Climate change could be the next great military threat

By Lee Gunn | 20 October 2009

Article Highlights

* Although the United States has faced many threats over the last few ecades, climate change may be the most ominous.

* Specifically, it will contribute to resource scarcity, state failure, increasingly mobile populations, and regional instability.

* The U.S. military may not be the best body to tackle climate change, but it still should be quick to reassess its global engagement strategy and be proactive in minimizing the effects of climate change

on U.S. and international security.

The United States currently faces one of its greatest and most misunderstood threats: climate change. And as changing climate patterns affect the water supplies critical to human life and agriculture, as sea levels rise and threaten coastal communities, and as changes in the environment increasingly weaken marginal states, the implications for U.S. defense will only grow.

Specifically, instability and conflict abroad will affect three important dimensions of U.S. national security: how the United States chooses to use its power, how and where the U.S. military operates around the world, and with whom Washington will and will not ally itself.

How power is applied. As societies struggle to adapt to changing climate conditions, the U.S. military will be called on more frequently to provide assistance, support governments, fight extremism in weak states, and anticipate natural and human-made disasters. In short, Washington will have to consider carefully why U.S. defense forces fight.

Take Central and South Asia, for example. The region's main water

source--the Himalayan glaciers--continues to recede due to climate change. The trend will no doubt lead to a dramatic reduction in freshwater availability, particularly in Pakistan, India, Bangladesh, and parts of China. In fact, a 2007 U.S. Marine Corps report ranks Afghanistan, Pakistan, and India in the top 10 states at risk of instability and violent conflict over water.

A fight for resources among these states--which are already mired in violence and mutual suspicion--would be disastrous for U.S. security interests in the region, particularly since declining conditions among poor segments of the population would be a boon for terrorist and extremist groups' recruitment. Climate-intensified conflict between mobile populations seeking fresh water amid wanton state instability may prompt future policy makers to deploy U.S. forces not only to combat extremism in the region, but also to provide aid to the hungry and displaced.

How and where the military operates. Climate change also will force a reevaluation of how the United States operates its forces around the world. Facilities, logistics, and strategic planning will need to be reassessed. The British Indian Ocean Territory of Diego Garcia, for example, is home to a critical staging facility for U.S. and British naval and air forces operating in the Middle East and Central Asia. But this atoll sits just a few feet above sea level. If sea levels rise as projected, PDF the facility could be lost, forcing the U.S. and British militaries to adapt and adjust their logistics and operations throughout the region.

Who will U.S. allies be? Changing climate conditions also will test traditional alliances and may even inspire unexpected new ones as states grapple with altered topographies, climate refugees, and changes in commercial and economic circumstances.

For instance, the U.S. Navy has been concerned about the loss of sea ice in the Arctic for nearly a decade. Specifically, it worries that as the fabled Northwest Passage opens, military and commercial activities there will increase. One need not look further than the 2007 Russian expedition that planted its flag on the seabed at the North Pole. Not surprisingly, Canada, Norway, Denmark, and the United States--all bordering the Arctic--reacted critically to Russia's perceived act of encroachment.

In addition, the effects of climate change could strain U.S. relations with Mexico. As Latin American water and arable land resources decline, poverty and internal unrest are likely to spread in the region, leading to increased human migration northward--both legal and illegal. Mexico's perceived inability to staunch the flow north would likely raise tensions with Washington, hampering U.S. collaboration in the fight against Mexico-based drug cartels.

Given all of this, the decision, therefore, isn't whether U.S. planners and strategists should adapt and prepare, but how they should adapt and prepare. Looking ahead, China is predicting the loss of 5-10 percent of its wheat harvest by 2030 due to climate change. In southern Sudan and the Darfur region, existing conflicts will be severely exacerbated by increasingly scarce water, food, and arable land. Responding to these and myriad other climate-influenced changes presents great challenges for the United States and the international community--far beyond the specific capabilities of the U.S. military.

Thus, here's how Washington should begin preparing for the consequences associated with climate change:

* Invest in capabilities within the U.S. government (including the Defense Department) to manage the humanitarian crises--such as a new flow of “climate refugees”--that may accompany climate change and subsequently overwhelm local governments and threaten critical U.S.

interests;

* Prepare military officers and troops to address the security and humanitarian needs of resource-stressed populations and climate refugees;

* Expand global public health programs (e.g., malarial eradication);

* Negotiate an agreement with Canada and Mexico to govern the use of fresh water in North America;

* Lead the world in developing conflict-resolution mechanisms to mediate between climate change's winners and losers.

If it doesn't take these steps, the United States will be ill-equipped to face climate-induced threats when they're most acute, forcing future generations to deal with a world full of conflict, disease, hunger, displacement, and extremism.