

## ➤ Stabilizing the International Order by Climate-Proofing our Future Security Systems

Sherri Goodman, Senior Fellow, Wilson Center Polar Institute and Environmental Change & Security Program and Elsa Barron, Research Assistant, Wilson Center Environmental Change & Security Program

Climate change is a threat multiplier that has multifaceted effects for non-state actors, international trade, and migration around the globe. For example, severe weather impacts the systems upon which societies are built in multiple, cascading ways. It damages the water, food, transport, and infrastructure that is essential for modern life. It threatens livelihoods in traditional industries like agriculture or fishing that are foundational to many economies. It heightens the risk of pandemics and novel pathogens. And it can make scarce resources scarcer, ethnic tensions more severe, competition for resources in the global economy more pronounced, and societies less governable.

Many of the most critical global climate challenges are insufficiently addressed. [With climate-forced migration reaching over 10 million over a six-month period throughout 2020-21, and climate migration projected to reach 1 billion by 2050](#), the seeds for fragility conflict are sown. A combination of human and wildlife migration creates additional, ominous possibilities for the future. New interfaces between organisms can lead to the evolution of new pathogens and the transfer of pathogens between species. Transmission of novel or eradicated pathogens portends serious worldwide health security consequences (a fact we have become intimately aware of over the past year).

Climate change also has extensive effects on trade and navigation. The Arctic is

increasingly navigable due to retreating sea ice, rising temperatures, and thawing permafrost. Mineral, gas, and oil exploration, shipping routes, research activities, fishing, and tourism have all migrated north in recent years. These activities increase the risk of an oil spill, collision, need for search and rescue, and miscommunication or miscalculation should an incident occur in remote regions with limited access. While the Arctic Council and the Arctic Coast Guard Forum are addressing some of these risks, a serious incident could be beyond the scope of current institutions' ability to manage.

A multifaceted response is necessary to combat the climate crisis and its effects, and the defense and security sector has an essential role in maintaining international order. Of course, the defense and security sector should be a partner, not the primary actor, in societal climate solutions. Yet, the defense and security sector has the opportunity to lead by example in moving to decarbonize energy systems and making defense facilities climate-resilient. Addressing climate risk will require a systematic integration of environmental factors into security strategy, planning, and operations--as well as across broader government functions. Climate change and geopolitical dynamics are converging with incredible speed; the U.S. and partner militaries need to act just as quickly. Here are a few steps to help turn the tide:

- The Climate Risk Analysis required by

the [Biden Executive Order](#) should direct combatant commands and other relevant security institutions to assess climate security risks in each region and include proposed actions to mitigate risk.

- Climate security considerations should be shared across government departments to inform diplomatic, energy, commercial, and trade policy decisions.
- Regional security institutions such as NATO and ASEAN should invest in trusted, granular, real-time data where climate-sensitive geographies and fragile security situations overlap.
- The U.S. and its regional partner militaries should step up their game in climate security preparedness.
- Transboundary water agreements and other international agreements should be updated, when appropriate, to account for the technical and climate-related realities of today.

Climate risks relating to non-state actors, migration, and trade can be better predicted, anticipated, and addressed. Taking rapid action to do so, systematically and in coordination with allied and partner nations, is the best strategy for ensuring a stable transition to economic, human, and state climate security. We can better stabilize the international order by taking steps now to climate-proof our security systems for the future.