

Is Climate a National Security Problem?

Jeff Kueter

President, George C. Marshall Institute

On May 3, Defense Secretary Leon Panetta told the Environmental Defense Fund that “the area of climate change has a dramatic impact on national security” because the various purported impacts of a warming climate “all raise demand for humanitarian assistance and disaster relief.” According to the Defense Department’s press account (“Panetta: Environment Emerges as National Security Concern,” *American Forces Press Service*, May 3, 2012), the Secretary then called for ratification of the Law of the Sea Treaty and discussed the military’s concerns about fuel costs.

The linkage between climate change and U.S. national security concerns is tenuous. While the Defense Department has significant interests in examining its use of energy, those concerns are not related to the climate-conflict hypothesis. Energy is expensive, requires a complicated supply and logistics operation, and puts men and women in harm’s way as fuel convoys move through hostile environments. None of those concerns are related to climate change and any steps the military may take in this area will (or, at least, ought to be) judged on the merits of their contribution to military missions. No reasonable or unreasonable case can be made for DOD energy consumption being anything more than a trivial contributor to anthropogenic climate effects.

But, the linkage between “rising sea levels, severe droughts, the melting of the polar caps, the more frequent and devastating natural disasters” and increasing demand for U.S. disaster and humanitarian operations cited by Secretary Panetta rests on little more than conjecture and speculation. Predicting the future in a way that is meaningful for preparing strategy, budgets, programs or the composition and character of the nation’s armed forces is challenging enough in those areas where defense planners have great experience and deep understanding. Projecting the assumed effects of human-induced climate change is imprecise. Climate forecasting rests on a mountain of assumptions about how the natural climate operates, how climatic variables interact with each other, how those interactions are best mathematically represented in a climate model, and whether there is adequate data to measure the variables. The climate models used to forecast the future fail to deliver (and may be incapable of producing) useful predictions at the regional level, which is the frame of analysis most pertinent to defense and security planning.

The Marshall Institute — Science for Better Public Policy

The depictions of the future that are used are consequently highly uncertain, but uniformly suggestive of terrible environmental outcomes. To complete the climate-security argument, the intelligence community and various think tanks have asked retired generals and admirals, intelligence analysts, and other national security scholars to uncritically accept those conclusions about the environment and deliver assessments of what the world would be like should such scenarios unfold. To no great surprise, the conclusions about the security implications also are negative.

None of the climatological phenomena mentioned by Secretary Panetta directly impact U.S. security. They have to cause something else to happen and whatever that is (usually refugees or state instability) has to be substantial enough to warrant a response by the U.S. The empirical studies done on the subject suggest strongly that neither environmental stresses nor refugees are significant sources of international conflict. For example, three Norwegian scholars recently examined the linkage between drought and the onset of conflict for *International Security*, a preeminent security studies journal. They found “little scientific evidence” in support of the claims and noted that “there is no direct, short-term relationship between drought and civil war onset, even within contexts presumed most conducive to violence.”

Examining the climate wars argument in the *Washington Quarterly*, Dr. Bruno Tertrais of the Foundation for Strategic Research notes:

“History shows that “warm” periods are more peaceful than “cold” ones. In the modern era, the evolution of the climate is not an essential factor to explain collective violence. Nothing indicates that “water wars” or floods of “climate refugees” are on the horizon. And to claim that climate change may have an impact on security is to state the obvious – but it does make it meaningful for defense planning.”

The natural variability of climate guarantees there will be droughts, storms, and natural disasters. Individuals, nations, and international organizations ought to rightly prepare to meet those challenges as they are clearly knowable. In doing so, they prepare as well for whatever impact may arise from human-induced climate change, particularly on the time-scale relevant to defense budgeting, force planning, and development of strategic thought. Further, as Joshua Busby rightly notes, “a modest investment in risk reduction and adaptation in poor countries will likely be much more cost-effective and security enhancing than responding to humanitarian disasters through military and relief operations.”

If there is no empirical basis to believe that climate causes conflict, what is it that Secretary Panetta would have the U.S. prepare to address? The answer, as Busby implies, is greater use of the American military as the world’s FEMA or Red Cross. The assumption Secretary Panetta asks the public to accept, and he is not alone in doing so, is that there is a moral obligation on the part of the United States to “help” those harmed or displaced around the world. Without question the U.S. is a philanthropic nation, quick and generous to aid those in distress. Over the years, the U.S. military, by virtue of its logistical acumen and available resources and manpower, has become the lead agent in government for responding to these crises. In a world where hypothetically these humanitarian crises are more frequent, the assumption is that the U.S. and its military will be ever more engaged.

That is not necessarily so, of course. The United States does not respond now to every humanitarian crisis and these types of operations are a relatively new occurrence, enabled by fast transportation abilities and responsive logistics systems. We, as a nation, elected to assume this role for ourselves and one can imagine a time when we might redefine our national interests more narrowly. In a world where there are more humanitarian crises, or we are more aware of them, just such a redefinition of roles and interests is likely, if for no other reason than resource constraints.

In short, the United States faces many security challenges in the months and years ahead – environmentally induced conflict ranks low amongst them.