

Climate Change Requires an Evolving National Security Doctrine

Rod Schoonover, CEO, Ecological Futures Group

The national security enterprise is increasingly mismatched to the 21st century threats posed by a changing planet. In a January 27, 2021 [Executive Order](#), the Biden White House argued that “the United States and the world face a profound climate crisis” and announced that “climate considerations shall be an essential element of United States foreign policy and national security.” Later that year, on April 22 (Earth Day), Director of National Intelligence Avril Haines [announced](#) that “climate change was no longer a peripheral issue but now ‘at the center’ of US foreign policy.”

What remains to be seen is whether the national security community will be able or willing to match this rhetoric with commensurate action. Thus far, beyond placing climate-knowledgeable advisors here and there throughout the Executive Branch, few structural changes have been undertaken in the government to address what scientists warn is almost certain to be an unprecedented period of climate and ecological chaos and uncertainty.

Actorless security threats comprise an especially difficult category for the national security community to address. National security doctrine is largely a holdover from the 20th century in which great power competition, nuclear weapons, and territorial disputes were among the most important elements. Human security and threats from non-state actors were increasingly recognized as elements of national security. When the intelligence community mentioned climate change in its annual [Worldwide Threat Assessment](#), it would typically cast

it as a threat to human security rather than a multipronged risk across [many security domains](#).

Brutally illustrated by the 600,000+ fatalities from COVID-19 is the persistent inability for the US to substantially bring actorless security threats posed by climate change, ecological disruption, pandemic risk, and other similar issues into the national security discussion. Much of this is rooted in methods since these threats do not easily lend themselves to being targeted by drones or electromagnetic interceptors. Computer models and open-source information are not typically clandestine, a property that many policymakers deem requisite for national security inclusion.

Effective strategic planning is crucial at a time when US capacity in this domain has fallen to essentially zero. One should expect that the basket of ecological, sociopolitical, and informational stresses facing the US and its partners to converge and amplify in important ways. For example, we should expect that the ongoing pattern of species extinctions will be exacerbated by climate change, yet we do not know how or what will be its effect on people and societies worldwide. We don’t understand how trends in [d/m] isinformation, ecological vulnerability, authoritarianism, and the like will amplify these planetary stresses.

These unprecedented stresses come at a time when the US has experienced a steady erosion of its ability to anticipate large scale presses and pulses affecting its national security. Over decades, strategic

anticipation has been replaced by production of national strategies that [critics](#) argue are largely public relations documents. No long-standing group exists at the White House whose mission is dedicated science-informed strategic analysis, exacerbated by staffing patterns that rely heavily on short-term detailees from other government agencies.