

Climate Change Poses a Widening Threat to National Security

Intelligence and defense agencies issued reports warning that the warming planet will increase strife between countries and spur migration.



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WASHINGTON — Worsening conflict within and between nations. Increased dislocation and migration as people flee climate-fueled instability. Heightened military tension and uncertainty. Financial hazards.

The Biden administration released several reports Thursday about climate change and national security, laying out in stark terms the ways in which the warming world is beginning to significantly challenge stability worldwide.

The documents, issued by the departments of Homeland Security and Defense as well as the National Security Council and director of national intelligence, mark the first time that the nation's security agencies collectively communicated the climate risks they face.

The reports include warnings from the intelligence community about how climate change can work on numerous levels to sap the strength of a nation. For example, countries like Iraq and Algeria could be hit by lost revenue from fossil fuels, even as their region faces worsening heat and drought. The Pentagon warned that food shortages could lead to unrest, along with fights between countries over water.

The Department of Homeland Security, which includes the U.S. Coast Guard, warned that as ice melts in Arctic Ocean, competition will increase for fish, minerals and other resources. Another report warned that tens of millions of people are likely to be displaced by 2050 because of climate change — including as many as 143 million people in South Asia, sub-Saharan Africa and Latin America.

The national security warnings came on the same day that top financial regulators for the first time flagged climate change as “an emerging threat” to the American economy. More frequent and destructive disasters, such as hurricanes, floods and wildfires, are resulting in property damage, lost income and business disruptions that threaten to change the way real estate and other assets are valued, according to a report released by a panel of federal and state regulators. As of Oct. 8, there have been 18 “weather/climate disaster events” in 2021 costing more than \$1 billion each, according to the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration.

The reports came as President Biden prepares to attend a major United Nations climate conference in Glasgow known as COP26. With his climate agenda stalled in Congress, Mr. Biden risks having little progress to tout in Glasgow, where the administration had hoped to re-establish United States leadership on addressing warming.

The reports “reinforce the President’s commitment to evidence-based decisions guided by the best available science and data,” the White House said Thursday, and “will serve as a foundation for our critical work on climate and security moving forward.”

The notion that climate change is a national security threat isn’t new — the Obama administration said as much, and began pushing the Pentagon to consider climate risks. But taken together, the reports signal a new stage in U.S. policy, one that places climate change at the center of the country’s security planning.

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Perhaps the broadest and most sweeping of the documents was a National Intelligence Estimate, which is meant to collect and distill the views of the country’s intelligence agencies about particular threats. The report, the first to look exclusively at the issue of climate, said that risks to American national security will only grow in the years to come.

The document made three key judgments. Global tensions will rise as countries argue about how to accelerate reductions in greenhouse gas emissions. Climate change will exacerbate cross-border flash points and amplify strategic competition in the Arctic. And the effects of climate change will be felt most acutely in developing countries that are least equipped to adapt.

China and India, with large populations and heavy use of fossil fuels, will heavily determine how quickly global temperatures rise, the estimate stated.

The odds are not good that nations will meet their pledges under the 2015 Paris agreement to keep the increase in average increase in global temperature to less than 2 degrees Celsius compared to preindustrial levels, the intelligence reports said. The Earth has already warmed by about 1.1 degrees Celsius. If it exceeds the 2 degrees threshold, the planet will experience increasingly deadly floods, fires, storms as well as ecosystem collapse, scientists say.

“Given current government policies and trends in technology development, we judge that collectively countries are unlikely to meet the Paris goals,” the report said. “High-emitting countries would have to make rapid progress toward decarbonizing their energy systems by transitioning away from fossil fuels within the next decade, whereas developing countries would need to rely on low-carbon energy sources for their economic development.”



Firefighters battling the Alisal Fire near Goleta, Calif., this month. David Mcnew/Getty Images

The intelligence report identified 11 countries as being particularly vulnerable to the effects of climate change and particularly unable to cope with its effects. That list included four countries near the United States, among them Guatemala and Haiti; three countries with nuclear weapons (North Korea, Pakistan and India); and two countries, Afghanistan and Iraq, that the United States invaded in the aftermath of the 9/11 attacks.

The scramble to respond to climate change could benefit other countries, intelligence agencies added, particularly those that become leaders in emerging renewable-energy technologies or the raw materials needed to produce them. China controls much of the world's processing capacity for cobalt, lithium and other minerals needed for electric vehicle batteries, as well as rare earth minerals used in wind turbines and electric vehicle motors.

Other countries, like Norway and the United Kingdom, have an advantage in meeting the growing demand to remove carbon dioxide from the air, the report said, because of government policies — such as a price on carbon — that support the development of that technology.

Federal officials noted how climate change is melting Arctic ice, opening the Northwest Passage between the Atlantic and Pacific oceans and setting the stage for competition for resources and sea lanes for commercial shipping between Russia, China, Canada and the U.S., among others.

The Pentagon, which released a report of its own, said the military will begin to spend a significant portion of its budget to incorporate climate-related threats into its planning.

The Department of Defense faces numerous climate risks. Its bases are vulnerable to flooding, fires, drought and rising sea levels. Among myriad other examples, the Coronado naval base has experienced isolated and flash flooding during tropical storm events particularly in El Niño years, the Naval Air Station Key West was

hit by severe drought several years ago and a wildfire in 2017 burned 380 acres on Vandenberg Air Force Base in Southern California. Droughts, fires and flooding can also interfere with the Pentagon's ability to train its forces and test equipment.

Sherri Goodman, a former under secretary of defense for environmental security and now secretary general for the International Military Council on Climate & Security, said the Pentagon was right to "directly integrate concept of climate change as a threat multiplier into all aspects of defense strategy, planning, force posture and budget."

The Department of Homeland Security, which includes the Federal Emergency Management Agency, said it will start making climate change a focus of its preparedness grants for state and local governments. It will also incorporate the changing science into the guidance it provides to the public and private sectors on how to manage risk, it said.

The agency said it intends to hire more employees with scientific expertise, including in its policymaking and public outreach divisions.

"From extreme weather events to record heat, the D.H.S. work force is on the front lines of the climate emergency every day," Alejandro N. Mayorkas, the homeland security secretary, said in a statement on Thursday.

When it comes to migration, the United States is already feeling the effects of climate change, with deadly and destructive hurricanes driving migrants from Central America. People trying to enter the United States through Mexico have overwhelmed border officials at various times since 2014 and particularly during the past six months.



Honduran migrants displaced by Hurricanes Eta and Iota approached the Guatemalan border in San Pedro Sula, Honduras, in January. Milo Espinoza/Getty Images

The National Security Council released its own report Thursday, looking at how climate change is already forcing people to leave their homes. The report noted one forecast suggesting that climate change could lead to almost three percent of the populations of Latin America, South Asia and sub-Saharan Africa moving within their countries by 2050 — more than 143 million people.

Climate events are often one factor among several, including conflict and violence, that force people to move, the report said.

In February, Mr. Biden signed an executive order directing the National Security Council to provide options for protecting and resettling people displaced by climate change.

The report released Thursday recommends that the White House “work with Congress to create a new legal pathway for individualized humanitarian protection in the United States for individuals facing serious threats to their life because of climate change.”

Teevrat Garg, an economics professor at the University of California, San Diego, who specializes in climate migration, welcomed the administration’s attention to the issue. But he said the report could have addressed the deeper question of what the United States and other developed countries owe to climate migrants.

“Much of the carbon emissions driving climate change have come from rich nations but the consequences are being borne disproportionately by the poor,” Dr. Garg said. As a result, wealthy countries have “an obligation to support climate refugees.”

Kayly Ober, the senior advocate and program manager for the Climate Displacement Program at Refugees International, called the report disappointing, more of a review of the challenges around climate migration than a set of prescriptions for how to address it. “It’s a huge missed opportunity,” Ms. Ober said. “I think the Biden administration hasn’t quite figured out what they want to do.”

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