Climate and Energy Program

Climate Security: Impacts and Opportunities for Transatlantic Relations

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Earlier this year, U.K. Foreign Secretary William Hague argued that “climate change is perhaps the 21st century’s biggest foreign policy challenge along with such challenges as preventing the spread of nuclear weapons.”1 With implications for political, economic, and social stability, both domestically and in areas of joint strategic concern abroad, climate change is already exerting a “slow but irresistible influence on human behavior and societies.”2 It is therefore essential that the transatlantic partnership is maintained and developed in preparation for the geopolitical shifts that are likely to occur as a result of climate change.

The United States and Europe continue to value the transatlantic alliance. U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton recently declared that the United States “needs strong and active European partners more than ever.”3 Responding in kind, the U.K. Minister for Defence, Liam Fox, stated that “NATO will remain our first instrument of choice for responding to the collective security challenges we face.”4 The West continues to share vital strategic and economic interests, a large stake in the smooth running of liberal global institutions, and common foreign-policy challenges that simply cannot be addressed adequately without cooperation (the most prominent being international terrorism).

However, since the collapse of the Soviet Union, members of the transatlantic alliance have questioned what its future holds in a new global era characterized by climate change, transnational threats, the growing assertiveness of newly emerging states (including China, India, and Brazil), and the increasing prevalence of nonstate actors on the global stage. In 2009, U.S. President Barack Obama described transatlantic relations as being at a “crossroads” in a world that has become smaller and more interconnected than at any time in history.5

Summary: Climate change is one of the most serious political, diplomatic, and social challenges facing the transatlantic community. Given the lack of progress in the international climate negotiations, foreign-policy and defense sectors on both sides of the Atlantic should develop a contingency plan based on closer military and foreign-policy collaboration. Early coordination on the political and military fronts to address the security implications of climate change will enable a more flexible response in both sectors. The transatlantic partners should 1) assess the security implications of climate change in areas of joint strategic interest; 2) define opportunities for cooperation in novel operating environments, research and development, horizon scanning, and sharing of bases; 3) consider operating as a strategic hub for international dialogue on climate change’s potential security implications; 4) build closer civil-military relationships in particularly at-risk parts of the globe to strengthen regional resilience and enhance early-warning capabilities; and 5) develop joint structures to facilitate a continual assessment of the risks climate change could pose to areas of common interests.

5. White House, 2009. Remarks by President Obama at
We are therefore forced to consider whether the transatlantic relationship will still be central to the management of global security in this new era.6

Transatlantic Relations in Crisis?

A number of recent media articles have suggested that the transatlantic alliance is in crisis.7,8 While such hyperbole overstates the extent of any rift between the Atlantic allies, the events behind recent proclamations cannot be ignored. America’s international focus has indeed shifted east towards the Pacific as the United States reconfigures its foreign policy to strengthen its strategic and economic position in relation to, and in recognition of, the growing importance of emerging powers in Asia. Europe is consequently becoming less central to the U.S. world view.9

At the same time, the recent entry into force of the Lisbon Treaty has signaled an opportunity for EU member states to ease their traditional post-war reliance on America for security and economic prosperity as the EU steadily moves towards becoming a proactive security actor in its own right. It is perhaps this shift in the form of EU "actorness" that has posed one of the biggest challenges to transatlantic relations. In ratifying the Lisbon Treaty, the EU has raised U.S. expectations of what the EU can achieve as a security actor — in essence, expecting EU member states to shoulder a larger share of the burden of maintaining international security. Unfortunately, this has been interpreted in some European quarters as meaning that EU resources should serve American strategic interests, and it is perhaps this tension that is informing those who see a crisis in transatlantic relations.10 However, although the strategic interests that characterize transatlantic relations have indeed shifted, it is not necessarily to the detriment of the alliance.

Cooperation in a Changing Climate

The security implications of climate change are most likely to be felt in areas of joint strategic concern overseas as they interact with pre-existing security dynamics. The Middle East, sub-Saharan Africa, and South Asia are among the most vulnerable to climate change. Consequently, promoting shared interests, managing common threats, and expanding the policy options for doing so in the coming decades demands not only continued cooperation but also a broader and more comprehensive transatlantic partnership than in the past. The failure of the international community to strike a comprehensive deal to address climate change through key international policy forums including the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change, G8, G20, and the Major Economies Forum means that the West cannot rely on the development of a global framework through which to pursue its strategic goals.

While the pursuit of a globally coordinated response should in no way be abandoned, a contingency plan is required. In doing so, it is vital that the transatlantic community develop and share knowledge about the implications of climate change for foreign policy and defense. Much of the groundwork for such a partnership has already been laid, as is evidenced by the large number of intelligence reviews, strategy papers, policy briefs, and academic papers that have come out of both the United States and Europe over the last 20 years citing the implications of climate change as a pervasive challenge to national and international security.11 However, more is needed to prevent the duplication of efforts, address knowledge gaps, and forge a common strategy to address the challenges that climate change poses.

Assessing the Current State of Knowledge

The implications of climate change for defense and foreign policy are complex. They are expected to affect a plethora of issues concerning choices about mitigation and adaptation strategies, energy security, nuclear proliferation, migration, social justice and accountability, shifting territorial bound-

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Climate change is expected to affect a plethora of issues such as mitigation and adaptation strategies, energy security, nuclear proliferation, migration, social justice and accountability, shifting territorial boundaries, sovereignty claims, government legitimacy, local resilience, and ungovernable spaces where nonstate actors can operate with impunity. It is because climate change can interact with all these different issues that climate change is often described as a “threat multiplier,” with the potential to alter geostrategic balances and exacerbate political, social, and economic tensions around the world, at all levels from the local to the international.\(^2\)

As climate change is likely to influence precipitation patterns, extreme weather events, local temperatures, ice cover, and sea levels, the broad consensus among scientists is that we will see reductions in land habitability and productivity, water scarcity, inundation, environmental degradation, increased health problems, population displacement, and significant damage to energy, transport, and communications infrastructure. These impacts can intertwine with existing political, social, cultural, and economic trends and could potentially trigger resource scarcity, humanitarian crises, the overstretching of traditional government and governance structures, land-use conflicts, and migration, particularly in those areas with the least capacity to adapt.

At the same time, new opportunities to exploit valuable natural resources are emerging in the Arctic and elsewhere, further contributing to the redrawing of geopolitical maps, and potentially fuelling disputes over territory, access to resources and governance. As temperatures continue to rise, tempers could flare unless anticipated and carefully managed through common endeavor. The consequences have the potential to impair progress towards the Millennium Development Goals, disrupt the global economic system, and, in a worst-case scenario, trigger state failure in already fragile regions. Ultimately, the impacts of climate change threaten to undermine the global economic and political stability on which states on both sides of the Atlantic depend for continuing security and prosperity.

Managing Change (and Perceptions)

It is difficult to predict precisely the implications of these destabilizing pressures or the timeframes within which they might occur, as they might be moderated by efforts to adapt or to mitigate the worst physical impacts of climate change or, conversely, accelerated by so-called tipping points in the climate system. Realistically, over the next 20 years, perceptions and representations of the dangers of climate change are perhaps likely to be more significant than any catastrophic changes to the physical environment. The U.S. National Intelligence Committee and the Pentagon have both warned about the potential for zero-sum perceptions of a rapidly changing environment to encourage states to take unilateral actions to secure resources, territory, and other strategic interests.\(^3\),\(^4\) The challenge of climate change to the transatlantic community is therefore as much political, economic, and social as it is physical.

Concurrent to climatic changes, the world in coming decades will continue to experience rapid population growth, further globalization, greater global inequality, greater interdependence among state and nonstate actors,
significant demographic shifts, resource scarcity, and resurgence in extremist ideologies, as well as the growing strategic importance of the Pacific region to the international community. The interaction of all these different dynamics further complicates our understanding of the implications of climate change for the international system. Moreover, as Peter Haldén notes, the “interactive, dynamic, and non-linear nature” of security politics makes it vastly difficult to forecast how states will respond to these pressures.\textsuperscript{15} However, a RUSI Whitehall Paper published in 2007 has shown that the transatlantic community should nevertheless be preparing for climate change to “drive as significant a change in the strategic security environment as the end of the Cold War.”\textsuperscript{16}

**Implications for Foreign Policy**

Although climate change could create opportunities for greater collaboration between states, there is clearly growing concern about the potential implications for security and localized conflict. Strategic interests, alliances, borders, the prevalence of threats, economic relationships, comparative advantages, moral obligations, and the nature of — and expectations surrounding — international cooperation are all likely to be altered by climate change. As a result, the geopolitical influence of climate change is extending far beyond the environmental sphere and is “linking old problems in new ways,” particularly in relation to resource management, economic development, and territorial claims.\textsuperscript{17}

The 2009 climate summit in Copenhagen, in particular, demonstrated a realignment of the international order as the BASIC group (Brazil, South Africa, India, and China) converged on a common position, which was able to block EU-led proposals for binding greenhouse gas emissions cuts. How to respond to such geopolitical realignments falls squarely within the remit of foreign policy communities — and the nature of these responses is likely to be heavily dictated by the way we understand the social, political, and economic implications of climate change.

Tensions between the West and the rest of the world are likely to be exacerbated by the moral burden of the West’s historical responsibility for climate change.

In the absence of an effective global response to climate change, alternative mechanisms are likely to emerge as the implications of climate change for security are felt more frequently, more intensely, and in tandem with other security crises (for example, as has occurred with recent large-scale flooding in Pakistan). However, the emergence of alternative mechanisms to respond to climate-related security crises could potentially produce a more fragmented and potentially less stable international system, with multiple poles of authority and where balance of power politics is normalized in place of institutional cooperation. In such a political climate, the traditional relationship between Western allies will be crucial for ensuring that strategic interests are protected.

**New Foreign-Policy Demands**

As states continue to shift their strategic postures in response to projections of climate change, foreign policy communities will be at the heart of operations to recalculate the costs and benefits of specific diplomatic relationships,


\textsuperscript{17} Ibid.
partnerships, and alliances, and to manage any changes that might be necessary to reposition themselves geopolitically and minimize the impacts of climate change on their interests. The pressure to do so will intensify primarily as the strategic and economic implications are recognized in full, but also as moral pressure to respond to crises in the worst-affected areas builds.

Geopolitical discourses will increasingly be set against, and influenced by, a backdrop of resource scarcity and other pressures driven by climate change. When engaging with the international community, diplomats and negotiators will need to be increasingly aware of, and sensitive to, the additional considerations and pressures that are likely to inform perspectives as a consequence of climate change.

The West may find its ability to project both soft and hard power significantly reduced as it struggles to address the likely impacts of climate change in different parts of the world. This will create space for competing forms of authority to intervene and could reduce influence in key areas of strategic concern. In the aftermath of recent floods in Pakistan, a number of militant groups stepped in to provide relief to the local population, potentially increasing their influence among the local communities at the expense of the Pakistani government and its Western allies. The potential for climate change to trigger this type of shift needs to be clarified.

The majority of foreign policy responses to climate-related security concerns are most likely to be coordinated through established channels of diplomacy and global governance. The West will be in a much stronger position to lead the global response to climate change if it is united. It is therefore essential that foreign policy communities on both of the Atlantic cooperate to overcome potential sources of division, for example, over the extent of commitments to, and funding for, mitigation and adaptation operations, which has been a source of conflict in the past.

It is therefore important for Western foreign-policy communities to assess the implications of climate change for security in areas of joint strategic interest and to consider the types of pressures that may be placed on transatlantic relations as a result. One way to do this is to cooperate more closely through pre-existing structures. NATO Secretary General Anders Fogh Rasmussen has already called for NATO to use its global influence and reach to serve as an important strategic hub for international dialogue about the potential security implications of climate change.18 Taking ownership of coordinating international responses to climate-related security issues in this way will have U.S. and European interests at heart as much as global concerns.

Implications for Defense

Climate change is also likely to have important implications for defense communities on both sides of the Atlantic. The exact nature of environmental impacts will depend on the mitigation and adaptation strategies that are deployed. However, we expect that they will negatively affect key energy and transport infrastructure, food production, water supplies, and defensive capabilities — systems that have all been designed around the expectation that the environment is, and will remain, a relatively stable variable. This, in turn, will affect where, when, and how defense communities operate. From a defense perspective, there is a danger that the military will be ill-equipped, under-resourced, and under-prepared. The procurement of new military technology and equipment requires long lead times and, once in service, they are expected to be in operation for 20 years or more.19 This is a worrying state of affairs given uncertainty

about precisely how climate change will be felt at local and regional levels, and the potential for rapidly altering climatic conditions (such as higher temperatures and flooding) to disrupt the effectiveness of military operations, equipment, and infrastructure.

In terms of direct impacts on military force capabilities, development, and procurement, among the most dangerous challenges posed by the physical impacts of climate change (e.g. sea-level rise, wildfires, coastal erosion, and extreme weather conditions) are those that threaten weapons systems and platforms, operations and training bases, supply lines, maintenance costs, and lead times for operations. One of the most frequently cited examples of how such challenges could manifest is that of the logistics base on the atoll of Diego Garcia in the Southern Indian Ocean, which is used by the United States and U.K. as a major hub of operations in the Middle East. The highest point of this atoll is only a few feet above sea level, and as sea levels rise, facilities there will be lost or forced to relocate. Losing forward bases such as the one on Diego Garcia will raise demand for longer-range lift and strike capabilities; the increased demand for energy alone is likely to prove costly.

Indirectly, climate change will affect decisions about where the defense sector should (or even can) deploy its forces both at home and overseas potentially requiring a redistribution of military resources. The Western world, particularly the United States, is usually expected to act as the first responder to major natural disasters in the developing world (as most recently demonstrated after the tsunami in the Indian Ocean, the earthquake in Haiti, and floods in Pakistan). Being able to respond in a timely and effective manner can be hugely important for the way that the West is perceived in other parts of the world. For example, in the aftermath of the Indian Ocean Tsunami in 2004 — a disaster to which the United States responded by leading

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AFRICOM and Opportunities for Civil-Military Cooperation

One of the most topical examples demonstrating the opportunities for multilateral civil-military cooperation with potential for building regional resilience is with reference to United States Africa Command (AFRICOM). AFRICOM offers an interesting window into potential future military engagements overseas in regions of shifting geopolitical importance, demonstrating the roles that the military will have to increasingly perform in response to climate-change impacts. Additionally, AFRICOM illustrates the way in which the military can act as an early-warning mechanism by flagging potential conflicts brought about via climate-driven impacts before they become part of a larger problem.

AFRICOM differs significantly from the other U.S. unified commands, which have the primary mission of fighting war, with the exception of United States Southern Command (SOUTHCOM). In contrast, AFRICOM is designed around the principle of building local security capacity in Africa and assisting in strengthening partnerships between states so that security problems can be dealt with by states themselves before they spiral out of control and require international strategic resources. This kind of role is not new to the military. However, if based on a broader definition of security to include concepts around human security, which includes elements of personal security, economic security, health, community security, food security, and the environment, such a role will allow for broader positive engagement from the military, which can improve local resilience. This involvement with a wider set of stakeholders can also lead to improved early warning capabilities, through better local knowledge networks, to flag potential local conflict, which could, given the right level of support, lead to earlier engagement by local governments and could also potentially lower the severity of security situations that climate change could exacerbate.

AFRICOM operations have also demonstrated the possibility of using environmental vulnerabilities to pursue positive engagement and cooperation between foreign militaries. The U.S. Navy and Coast Guard have been active in West Africa, assisting local forces to train around fisheries protection and developing local capacity to respond to such incidents when they arise.1

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a huge international relief effort — public support for the United States in Indonesia dramatically increased. Similarly, Pakistani perceptions of the United States also improved after an earthquake in 2005 — again the United States was one of the first responders. In contrast, the relatively weak response from the United States (and other Western states) to recent floods in Pakistan discussed earlier has seen public opinion fall further and boosted support for militant groups, some of which are likely tied to the insurgency in the Afghanistan.  

New Defense Demands

With greater localized conflict, natural disasters, and humanitarian emergencies, increased demand for military support could result in the overstretching of resources, minimizing the contribution that the transatlantic alliance can make to supporting fragile states. Furthermore, greater demand for military resources to support disaster relief efforts will strain the readiness postures of Western forces and affect their availability for combat operations.

As a result of the implications for climate change for defense outlined above, there is clearly a need for transatlantic defense communities to be aware of how climate change will affect resources and equipment. Planning for and managing the uncertainty of environmental conditions must play an increasingly prominent role in defense strategy, as must the sharing of this knowledge among the transatlantic partners to increase the effectiveness of joint operations. Concern that the pursuit of “climate intelligence” will divert attention and resources away from other planning activities is a moot point. Despite the lack of highly granulated information on the exact climate change impacts we will face, it is certain that any significant change in climatic conditions will affect defense operations whether we prepare for it or not.

Transatlantic Opportunities

The need to coordinate a response to the implications of climate change for security will provide a number of opportunities for the transatlantic alliance to strengthen relations. Early coordination between the United States and the Europe on the political and military front will enable a more flexible response to climate change in both sectors. Particularly important will be for countries on both sides of the Atlantic to share knowledge and resources to expand transatlantic capabilities for operating in the types of novel operating environments that could emerge rapidly as a consequence of climate change. Similarly, there is considerable scope for cooperation on research and development for equipment to be used in these environments, sharing of bases and strategic resources to minimize vulnerability to sudden environmental shocks, and horizon-scanning based on a broad set of similar interests and strategic goals that could be vulnerable to the impacts of climate change. These kinds of activities will need to be supported in the long term through transatlantic structures that allow for the continual reassessment of climate change implications for transatlantic interests — for example, a joint center for annual risk assessment — as our understanding of climate change and its implications develops.

Policy Recommendations

At the heart of this paper is the principle that closer collaboration and coordination between the United States and Europe will lead to opportunities for both foreign policy and defense communities. A failure to take advantage of the historic bond that exists between North America and Europe would mean a loss of global positioning for both sides in the debate on climate change, and a lost opportunity for generating global responses to climate change.  


In this regard, the transatlantic partners should consider five key policy recommendations so that United States and Europe can take advantage of their collaborative position and use foreign policy and defense communities on both sides of the Atlantic to prepare a transatlantic response to climate change. Such a response would go beyond support for a global framework to address climate change, essentially developing a contingency plan for the defense of transatlantic interests should global negotiations collapse.

- First, the transatlantic partners should assess the implications of climate change for security in areas of joint strategic interest and the strengthening of the transatlantic alliance, and look for ways to address potential sources of division (e.g. the extent of commitment to, and funding for, mitigation and adaptation operations).

- Second, the transatlantic partners should assess opportunities for cooperation in novel operating environments, research and development, horizon scanning, and sharing of bases. This should include looking at where knowledge can be shared, potential for joint-investment in new technology and infrastructure, etc.

- Third, the transatlantic partners should assess opportunities for their joint operation as a strategic hub for international dialogue about the potential implications of climate change for security.

- Fourth, the transatlantic partners should enhance and harness military cooperation to build closer civil-military relationships in particularly at-risk parts of the globe to build regional resilience to climate change and enhance early warning capabilities.

- Finally, the transatlantic partners should develop transatlantic structures that allow for the continual reassessment of climate change implications for common interests, e.g. a joint-centre for annual risk assessment.

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**About GMF**

The German Marshall Fund of the United States (GMF) is a nonpartisan American public policy and grantmaking institution dedicated to promoting greater cooperation and understanding between North America and Europe. GMF does this by supporting individuals and institutions working on transatlantic issues, by convening leaders to discuss the most pressing transatlantic themes, and by examining ways in which transatlantic cooperation can address a variety of global policy challenges. In addition, GMF supports a number of initiatives to strengthen democracies. Founded in 1972 through a gift from Germany on the 25th anniversary of the Marshall Plan as a permanent memorial to Marshall Plan assistance, GMF maintains a strong presence on both sides of the Atlantic. In addition to its headquarters in Washington, DC, GMF has seven offices in Europe: Berlin, Bratislava, Paris, Brussels, Belgrade, Ankara, and Bucharest.

**About the Transatlantic Climate Bridge**

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