



Can Stoltenberg Tackle NATO's Climate Mission?

By Sherri Goodman, Francesco Femia and Caitlin Werrell

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Since the Soviet Union collapsed, analysts have asked again and again: "Whither NATO?" Russia put that debate to rest. But while Vladimir Putin's revanchist designs present the clearest threat to the alliance, this is not the Cold War world. Since 1991, the world population has increased by two billion, the internet and global marketplace connect nations across vast distances, and transnational threats, including state failure and the proliferation of nuclear materials, are on the rise. Overlaid on this landscape is climate change - the "[threat multiplier](#)" of the 21st century – which according to the Pentagon's 2014 [Quadrennial Defense Review](#), places significant strains on water, food and energy security. It's a threat to all nations, including those in the NATO alliance.

It is these choppy waters that Jens Stoltenberg, the next Secretary General of NATO, must navigate. Stoltenberg has a successful track record on traditional security issues *and* climate change, having [bolstered](#) Norwegian defense forces as Prime Minister, [negotiated resolution](#) of a long-standing border dispute with Russia, committed Norwegian forces to NATO missions, and acted as a climate envoy. Success in his new venture will depend on his ability to tackle these issues jointly.

What's climate change got to do with NATO?

While it seems strange to discuss NATO's climate posture as Russian forces mass on Europe's doorstep, the truth is that collective security institutions must have the capacity to manage multiple threats on multiple fronts – or as we say in America "walk and chew gum at the same time." Like threats from states, [threats from climate change](#) can be unpredictable and destabilizing. More extreme weather events will stress the NATO member state forces who are called upon as first responders. Stresses on [food production and prices](#) threaten NATO's backyard, as well as burden national budgets in a time of austerity. Rapid sea ice melt is shifting the geopolitics of the Arctic region, creating new challenges for member states bordering the Arctic. And water insecurity in regions of strategic concern to NATO, such as [North Africa and the Middle East](#), is contributing to the devastation of crops and livestock and widespread displacement of peoples.

These cascading disasters associated with climate change could diminish the capacity of a NATO whose forces and budgets are strained. If left unchecked, they could fray the bonds that hold the alliance together - just when those bonds are needed most.

NATO's track record on climate change

Secretary Generals have taken on climate change before. Jaap de Hoop Scheffer [highlighted](#) the threat in 2008, and in 2009 Secretary General Anders Fogh Rasmussen integrated climate concerns into NATO's [2010 Strategic Concept](#). And then...nothing very significant happened. Why the drop off? It's a complicated mix of competing priorities and declining political will, all while climatic risks have increased. In this context, holding the attention of NATO's most powerful members, as well as the international security community, will be critical.

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The Stoltenberg Fix

Despite legitimate competing priorities in Ukraine, Syria and Afghanistan, Secretary General-designate Stoltenberg has a responsibility to address the climate threat head on. Support from the alliance's major powers, and knowledge of climate risks, give him a unique authority to do so. Furthermore, the U.S. military – leader of the NATO military command structure - has been proactive in addressing climate threats as highlighted in the [2014 Quadrennial Defense Review](#), the [DoD Arctic Strategy](#), and robust statements by [Defense Secretary Hagel](#).

This lays the groundwork for Stoltenberg to make bold decisions on climate change, without taking his eye off other pressing concerns. The low-hanging fruit includes raising the profile of climate change at NATO summits and other security forums, encouraging member states to [integrate climate](#) into [intelligence assessments](#), national security and defense strategies, exercises and training for forces, supporting partner nation militaries to manage more frequent and severe natural disasters, advancing strategic investments in energy efficiency and renewable energy, and developing a [common NATO strategy](#) for addressing climate impacts on military operations. Such actions will help NATO avoid the higher costs of responding to these threats *post facto*.

Climate of opportunity...for now

As distinct from more unpredictable security threats, climate projections have given us considerable advanced warning of the range of probable outcomes to expect. But as the [scientific research confirms](#), climate change is not a future threat. It's here, and it is changing the very nature of the global security landscape. Institutions like NATO therefore have a shrinking window of opportunity to develop a durable and climate-resilient force. Stoltenberg faces no small task. But his breadth of experience, strong support from the United States – including U.S. military leadership on climate change - gives him a critical opportunity to prepare NATO for this uncertain future. Success in this objective could go a long way towards shaping regional and global responses to the emerging threats of the 21st century.

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