

# BRIEFER

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## Climate-Security a Reality, Not a Narrative

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*This report also featured on the humanitarian news site, [AlertNet](#)*

[AlertNet](#) posted an [interesting piece yesterday](#) titled “Climate Conversations – Climate-security as agent provocateur.” The author, Katie Harris of the London-based [Overseas Development Institute](#), rightly calls for “nuance” in making the case for the potential security and conflict implications of climate change. The essence of the article is that though the “frame” or “narrative” of climate-security may have generated increased interest and action from the world’s policy-makers, it can be dangerous if done poorly. We couldn’t agree more. Also, as Harris states, “for those who want to identify the possible connections between a changing climate and the potential for increased violent conflict, nuance is key...” Indeed it is! However, despite these wise words of caution, the article omits a couple key points that may address some of the author’s concerns, including the significant evolution of climate and security scholarship in recent years, and how climate-security is actually defined in this space, specifically in relation to conflict.

First, the climate and security discourse is evolving. More and more is being done to tease out the connections between climate change, security and conflict as additional regional and local climate data become available. There are too many reports to list here, but a number of recent studies from [Busby et al.](#), [Hsiang et al.](#), [Mabey et al.](#), [Werz &](#)

[Conley](#), and an entire special issue from the [Journal of Peace Research](#), come to mind. In this work, “the security implications of climate change” is no mere frame, but a well-analyzed reality and probability, which factor in a number of specific human variables in particular conflict-ridden and conflict-prone regions of the world, such as the Sahel and Central Asia. While more needs to be done to better incorporate non-environmental variables into such assessments (such as the numerous locale-specific social, political and economic drivers of conflict), the field has come a long way since the phrase “climate change is a security threat” was uttered late last century.

Second, the article repeats a common misconception about the climate-security discourse which we would be remiss to not address (and which we discussed in a [previous blog response](#) to an [AlertNet piece](#)). Harris states:

*In many parts of the world that have had the ‘climate-security’ spotlight shone on them, climate change is unlikely to be the biggest thing affecting their immediate security. I’m referring specifically to those places currently experiencing violent conflict.*

This is a perfectly reasonable statement. However, the serious scholars and practitioners in the climate-security sphere rarely, if ever, refer to climate change as “the biggest thing affecting the immediate security” of people in countries experi-

encing, or likely to experience, conflict. In most cases, climate change is treated as one serious variable among many, often defined as a “[threat multiplier](#)” or “[accelerant of instability](#).” In other words, the discourse is indeed sensitive to the other drivers of conflict, despite Harris’ assertion that climate-security is not “conflict sensitive.” Among those who are serious about exploring the connections, climate change is a phenomenon that in many cases may exacerbate the current tensions that lead to conflict, whether it is resource scarcity, economic disparity, population mobility, or poor governance. Climate change is not an independent variable looming out there on its own ([a recent panel discussion](#) hosted by the Woodrow Wilson Center fleshes out this concept brilliantly).

In this context, the assertion that climate change may be a security risk is not an alarmist tactic, by any means. It is the exploration of a very probable reality. And fully exploring this risk is a necessary prerequisite for developing solutions. As Harris states:

*The climate-security narrative continues to be pushed forward in 2012, without enough focus on the opportunities for collaboration, cooperation*

*and negotiation that are vital to avoid the very doomsday scenarios that are being promoted.*

Once again, agreed. But in order to focus on opportunities for cooperation, it is important to fully flesh out the climate-security risks that such cooperation must address in order to avoid these so-called “doomsday scenarios.” Continued research on the climate-security nexus, more work on further incorporating the non-environmental drivers of conflict into climate-security studies, and a continued promotion of the excellent work that has already been done, will be key for devising the smart and “conflict sensitive” solutions that Harris is calling for. Nuance is, indeed, key.

In short, we should not let the occasionally irresponsible use of the climate-security “frame” discredit the responsible scholarship addressing the climate-security “reality.” Harris’ article should be seen as a call to do more in this space, not less.

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