

Opinion: Climate change can threaten defence plans

Ignoring the various impacts that climate change can have on internal, regional or even international affairs could lead to defence planners facing even more obstacles than expected, suggests Rebecca R Rubin

Observers may debate exactly when, where and how climate change and environmental developments will contribute to or drive forces of internal and regional instability, and even armed conflict among nations.

But the defence planner who ignores the probability that global climate change and its resulting environmental impact will have such destabilising effects should proceed at considerable peril.

It should be beyond question that an assessment of these issues must be an integral part of total defence analysis and planning.

Reduced access to potable water; impaired food production as a result of either rising temperatures, desertification, lack of water, land loss, or flooding; and displacement of populations, among other environmentally driven factors, are all well known consequences of climate change. These factors will in turn stress the ability of nations to meet the essential needs of their populations, as well as to govern and maintain peaceful relations with neighbours claiming access to the same, increasingly scarce resources.

Conflicts could intensify

Climate change and its associated negative effects will increase the potential for failed states, which are well known havens for terrorist activities, as well as for internal armed conflict that can spill easily across borders. Competition for reduced or now-unreliable supplies of clean water and other resources (such as fisheries) will exacerbate the potential for conflict. And in this cauldron of confrontation rests the horrifying potential for the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction, dramatically raising the risks, and the stakes, for all.

Although there has been evidence of climate-driven events leading to instability for some time, US traditional defence planning processes have not adequately incorporated the potential implications and impact of these climate and environmentally driven effects.

We believe that one essential outcome of the 2009 Quadrennial Defense Review (QDR) must be to institutionalise such an assessment of climate change and environmental developments as core elements of the US defence planning process.

The Department of Defense (DoD) and the intelligence community must become better at monitoring and predicting where climate change and environmental developments will

contribute to instability that could lead to the requirement to employ US forces, alone or in combination with allies and friends.

In addition, as the Military Advisory Board to the Center for Naval Analyses said in its 2007 report on National Security and the Threat of Climate Change, the US needs to "commit to global partnerships that help less developed nations build the capacity and resiliency to better manage climate impacts".

The implications of implementing such a commitment on US force structure, weapons acquisition, personnel management, career development, professional military education and training, among other sections, would be extremely significant.

The implications of the US committing to a global partnership to fulfill this commitment would be even more significant. It would represent a significant new step on the long journey to co-operative development of global environment monitoring and forecasting tools.

This, in turn, could lead to the ability for interventions that would prevent the root causes of environmentally driven instability and conflict or, at the very least, to anticipate and secure global or regional responses that could deter or minimise any conflict that might result from the emergent or gradual arrival of such conditions.

Not only would better global monitoring and forecasting be able to improve conflict avoidance methods in areas of the world more prone to environmental disasters, it would also help defence planners to prepare to manage responses to these instabilities and conflicts that might not be avoided.

Strategies that prevent and address climate-induced stressors will drain some of the breeding grounds of despair that foster the growth of extremists and terrorist groups. A problem for all nations

Finally, one should never think that these issues affect instability and military planning only in response to potential events in the developing world. It can also happen in the US. Hurricane Katrina's impact in the Gulf Coast and New Orleans proved that social upheaval arising from climate can afflict a developed nation and draw considerably upon its military resources.

Understanding the long arc and the near-term realities of climate change and the impact of its environmental consequences are critical national security and defence planning imperatives that need to be formally incorporated into our defence planning processes.

A failure to do so, and a failure of the QDR to establish this planning paradigm as a central defence planning element, will leave our nation's security planners subject, quite literally, to the whims of the weather.



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