



2.5 THE CONNECTION BETWEEN CLIMATE CHANGE AND NATIONAL SECURITY

Dr. Geoffrey Dabelko

I would like to cover four topics that relate to the connection between climate change and national security. My thoughts come from the perspective of someone who is sitting at the Woodrow Wilson Center—a non-partisan, non-advocacy organization that is often trying to bring together communities that do not have a lot of experience talking with one another. They speak different languages, use different tools, and have different objectives. Hopefully, there are a few lessons that we can draw from that.

The first topic deals with frames, messengers, and mindsets and how this community is equipped to address those issues. Second, I would like to lend my support to the views you have heard this morning in terms of characterizing threats and the real concerns that are there. In particular, I would like to reinforce the complexity and uncertainty message that Dr. Jay Gulledge put forward. I do so in part to remind us that this set of topics is occurring in a political context and that we would be well advised to avoid some of the pitfalls that have become apparent during past discussions

Dr. Geoffrey Dabelko is the Director of the Environmental Change and Security Program at the Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars. He received a bachelor's degree in political science from Duke University and a doctorate in government and politics from the University of Maryland. For the past 18 years, he has facilitated dialogue among policymakers, practitioners, journalists, and scholars, grappling with the complex links among environment, population, development, and security. He is a member of the United Nations Environmental Programs Expert Advisory Group on Environment Conflict and Peace Building. Prior to joining the Woodrow Wilson Center, Dr. Dabelko held a position with the Council on Foreign Relations and served as a lecturer at Georgetown University's School of Foreign Service.

of this topic. We want to be able to focus on the analysis rather than on some of the arm-waving that we see in the advocacy community.

My third topic gets at what I think are future concerns about indirect causes of conflict as we try to address climate change with a variety of different means. Although we have heard some of that this morning, I think it is a topic that we have yet to fully explore. It is just beginning to play out. In some ways, I will present a deductive set of arguments, albeit ones that I think we need to be aware of as we move into that discussion. Finally, I will end on a positive note with a few comments about opportunity as well as threat and the ways that the Navy and its partners can respond to those.

So let's begin by addressing frames, messengers, and mindsets. As I mentioned, the Woodrow Wilson Center frequently asks very different communities to come together to talk. Accomplishing that for just the climate and environment communities turns out to be a fairly difficult task. Then, when we extend it to those involved with conflict, peace, and security, it becomes even more complicated. To get the process started, we have to abandon our stereotypes of what we mean by environment or what we mean by security if we are engaging folks from the climate environment community. It is more than a kid trying to hug a redwood tree.

In short, we need to focus on the analysis rather than the politics. As we have seen, these issues are now front and center in terms of their geopolitical context, their economic context, and their security context. As we go forward and engage our colleagues, we have to put it in those terms. We need to focus on the message, not on the messenger. One of the factors that has inhibited discussion on these issues in the past is that the argument is often about who is making the case rather than the case that is being made. I offer this as advice as you go forward and engage other colleagues who may have different views on these topics.

In order to bring the proper attention to these issues from a national security perspective, it is not a requirement that we engage in the debates about cap and trade or carbon tax or the things that are done on Pennsylvania Avenue. As we have seen, there is an

awful lot that we need to pay attention to that does not go into the political realm.

In terms of mindsets, I would like to echo Dr. Gullledge's recommendation that we focus on uncertainty. We need to examine these issues from a risk perspective as we develop and assess potential responses. In this way, I think the mindset that the security community brings and the tools that the security community has available leave it well positioned in terms of planning for the worst. We cannot afford to ignore events that have low or unknown probabilities when they have high negative outcomes. Unfortunately, that view is not necessarily shared by all players in this case. But it is something the security community, along with its gaming scenarios and simulation tools, really brings to the table.

As General Sullivan of CNA's Military Advisory Board reminded us, we cannot let the lack of complete information keep us from making important decisions. [1] If we do, bad things are certain to happen. The notion that we must have scientific certainty before we can take action is misguided. Certainty is just not going to come; its absence, however, should not be considered an excuse for inaction.

Let's move on to my second topic, which looks at the notion of threat complexity. In doing so, I hope to avoid the oversimplification and the backlash that has occurred in the past when this topic has been addressed. In the early 1990s, we tended to focus our attention on environmental change and conflict. Climate was not the focus of the discussion then. The notion was that environmental change was long-term and incremental. We tended not to worry so much about climate in the context of precipitating conflict.

Since the mid-1990s, we have begun to view environmental change as a potential threat multiplier or accelerant of conflict, especially in regions of high instability, such as West Africa. And so while there was a lot of substance in the analysis, it ended up being framed by overclaims and overstatements and political oversell. As a result, we saw a pullback on those issues in the late 1990s and the early 2000s in terms of understanding its importance. I think

the discussion that we are having today might have occurred earlier had that not been the case.

To avoid such outcomes, we need to avoid oversimplifying and instead maintain the notion of uncertainty and complexity and seek to understand the issues from a risk-analysis perspective. There are plenty of things to be concerned about without having to know all the answers about exactly what is going to happen.

I think that Admiral Tittle's characterization of the Arctic as a challenge rather than a crisis provides an excellent example of this approach. Regarding water issues, I fully agree with Major General Engel that this is an absolutely critical point of concern. At the same time, we need to remind people that, historically, we have not seen countries fight over water.

That is not to say that there has not been a lot of violence associated with water disputes. It is just been at the subnational level rather than between countries. It is less organized than we might think or be typically accustomed to in tracking conflict. That fact provides some challenges but also some opportunities. Sharing water resources is something that countries and basins do cooperate on. But it takes a lot of work. And we have generally neglected those institutions that are critical to doing it.

So it is again a complex set of issues. It does not just lend itself to the waterworks frame, as politicians and journalists love to frame this issue going forward. But, of course, the bottom line is that the future may not look like the past. So countries in some of these basins, particularly in a warmer world where we are losing glaciers, may start engaging in some of these activities. Fortunately, we have some basic at-risk analysis to build on.

My point is that we should strive to avoid oversimplifying such issues. We should seek to be more precise, employ far fewer bumper stickers, and recognize that there are tremendous challenges. As a final example, let's look at population migration. We need to recognize that population migration need not always be a bad thing. In some cases, the movement of people has actually diffused conflict.

It really matters how it is done. People can be driven to move by a complex mix of motivations; they can be pushed by environmental or political factors, or pulled by economic ones. The challenge is to avoid creating some new category of “climate refugees” that pushes all the hot buttons on the migration side and ignores the fact that people move for lots of reasons. At the same time, we need to put forward migration as a critical issue. At the end of the day, I am making the case for embracing complexity and embracing uncertainty. There are very real threats and challenges there. But we do not want to set ourselves back unintentionally by overstating the facts regarding any of these issues.

My third topic examines some additional conflict considerations. We talked about what our fears are in terms of environmental change and what impacts that might have, for example, on water availability or on population migrations because of changes in water availability.

But I would suggest that we have a whole other category that we need to look at in terms of what needs to be done if we are going to get serious about addressing climate change. And that is an area that we have spent precious little time trying to understand. We need to go into it with our eyes open and to try to take some steps to minimize the political and economic disputes associated with shifting to alternative energy sources. And here I am thinking the most obvious way to get off fossil fuels is to increase reliance on nuclear power.

This morning, we heard the Secretary of the Navy talk about first-, second-, and third-generation biofuels. Let’s look in more detail at one of these: palm oil. The European Union has said that, by 2020, they are going to have 10% of their transportation sector fueled by renewables. And palm oil is going to be a big part of that. Based on that declaration, the price of palm oil doubled, accelerating deforestation on the other side of the Earth, in Indonesia where it was already a problem. The resulting social conflict was entirely unanticipated by those who had proposed increased use of palm oil. Now, people are working harder to recognize such unintended effects and try to manage them. At the same time, it continues to go on.

At the end of the day, how does it come back around to us? Well, a lot of these unanticipated effects are happening in the neighborhood of the Straits of Malacca, a sea passage that is critical from both geostrategic and trade perspectives. It turns out that some of the social conflicts that are being accelerated by manifestations of climate change lie very close to critical trade routes. So, it is through that lens that we need to understand it.

As another example, let us look at the construction of hydroelectric dams. The World Commission on Dams said 40 to 80 million people were displaced in the second half of the 20th century because of large dam projects. [2] This did not occur as the result of armed conflict but rather because of economic development. And it is characteristic of the ways in which efforts to address climate change can have unintended consequences.

As yet another example, consider the strategic minerals that might be important in a green economy. If we are moving to battery technology, one answer would be lithium. As it turns out, Bolivia sits on 50% of the known quantities of lithium. They are now talking about setting up a cartel with some of the other countries that have large deposits. I am not saying it is going to happen. But our experience with petroleum should impress upon us the need to ask questions about resource dynamics.

Then there is the subject of geoengineering. I would second the notion that we have thought very little about this topic. It holds big potential for challenges in both the political and security realms. Admiral Tittle asked what we would do if a country unilaterally decided to start putting particulates up into the atmosphere. The barriers to entry in this field are so low that all it takes is a couple of eccentric billionaires who think this is a good idea.

What would happen if several billionaires decided they were going to solve the Earth's climate problem and sailed their yachts out into the open sea and started launching particulates into the atmosphere? It is not for me a stretch to suggest that the Navy is going to be asked to monitor and potentially interdict these kinds of activities because there is such a low threshold for entry. This kind of thing that is not a direct climate impact, but it is the product of

our trying to get serious about climate change. And it shows that it may only take a few folks, rather than a whole country, to pose some very real challenges.

To try to end on a positive note, I will emphasize an opportunity. In recent years, we have seen a small area of research aimed at asking whether we can take advantage of environmental interdependencies as well as the need to cooperate across borders and between groups to build on those interdependencies to try to develop patterns of cooperation, trust, peace, and confidence building. As a result, we are starting to understand, for example, the strategic communication and reputational benefits that come from responding to humanitarian crises. While those sometimes come at a high cost, there are multiple other reasons for doing it or not doing it.

The military, I would argue, has been very good historically at being proactive in building on this notion of shared environmental threat and shared environmental interdependency. When first established, the Arctic Military Environment Cooperation Program included only the Norwegians and the Soviets. Later, the Americans joined, followed by the British. This group helped resolve some of the radioactive contamination issues that arose when the Russians decommissioned their nuclear submarines. It provided a mechanism that the U.S. government and military could use to address an important environmental concern in the face of the unsettled political situation coming out of the Cold War.

When Marine General Anthony Zinni headed the U.S. Central Command, he used this military-to-military approach to address a number of important issues, including natural disaster preparedness. He conducted joint exercises with the Central Asian Republics and in the Middle East. I would argue that we could do this in terms of climate, both mitigation and adaptation. We could use it as a means to achieve some larger military-to-military objectives that, in many ways, are on the prevention side rather than on the response side.

Going forward, some of us have suggested, for example, that we use the set of climate change issues to facilitate military-to-military

interactions with China. By focusing on issues where we have common interests, such as natural disaster preparedness, we can build relationships that will be beneficial for topics where there is contention. Both countries are concerned about the climate, concerned about environmental change. Focusing on issues of common interest becomes an avenue, a tool, for building military-to-military relationships.

I would further suggest that we continue our discussions with groups like NATO that are also going to be concerned about the humanitarian disaster response. By broadening the discussion to include them, we can address our environmental and climate objectives as well as some of our national security objectives. We might also hope to address the issue of burden-sharing, although that may be too much to ask.

So, in conclusion, I offer my apologies if my presentation reminded you of a tennis match or an economist flipping between “on one hand” and “on the other hand.” I do hope, however, that I have demonstrated that although we need to be quite concerned about climate change and its potential effects on national security, we need to accept and embrace the topics’ inherent complexities and avoid some of the mistakes we have made in the past when dealing with these issues. Because they are so important, we do not need to succumb to the bumper-sticker approach or engage those who do. We should stick to the very focused and cool-headed analysis of how these issues really pose fundamental challenges for us.

REFERENCES

1. Military Advisory Board, *National Security and the Threat of Climate Change*, Alexandria, Virginia: CNA, 2007, <http://securityandclimate.cna.org/report/>.
2. World Commission on Dams, *Dams and Development: A New Framework for Decision-Making*, Nov 2000, <http://www.dams.org/>.