



November 28, 2014, 12:00 pm

Strengthening national security through climate resiliency

By USMC Brigadier General Stephen Cheney (ret.) and Andrew Holland

It is a dangerous and unpredictable world. With terror in the Middle East, a Russian invasion into Ukraine, tensions over borders in the South China Sea, and other threats, our military has many missions to prepare for, even as Congress cuts the military budget.

Unfortunately, we do not get to choose the next war, and global crises are not constrained by budgetary concerns like “sequestration.” In a world already facing many threats, militaries around the world have recognized a new one: climate change.

The U.S. Department of Defense reminds us that climate change poses **immediate risks** to our national security. Our military bases are vulnerable and will require expensive investments to simply stay above water. Our homeland security is directly threatened by extreme weather events. And, climate change will act as a “threat multiplier” that increases the risks of conflict around the world.

While no war is caused by temperature increases alone, the effects of climate change – drought, sea level rise, or extreme weather events – will amplify already existing threats like hunger, poverty, refugee migration, and resource conflicts. The American military will be called to intervene, even as we react to impacts at home, and that means that we must prepare.

A recent **report from the Department of Defense** stated that, “The military could be called upon more often to support civil authorities, and provide humanitarian assistance and disaster relief in the face of more frequent and more intense natural disasters. Our coastal installations are vulnerable to rising sea levels and increased flooding, while droughts, wildfires, and more extreme temperatures could threaten many of our training activities.”

Our nation must employ a multi-front strategy to manage this risk: this is not a military mission alone.

Our national security leaders are assessing where other countries’ climate vulnerabilities lie, and planning for contingency operations. The Department of Energy is working to develop low-carbon energy resources, and deploy them with partner nations around the world. The U.S. Treasury is engaged in the development of a new multilateral fund, called the Green Climate Fund that will reduce climate vulnerabilities and increase the resources that partner countries can devote to deploying cleaner energy technologies. These are smart, cost-effective ways to integrate our foreign policy, energy security, and national security goals.

The US has pledged a \$3 billion investment in the Green Climate Fund. Additional commitments to the Green Climate Fund from other countries have brought the total current capitalization to \$9.3 billion. This new fund will use public and private financing to help poor countries adapt to climate change and to invest in clean, low-emissions energy resources.

America’s \$3 billion pledge is cost-effective because it will address the threats presented by climate change *before* American troops have to be deployed. This investment is a continuation of American leadership: in 2008, the Bush Administration gave \$2 billion of a worldwide \$8 billion investment in the Climate Investment Fund, a predecessor to this fund.

For the first two weeks of December, countries will be meeting in Lima, Peru to work toward stronger global collaboration to address climate change. There is new momentum going into these meetings after aggressive diplomacy by Secretary of State John Kerry and others helped achieve a historic agreement between U.S. and China to limit dangerous carbon emissions and ramp up renewable energy production.

As world leaders prepare for next year’s Paris climate conference, these steps demonstrate credible efforts to implement real solutions are surfacing.

When other countries fear the effects of climate change, helping prevent the worst scenarios can build goodwill beyond just climate preparedness - it can build stronger diplomatic bonds across a range of national priorities.

As an example of how this is more than simply goodwill, we should look to the Pacific. Climate change is the largest existential threat for many small Pacific island states, where a combination of sea level rise and extreme weather is already causing people to question the viability of their countries.

The commander of the U.S. Pacific Command (PACOM), Admiral Locklear, has said that climate change will threaten the region over the long term more than any other threat. PACOM is often the **most important diplomatic engagement** for many small Pacific nations. After major disasters strike this area, **U.S. Navy and Marines** are the only organizations in the Pacific with the logistical capabilities to respond in time in a large enough force to make a difference. Targeted investment before disasters hit could build resilience and strengthen important diplomatic ties in the region.

If America acts now to tackle climate change, we have the opportunity to strengthen our national security, and increase our global influence through deft exercise of diplomacy. We know that “an ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure” – it is simply good risk management.

Cheney is the CEO of the American Security Project. He served as the Commanding General of Marine Corps Recruit Depot Parris Island. **Holland** is the senior fellow for Energy and Climate at the American Security Project.