Climate Change as a National Security Issue

The implications of climate change for national security have been known for some time, but the issue has gained new exposure in recent months, in part because of the release on 14 April of a report on the subject compiled by 11 retired U.S. generals and admirals under the auspices of the nonprofit CNCA Corporation.

“Our view is that climate change could be a threat multiplier in every global region,” said retired U.S. Air Force General Charles Wald, one of the authors of the CNCA report, “and the Threat of Climate Change.” Speaking before the U.S. Senate Committee on Foreign Relations on 9 May, Wald used the Darfur region of Sudan as an example. Climate was a key instigator of the conflict in this region, he said. Long periods of drought resulted in the loss of both farm land and grazing land to the desert. Nomads went south in search of water and grazing lands, which in turn led to conflict with farmers occupying those lands. “If the perfect case study of how existing marginal situations can be exacerbated beyond the tipping point by climate-related factors,” Wald said.

Personal Summary for Policymakers from Workshop Group II of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, released in April (see Eos, May 6, 2007), highlights the potential of the impacts now put forth as having implications detrimental to future national security, such as less clean water and food in Africa and in other regions where people are already stressed by marginal living conditions. The CNCA report warns that climate change could exacerbate these conditions, causing widespread human and political instability that could have implications for the security of nations around the world.

The report has already been the subject of multiple hearings before committees of the U.S. Congress and is just one sign of increasing interest in the subject. The United Nations Panel on Climate Change, for example, held its first ever discussion on climate change on 17 April, and legislation currently before Congress and the House of Representatives (H.R. 620) is directed to the National Intelligence Council to produce a National Intelligence Estimate on the security implications of global climate change.

The CNCA report was not the first to recognize the potential threat of climate change to national security. The U.S. Department of Defense commissioned its own report on the topic in 2003, and the German Federal Ministry for the Environment, Nature Conservation, and Nuclear Safety presented a similar report to the U.N. Framework Convention on Climate Change in 2002. However, this new report is gaining far more attention.

One reason may lie in how the authors analyze risk; the CNCA report notes that the military cannot wait for certainty to act. “Failing to act because a warning isn’t precise enough is unacceptable,” they wrote. “One way to move forward on this issue of climate change is to make the case for action to energy without getting into the debate on the science,” said retired U.S. Air Force Lieutenant General Lawrence Farrell. Jr. Farre and other authors of the CNCA report spoke at a 14 May discussion held by the Woodward Wilson International Center for Scholars in Washington, D.C. Farrell continued, “Many of the impacts described in the report have already occurred and will continue to evolve over coming decades. We don’t have to wait to get these things right. We need to deal with the impacts of climate change now.”

The CNCA report is available at http://securityandclimate.cna.org/.