.org/), 2009), the [Green Climate Fund](https://unfccc.int), and the Montreal Protocol.

The sole NSS issued by the Trump administration in 2017 characterizes climate in terms of “America’s business climate” (p.21), an “investor-friendly climate” (p.22), and “energy dominance” within the context of an “anti-growth energy agenda” (p.22). In what can only be characterized as a deliberate lack of vision – *not ignorance* - climate change, global warming, greenhouse gases, extreme weather events, water security and scarcity, and their effects on U.S. domestic and national security are noticeably absent - all factors that press on human security. [6] This is not only a glaring error, it is disturbingly contradictory, as Congress and the Trump administration seemingly “affirm that climate change threatens security” and requested the U.S. military to plan for the effects of climate change.

Also absent from the Trump administration's NSS and 2017-2018 defense and IC publications is Obama Presidential Memorandum (September 21, 2016), [Climate Change and National Security](https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/). The Memorandum
establishes a framework and directs Federal departments and agencies (agencies) to perform certain functions to ensure that climate change-related impacts are fully considered in the development of national security doctrine, policies, and plans.

Conclusion
Climate change is now almost universally recognized as a grave challenge to the national security of the U.S. and its global counterparts. As illustrated in this essay, it took decades for climate change and its association with national security to capture the imagination of certain federal bodies. The particular publications discussed here exemplify how challenges are characterized in the federal universe and elevated to the status of an “official” or recognized social problem; on another level, these publications stand as forecasting tools and indicators of warning and uncertainty. In effect, the documents produced by DoD, the Intelligence Community, and presidential administrations are fodder for policymaking and sustainable action if political will prevails.

Notes


2. DoD's Climate Change Adaptation Roadmap, Department of Defense Strategic Sustainability Performance Plan FY-2014 acknowledges the critical role of the 2010 QDR; we are left to wonder, however, why only one climate roadmap was compiled by DoD. See https://dod.defense.gov/News/News-Releases/News-Release-View/Article/605221/


4. McClelland argues that the NSS should not be viewed as a “grand strategy,” and offers numerous examples where specific volumes may be considered forays into propaganda. See Patrick A. McClelland (2007), The United States National Security Strategy: Grand Strategy or Propaganda, Thesis, National Defense University, Joint Advanced Warfighting School, June 15, ADA468868, https://apps.dtic.mil/docs/citations/ADA468868

5. See Gareth Porter's (1995) Environmental security as a national security issue,
Current History, 94(592), 218-222.

6. It appears that discussion of climate is also absent from the Affordable Clean Energy Proposal that appeared in the Federal Register, August 21, 2018, which captures this Administration's short term thinking.


8. Update: A nine month joint investigation conducted by NBCNews.com and InsideClimate News found among other concerns that "black flag" conditions, or the DOD’s index for intensity of physical exercise in conditions of 90 degrees and above, are not being consistently enforced. For example, the investigation found that despite acknowledging the risks of climate change, the military continues to wrestle with finding a sustainable, comprehensive strategy for how to train in sweltering conditions. The military's investigative reports, often heavily redacted, show evidence of disregard for heat safety rules that led to the deaths of service members.

9. Update: In anticipation of the DOD's June, 2019, Report to Congress Department of Defense Arctic Strategy, the American Security Project (May 29, 2019) wrote that "one thing that shouldn't be expected in the 2019 Arctic Strategy is the term climate change. Despite the overwhelming evidence of climate change, the current US administration has refused to acknowledge the problem." In its current published form, the Report "outlines DoD’s strategic approach for protecting U.S. national security interests in the Arctic in an era of strategic competition" (p. 1). Although the Strategy outlines the region's "changing physical environment" (p. 3-4), there is little discussion on how the DOD will meet the challenges of climate change in an already harsh and inhospitable environment.

10. Update: The Congressional Research Service (CRS) recommends in its Military Installations and Sea-Level Rise that definitions of extreme weather be standarized across DOD. CRS writes that "a standard list of extreme weather definitions could assist DOD with assessing and preparing for sea level-related and other impacts of extreme weather events on coastal and noncoastal installations."

11. Update: In its executive summary, a recent 2019 report from the U.S. War College states that
As an organization that is, by law, non-partisan, the Department of Defense (DoD) is precariously unprepared for the national security implications of climate change-induced global security challenges...The study does, however, assume that human behavior can mitigate both the size and consequences of negative impacts that result from climate change. (Brosig, Frawley, Hill, et al, n.d., p.1)

The report, *Implications of Climate Change for the U.S. Army*, lays out problems and recommendations that include timing/urgency and demand for resources. Problem 1.1 for example, states:

Problem: The Lack of a Culture of Environmental Stewardship
Recommendation: Army leadership must create a culture of environmental consciousness, stay ahead of societal demands for environmental stewardship and serve as a leader for the nation or it risks endangering the broad support it now enjoys. Cultural change is a senior leader responsibility.
Implementation Timing: Now
Resource Requirements: Low

*Implications of Climate Change for the U.S. Army* concludes on a somber note

Foresight regarding such events would be nice. It would be nicer still if we could recognize more quickly what is happening right in front of us. That is the right starting point for thinking strategically about the warming climate. (Brosig, Frawley, Hill, et al, n.d., p.47)

This important document includes an appendix on the legality of "Weather Control" and discussion of the *Convention on the Prohibition of Military or any Hostile Use of Environmental Modification Techniques* (ENMOD) of 1976 (p. 50).