

THE U.S. ASIA-PACIFIC REBALANCE, NATIONAL SECURITY AND CLIMATE CHANGE

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How Focusing on Climate Security in the Pacific Can Strengthen Alliances: Lessons from the Global Defense Index on Climate Change for the U.S.

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The Climate Security Threats to the Asia-Pacific

Climate change is destabilizing global security around the world. The area around the Pacific is perhaps the most vulnerable to the effects of climate change because of how multiple threats overlap one another. Environmental factors like rising sea levels, declining fresh water availability, worsening food productivity, and the threat of more powerful tropical storms are combining with other factors like rapid urbanization in low-lying river-delta cities, deforestation of tropical forests, and international competition over access to energy resources to make a very dangerous cocktail of threats.

Together, all these dynamics could make ensuring security and stability around the Asian side of the Pacific Rim more difficult in the near term, as climate change acts as an “accelerant” of existing threats. Over the longer term, if climate change is unmitigated, it is not an exaggeration to say that the problems of sea level rise, water and food insecurity, and extreme weather could make some parts of the region ungovernable, even unlivable. For example, low-lying island states like the Marshall Islands, Tuvalu, or Kiribati could cease to exist, with nowhere for the tens of thousands of people living on them to go. On the Asian mainland, sea level rise threatens to inundate key food growing regions like the Mekong River Delta and threatens the long-term viability of major population centers like Shanghai, Jakarta, and Bangkok.

Countries of the Region are Aware of the Climate Threats

Given these threats, perhaps it is heartening that the governments and militaries of the countries

in the region are aware of the problems and are beginning to plan for the impacts. The American Security Project's Global Security Index on Climate Change has sought to quantify how countries around the world view the threats of climate change – and whether their militaries are preparing for it.¹ Even though many countries in the region face a full slate of more “traditional” security threats (like territorial disputes over sea boundaries, historical antagonisms, or the threats on the Korean peninsula), virtually all of the countries in East Asia, Southeast Asia, and Oceania view climate change as a threat to their national security – and most of them have integrated it into their military planning documents. This shared fear of the national security threats of climate change is one of the few things that the fractious nations of the region can all agree on; the U.S. should use this shared threat as a unifying message.

Broadly, these countries can be divided into three categories based on how they view the threats of climate change: (1) mostly developed countries that will provide military aid (let's call them security exporters); (2) victims of a changing climate (call them climate victims); and (3) middle income countries that know enough to be worried, but do not have detailed plans (call them wary watchers).

More developed countries around the periphery of the Pacific foresee that climate change could cause deep insecurity – especially for island states – and they know their militaries will be called in to respond. Perhaps the most active of these security exporters is Australia. Its 2013 Defence White Paper, for example, says:

The combination of the effects of climate change and resource pressures will increase the risk of insecurity and conflict, particularly internal instability in fragile states, many of which have increasingly large populations in areas that will be affected by climate change. These factors, taken together, point to an increasing demand for humanitarian assistance, disaster relief and stabilisation operations over coming decades.²

Other countries that see themselves as “exporters” of security in the region include New Zealand, South Korea, or Japan, each of which has included significant sections on disaster response and instability caused by climate change in their recent defense documents.

On the other hand, the small countries that see themselves as “targets” of climate change have become increasingly insistent about the threats their countries face. For small island states like Kiribati, the Marshall Islands, or Tuvalu, sea level rise makes climate change a truly existential threat – they are expected to be some of the world's foremost climate victims. For example, Manny Mori, the President of Micronesia has said: “We know that our continued peaceful existence is totally at risk. We know that the enemy that gives rise to these threats is climate change.”³ Unfortunately, most of these countries lack any defense planning capability; some have no regular

military forces at all. So, they face an existential threat with little capacity to respond to it.

In the middle of these two extremes lie the middle income countries that have some military and government capability to provide for security from the effects of climate change, but could be overwhelmed by repeated or particularly strong disasters. Countries with highly populated low-lying coastal regions, like Vietnam, Indonesia, the Philippines, or Thailand, are aware of the threat to their security, but an analysis of their defense documents show that they do not have definite policies for how to prepare for the effects of climate change. An example of the wary watchers is Indonesia's Ministry of Defense, saying "Global warming has resulted in extreme climate changes that hit almost all countries."⁴ No doubt this is an important statement, but there is little follow-up beyond that.

The United States, long the predominant military power in the region, understands the clear national security threats that climate change poses to the region. In 2013, Admiral Locklear, the four-star Admiral then commander of U.S. Pacific Command, called climate change the one threat that could destabilize the region over the long term more than any other. American leadership on climate security in the region could help solidify relationships and unify countries around a shared threat: it could even prove to be an effective way to engage with potential adversaries.

When then-Secretary of Defense Chuck Hagel was in Hawaii for the ASEAN Defense Ministers meeting on April 3, 2014, one of the subjects he talked about to the gathered defense ministers from ASEAN countries was preparing for the effects of climate change and disaster response. Building on this engagement will certainly help the United States and ASEAN countries respond to the next disaster – but it will also help restore American leadership overall throughout the region.

Lesson from Typhoon Haiyan Shows Importance of American Engagement

The 2013 storm season in the Central Pacific provided a tragic case study for how the "soft power" of long-term engagement on climate security combined with short-term disaster relief can help U.S. standing in the region. Throughout the fall of 2013, favorable atmospheric conditions combined with abnormally warm water in the deep Central Pacific to spawn five "super-typhoons" with sustained winds greater than 150 mph.

This spate of storms included Super-Typhoon Haiyan, the storm that made landfall in the Philippines with maximum sustained winds estimated at 195 mph – the highest in recorded history to make landfall anywhere in the world. Bryan Norcross, the Senior Hurricane Specialist from the Weather Channel called it "the most perfect storm" he's ever seen.⁵

Where the storm first hit land, on the east coast of the Philippines' Samar Island, towering waves on top of a massive storm surge crashed against the coast, creating high water marks 46 feet above mean sea level – the highest level recorded from a tropical cyclone in at least a century.⁶

The result was that more than 7,000 people died around Tacloban, making Super-Typhoon Haiyan the deadliest typhoon in Philippine history. Filipinos are accustomed to typhoons – they make landfall nearly every year; the country's government institutions and its culture are prepared to weather the storms. Haiyan simply overwhelmed their ability to cope. This typhoon was of a strength unprecedented in human history – how could they have prepared for it?

When a disaster of that scale happens, the US Navy and Marines are the only organization in the Pacific with the logistical capabilities to respond in time in a large enough force to make a difference. Shortly after the storm, Secretary Hagel ordered the USS George Washington's battle group, then on a port visit to Hong Kong, "to make best speed" to respond to the typhoon.⁷ In all, over 13,000 soldiers, sailors, airmen, and Marines were engaged in the Humanitarian Assistance/ Disaster Response (HA/DR in military acronyms) mission to the Philippines.⁸

U.S. Marines help displaced Philippine nationals from the back of a KC-130J Super Hercules at Vilamor Air Base, Manila, Republic of the Philippines Nov. 11. DVIDSHUB / LANCE CPL. CALEB HOOVER



That response certainly saved lives: even weeks after the typhoon, doctors, transported to remote areas by Navy and Marine helicopters, were treating patients hurt in the storm. Moreover, these HA/DR missions provide more than simply food, fresh water, and supplies; they can prevent a downfall into lawlessness. In the days immediately after the storm, there were reports of radical Filipino insurgents hijacking aid supplies from Filipino government convoys. U.S. Marines are a harder target – and their presence helped to quell such violence before it became common.

American Engagement on Climate Security and Disaster Response Capability Increased American Influence

U.S. military engagement on this issue is important because it prepares for the next storm and it boosts American soft power in a region that too often only sees the U.S. through its military perspective. Whether we like it or not, the U.S. military is one of the most visible faces of American presence around the world. The fact that U.S. Pacific Command and the Department of Defense are preparing for climate change can help to align American interests with the other nations in the region that view climate change as a clear threat to their security.

Immediately after the storm, the Filipino Climate Change Ambassador, Yeb Sano, made an impassioned speech to the global negotiators assembled in Warsaw for the round of UN negotiations leading to a successor to the Kyoto Protocol. In a tearful address, he said “What my country is going through as a result of this extreme climate event is madness.”⁹ If the United States military had not responded in the way it did, and if the U.S. leadership in the Pacific had actively denied the link between climate change and security, it is easy to see how there could have been a backlash against American interests in the region.

Instead, in April 2014, President Barack Obama visited Manila to sign a new U.S.-Philippines defense pact. Certainly, most of the thrust driving that treaty forward was the rise of China, particularly their aggressive actions in the South China Sea. Nonetheless, the quick American response after Typhoon Haiyan served to remind the Filipino government and people (who have not always supported American military engagement) why it is important to have the U.S. Navy on your side.

To underline the importance of climate preparedness to this agreement, the first joint U.S.-Philippine exercises since the pact was signed – the Balikatan war games, held in early May – included a HA/DR exercise to Tacloban, the very city which had been devastated by Typhoon Haiyan.

How to Engage Different Countries in the Pacific on Climate Security

Unfortunately, the route to increase American influence is not as simple as going out and saying that the U.S. “cares” about climate security. Instead, America’s military and foreign policy should target each country differently, based on its interests. The three categories discussed previously are (1) the security exporters; (2) the climate victims; and (3) the wary watchers. These categories can broadly define how the U.S. can use engagement on climate security as a way to increase influence. The “security exporters” include most of the big, developed countries, like South Korea, Japan, Australia, and others. These countries foresee that the effects of climate change could harm the security of countries in the Pacific – and that if they allow instability to fester it could grow into conflict, drawing in their armed forces. Therefore, they see that their military mission around climate change is to provide HA/DR and stabilization operations prior to such destabilization. Probably the best way for the U.S. to engage with these countries – nearly all of whom are already U.S. allies – is to combine planning operations for future HA/DR and stabilization missions. The U.S. should actively seek personnel exchanges with planning and operations officers and staff between Pacific Command Headquarters and their military headquarters.

The “climate victims” include all of the small island states at the heart of the Pacific. These countries have been emphatic in multiple international fora that they are unable to deal with the predicted effects of climate change and they need compensation for the “loss and damage” expected. Working with these countries is not simply about military-military engagement, because they often do not have a military establishment. To complicate matters, these small countries are increasingly on the receiving end of direct engagement by Chinese government officials.¹⁰ The U.S. should work directly with these small countries, in the most visible way possible. Pacific Command can use port calls, while U.S. military units can deliver direct U.S. foreign aid for climate adaptation.

The most difficult countries to engage with on climate security are the “wary watchers” – those countries that know they are directly threatened by one or more of the effects of climate change, but have not yet determined how their militaries should respond. They may also be the most valuable for the U.S. to engage with – countries like Vietnam, Indonesia, and the Philippines are clearly threatened by rising sea levels and extreme weather. As they are developing countries, their militaries often do not have the resources to respond to acute extreme weather events. In addition, they may not have the planning capacity to be able to prepare for the effects of climate change. The U.S. military should use its demonstrated expertise in these missions to work with these countries. Every joint bilateral or multinational exercise should include HA/DR drills. Sharing weather and climate predictive capabilities would also engender goodwill.

Conclusion

Planning for climate change is important in the Pacific area of operations because climate change will fundamentally alter the operating environment in ways that will cause harm to the national security of countries around and within the Pacific. However, planning for climate change in the region is also important because the other countries in the region perceive it as important. As Dale Carnegie says in *How to Win Friends and Influence People*: “To be interesting, be interested.” In other words, in order for the U.S. to gain influence in the Pacific, the U.S. must be interested in what interests countries in the region: and the threats posed by climate change interest them deeply.

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Notes

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- 8 Cheryl Pellerin, “Recovery Effort Takes on Great Energy, Task Force Commander Says,” American Forces Press Service, U.S. Department of Defense, November 19, 2013, accessed May 21, 2014, available at <http://www.defense.gov/news/newsarticle.aspx?id=121177>
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