

Climate Change and the Department of Defense

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For 5,000 years, humans lived in the past tense: "Yesterday was the same as tomorrow." For the next 500 years people lived in the present tense: "Today can be whatever we want it to be." But now, for the next 50 years we must start living in the future tense: "Tomorrow's social, economic and political constraints must become today's reality."

"DoD (Department of Defense) recognizes the reality of climate change and the significant risk it poses to U.S. interests globally. The National Security Strategy, issued in February 2015, is clear that climate change is an urgent and growing threat to our national security, contributing to increased natural disasters, refugee flows, and conflicts over basic resources such as food and water. These impacts are already occurring, and the scope, scale, and intensity of these impacts are projected to increase over time"

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The Department of Defense budget is over 50% of all discretionary spending in the United States, exceeding the sum of all Federal money spent on health, education, science, veteran's services, and national infrastructure. The primary justification for the budget is to fight radical Islam and to provide for national security.

Yet, as important as the war on terror is, the actual number of deaths, the physical damage done, and the number of lives and amount of property that potentially are at stake, is small in comparison to the much larger looming threat to national security posed by climate change.

The Defense Department appropriations bill of 2015 requested the Department of Defense to identify the most serious and likely climate-related security risks. In response the Defense Department confirmed that the defense strategy is to: (1) protect the homeland, (2) build security globally, and (3) project power and win decisively. The role of climate change was simply presented as increasing the risk of instability and conflict overseas. The role of the Defense Department was to identify an appropriate response to those challenges within the constraints of the three pillars of national defense strategy.

The Department of Defense generally views climate change as a security risk because it reduces the ability of governments to meet the basic needs of their populations: "Communities and states that are already fragile and have limited resources are significantly more vulnerable to disruption and far less likely to respond effectively and be resilient to new challenges. Case studies indicate that in addition to exacerbating existing risks from other factors (e.g., social, economic, and political fault lines), climate-induced stress can generate new vulnerabilities (e.g., water scarcity) and thus contribute to instability and conflict even in situations not previously considered at risk."

The balance between climate change and terrorism as a national security risk is tipped in the wrong direction. Climate change is the number one threat, yet we spend almost nothing from the Department of Defense Budget preparing for this issue.

The Fiscal Year 2016 Budget for the Department of Defense was organized around the three pillars of the national defense strategy to "progress toward achieving full spectrum combat readiness by FY 2023 for the Army and the Air Force, the Navy's fleet response plan by 2020, and the Marine Corps' Force Posture Plan by 2020." The goal of the budget was to reverse the effects of sequestration:

“Providing stability in shipbuilding to affordably deliver war fighting requirements. The FY 2016 budget includes construction of 48 ships across the Future Years Defense Program (FYDP)...The FY 2016 budget also funds the overhaul/life extension of the *USS GEORGE WASHINGTON* (CVN-73), its Carrier Air Wing, and associated force structure. If the Department returns to sequester-level funding, the Navy will be forced to retire this carrier and air wing, and it will be unable to procure approximately 9 ships and 35 aircraft over the FYDP. These cuts would jeopardize the Navy’s modernization and recapitalization plans, threatening both readiness and the industrial base. (Page 2-3)

The science is clear. Unless we invest more of our discretionary spending to combat climate change, and prevent environmental collapse, the striking capacity of a carrier air wing is a meaningless asset.

Climate change is like an epic science fiction invasion of the entire planet from outer space, with the exception that there are no targets to shoot at – it is an invisible force of nature: world-wide rising sea levels, diminishing coast lines, sever storms, food and water shortages, humanitarian refugee and migration crisis, failing eco-systems, and disruptions to health, education, transportation, trade, finance and communication systems – a failed planet – with more people than available basic resources.

“Some warming is now inevitable. But, there comes a point when the worst effects will be irreversible. And time is running out. We all know what needs to happen. It is no secret... This is not a problem for another generation. It has serious implications for how we live right now.”

President Barak Obama

The only way to defend the homeland is through prevention. After societal collapse, projecting power and winning decisively will not an option, and the opportunity for global security will have been lost because it was never a military possibility. Climate change and the collapse that will follow is the result of current human activity: we have met the enemy, and them is us.

Climate change and the consequence of societal collapse is a National Security issue, and the Department of Defense is not going to protect us from this threat. Just the opposite, our preoccupation with military to keep us safe is standing in the way of coming to terms with the question of our time: How to live peacefully and sustainably on a crowded planet in the 21st Century.



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