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CLIMATE CHANGE THREATENS NATIONAL SECURITY
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We are in the midst of a financial crisis the proportions of which are still unknown. Few have experienced such global economic turmoil. Some say this is reason to delay taking action on climate change. As lifelong war fighters and military planners, we respectfully disagree.

In the Cold War era, military personnel often referred to the potential for attack by the Soviet Union as a low probability/high consequence event. The simple translation: While not highly likely to happen, if it did, everything would be very different. Climate change can be considered in a similar way. The need to address the potential for global climate change and associated risks of failure is compelling. As retired General Gordon R. Sullivan, our colleague on the CNA Military Advisory Board (MAB), noted in our first report, “If we don’t act, this looks more like a high probability/high consequence scenario.”

The ominous consequences of global climate change loom large, not just in their potential for environmental upheaval, but also as threats to our national security. This is not speculation. In 2007, the MAB, commissioned by CNA, a non-profit research organization, and comprised of many of the nation’s highest ranking retired military leaders, came to the following conclusion in the report, *National Security and the Threat of Climate Change*: climate change can act as a “threat multiplier” for instability in some of the most volatile regions of the world. The 2008 National Intelligence Assessment on the National Security Implications of Global Climate Change to 2030 confirmed that climate change is a serious threat to national security and long-term global stability.

What does this mean in real terms? First, consider the consequences of global climate change: retreating glaciers, rising seas, increasingly severe hurricanes and storms, floods, heat waves, drought, shifting habitat, the spread of disease. Then consider the human consequences wrought by large scale climate change: loss of coastal regions (the most heavily populated and critical commercial and military areas of the world), reduced water supplies, decreasing long-term agricultural productivity, hunger, widespread health crises, and mass migrations forced by environmental change and a desperate search to meet basic human needs.

The all-too-often response to these projections is, “people will just have to move.” But the grim reality of such an eventuality is far more complicated and catastrophic, especially in a national and international security context.

Mass human migrations are destructive, destabilizing events – for countries and regions losing their citizens, and for countries taking in refugees. Abject poverty, social turmoil, cultural conflicts, social-infrastructure collapse, murder, mayhem and war are all direct and, sadly predictable, consequences of migrations driven by environmental catastrophe. In our own hemisphere, there already is the tremendous pressure from people seeking a better quality of life. Consider how this pressure will increase when that search is simply to attain the basics of life.

Measured in today's international security terms, think of the crises in Darfur and Somalia today, on a much larger scale, with increased conflict intensity, happening at the same time, in more places around the world.

These threats are real, and translate into very serious national security concerns. Countries near the brink will be pushed closer to – and over – the edge as crop production declines, hunger and illness increase, and water resources ebb. Many strife-torn countries in Asia, Africa and the Middle East will be further weakened, opening new doors to extremism, conflict, and radical ideologies. The United States will not be able to stand by idly as these events unfold. Alone or with allies, the U.S. military will be called into action -- whether to help stabilize a nation or region as conditions worsen before a catastrophe occurs, or to undertake reconstruction in its aftermath.

These challenges are daunting, but they must be faced. Since the release of our first report, some critical work has begun. Congress has directed defense officials to include climate change considerations in their planning. A project has been launched to evaluate sea-level rise and the ecological impacts on military installations posed by climate change. Efforts are underway to increase the U.S. military's coordination with other nations to help prevent, mitigate or adapt to the likely consequences of climate change.

But more needs to be done. Chief among our report's findings is that climate change, national security, and energy dependence are an interwoven set of global challenges. This is the focus of our next Military Advisory Board report, to be released in May. While, a weakened national and global economy has, temporarily, reduced demand for and the cost of oil, this recession will end and the volatile cycle of high fuel prices will return.

Without action now to address our dependence on fossil fuels, our national security will be at greater risk. Moving toward clean, independent, domestic energy lessens that danger and significantly helps us confront the serious challenge of global climate change. Because the issues are so closely linked, solutions to one affect the other. Technologies and practices that improve energy efficiency also reduce carbon intensity and carbon emissions, and, most critically, increase our national security.

It is the job of military leaders to carefully weigh and manage risk. A range of possibilities is never justification for inaction. We never have 100 percent certainty. Given the growing body of evidence, we have determined that now, not some point in the distant future, is the time to respond to and plan for the climate crisis. That is especially true for those in charge of our national security. The current financial crisis is no reason to delay. Rather, it gives us greater impetus to act now in ways that can create a better and more secure future for our Nation.

General Wald, USAF (Ret.) is former deputy commander, Headquarters U.S. European Command, and chair of CNA's Military Advisory Board for an upcoming report on energy, national security and the armed forces. Vice Admiral McGinn (Ret.) is former commander of the U.S. Third Fleet and deputy chief of naval operations for warfare requirements and programs and also a member of the Military Advisory Board. *National Security and the Threat of Climate Change* is available at <http://securityandclimate.cna.org/>