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Military Sharpens Focus on Climate Change

A Decline in Resources Is Projected to Cause Increasing Instability Overseas

By [Juliet Eilperin](#)
 Washington Post Staff Writer
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The U.S. military is increasingly focused on a potential national security threat: climate change.

Just last month the U.S. Army War College funded a two-day conference at the Triangle Institute for Security Studies titled "The National Security Implications of Global Climate Change." And tomorrow, a group of 11 retired senior generals will release a report saying that global warming "presents significant national security challenges to the United States," which it must address or face serious consequences.

The 63-page report -- which is being released a day before the U.N. Security Council holds its first-ever briefing on climate change -- lays out a detailed case for how global warming could destabilize vulnerable states in Africa and Asia and drive a flood of migrants to richer countries. It focuses on how climate change "can act as a threat multiplier for instability in some of the most volatile regions of the world," in part by causing water shortages and damaging food production.

The study's authors, along with several other national security experts, confirmed last week that the military has begun studying possible future impacts of global warming with new intensity.

"It's only in the last six months that climate change itself has surfaced as a term that's commonly recognized as having security implications," said Kent H. Butts, a professor of political military strategy at the War College's Center for Strategic Leadership. Butts added that when he meets with military leaders to discuss how to tackle terrorism and regional instability, "Each time they're saying, 'This is getting worse because of changes in the climate.'"

Commissioned by the Center for Naval Analyses, a government-funded think tank,

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the report boasts a list of contributors that includes eight retired four-star generals and three three-stars. Many have significant technological expertise, and some, such as Admiral T. Joseph Lopez, are close to Vice President Cheney. Others, including Gen. Anthony C. Zinni, have criticized President Bush in recent years.

The Army's former chief of staff, Gen. Gordon R. Sullivan, who is one of the authors, noted he had been "a little bit of a skeptic" when the study group began meeting in September. But, after being briefed by top climate scientists and observing changes in his native New England, Sullivan said he was now convinced that global warming presents a grave challenge to the country's military preparedness.

"The trends are not good, and if I just sat around in my former life as a soldier, if I just waited around for someone to walk in and say, 'This is with a hundred percent certainty,' I'd be waiting forever," he said.

Part of the sense of urgency, the generals said in interviews last week, stems from the fact that changing climatic conditions will make it harder for weak nation-states to address their citizens' basic needs. The report notes, for example, that 40 percent of the world's population gets at least half its drinking water from the summer melt of mountain glaciers that are rapidly disappearing.

"Many developing nations do not have the government and social infrastructures in place to cope with the type of stressors that could be brought about by global climate change," the report states. "When a government can no longer deliver services to its people, ensure domestic order, and protect the nation's borders from invasion, conditions are ripe for turmoil, extremism and terrorism to fill the vacuum."

The study states that conflicts in regions such as Darfur and Somalia stemmed initially from a lack of resources, something that will only worsen with global warming.

Climate change is different from traditional military threats, according to report author Vice Adm. Richard H. Truly, because it's not like "some hot spot we're trying to handle."

"It's going to happen to every country and every person in the whole world at the same time," Truly said.

The report also notes that some military bases probably will be compromised by climate change. Diego Garcia, an atoll in the southern Indian Ocean that U.S. and British forces use as a logistic hub for their Middle East operations, lies just a few feet above sea level. "Although the consequences to military readiness are not insurmountable, the loss of some forward bases would require longer range lift and strike capabilities and would increase the military's energy needs," the study says.

The military has contemplated the implications of climate change before: In 2004 it released a study of possible catastrophic global warming that was commissioned by Andrew Marshall, who directs the Pentagon's Office of Net Assessment; four years earlier the Defense Department issued a report titled "Climate Change, Energy Efficiency and Ozone Protection."

Pentagon and Army officials declined repeated requests for interviews last week. But several former officers involved in the study who maintain contacts inside the Defense Department said several branches of the military are examining how to cope with climate change.

Sullivan said he plans to talk to military officials about his group's report, and he expects they'll be sympathetic to his message. "I don't think this is a hard sell," he said.

Staff writer Thomas E. Ricks and staff researcher Karl Evanzz contributed to this report.

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