

The war against warming

Military and intelligence experts become increasingly focused on the “climate security” threat. **Keith Kloor** reports.

Shortly before Rear Admiral Neil Morisetti came to Washington DC on 29 October to discuss the links between climate change and geopolitical instability, the stage was being set on both sides of the Atlantic.

In September, Morisetti was appointed as the United Kingdom’s newly minted climate and energy security envoy. Later in the same month, the US Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) announced it was opening a special centre on climate change, which would assess “the national security impact of phenomena such as desertification, rising sea levels, population shifts and heightened competition for natural resources”. In October, the UK government then unveiled a glossy, colour-coded map detailing how global warming could lead to water and food shortages, extended drought, mass migration and violent conflicts, if action to curtail greenhouse gases wasn’t taken at the upcoming Copenhagen summit.

At the Washington DC meeting, Morisetti joined a panel of military experts from seven other nations at the Brookings Institution, a policy think tank. Together with senior, mostly retired, officers from Bangladesh, Guyana, India, Mauritania, Nepal, the Netherlands and the United States, they laid out the security implications of climate change. By that stage, President Obama and leading congressional Democrats had been talking up the “climate security” angle. So too had some military hawks, such as the former Republican senator of Virginia, John Warner, who on October 28 testified in support of the US congressional climate bill, arguing that the bill’s passage was a national security imperative.

As well as outlining the nascent “climate security” threat, Morisetti and his military peers issued a statement asserting that “incremental, and at times, abrupt, climate change is resulting in an unprecedented scale of human misery... with consequential security implications that need to be addressed urgently”. Additionally, the international group of experts called on all governments to “work for an ambitious and equitable international agreement” at the upcoming



Rear Admiral Neil Morisetti, the UK's climate and energy security envoy.

climate conference in Copenhagen this December, where policymakers from 192 nations will wrangle over the details of a treaty to replace the Kyoto Protocol when it expires.

STRATEGIC INTERESTS

Although a sense of urgency has been building in military and intelligence circles around the world for some time, particularly in the United States¹, it's largely been think tanks and illustrious military advisory boards (comprised of retired officers) doing all the heavy lifting. That Morisetti, a serving British naval officer for more than 30 years, has been given a highly visible government platform to convey the security component to climate change is thus notable. “The UK Ministry of Defence appointment of a serving officer for climate and security marks a new level of seriousness among one of the most influential militaries,” says Geoff Dabelko, director of the environmental change and security programme at the

Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars, Washington DC.

There is, after all, no one equivalent to Morisetti in President Obama's administration. But environmental security issues, such as climate change, are now in the process of being “mainstreamed” into national security planning at the US State Department and the Department of Defense, says Sherri Goodman, a senior vice president at the Center for Naval Analyses, Virginia. For example, Congress has mandated that climate security be addressed in the next Quadrennial Defense Review (QDR), due out in February. The QDR — a Defense Department planning document, is sure to contain many of the same scenarios that the Brookings group raised. Particularly, experts say the rapidly melting glaciers in the Himalayas are most worrisome. Goodman, a former deputy undersecretary of defense in the Clinton administration, says that flooding from glacial melt and loss of vital clean water source will probably “exacerbate instability in Pakistan, a

country where the United States has a key strategic interest”.

THE HARD SELL

In addition to forging greater cooperation between governments on such concerns, Morisetti says his larger goal as the British envoy is to “bring this discussion into the mainstream”. But this may prove a hard sell in the United States, where partisan politics threaten to sink the climate bill and poison the public dialogue over policy actions. Objecting to the formation of the CIA’s climate change centre, Republican Senator John Barrasso of Wyoming asserted in October that any resources spent on studying climate change will harm the agency’s capacity to spot terrorists. In a press statement, Barrasso asked: “Will someone sitting in a dark room watching

satellite video of northern Afghanistan now be sitting in a dark room watching polar ice caps?” Not at all, counters CIA spokeswoman Marie Harf. “This isn’t about deploying clandestine officers to take air samples in polluted cities or to monitor sea lions. It’s about developing analytical insights for policymakers.”

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John Barrasso

Despite mounting concern over climate change in military circles, the

chances of nations signing a legally binding treaty by the end of the year now look increasingly slim. But, says Dabelko, the relevance of the climate security issue is not contingent on what happens at Copenhagen. “Much of the security community’s analysis of climate and security links is completely independent of the political negotiation calendar,” he says. “In that way, the climate security focus should continue regardless of the outcome at Copenhagen.”

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