

Climate change and security politics

Written by Rodger A Payne

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RODGER A PAYNE, AUG 12 2009

This past weekend, The New York Times ran an interesting story, "Climate Change Seen as Threat to U.S. Security." Here's a key quote from the piece:

Recent war games and intelligence studies conclude that over the next 20 to 30 years, vulnerable regions, particularly sub-Saharan Africa, the Middle East and South and Southeast Asia, will face the prospect of food shortages, water crises and catastrophic flooding driven by climate change that could demand an American humanitarian relief or military response.

The entire article was obviously provocative as it created a bit of a stir in the blogosphere. Realist theorist and *Foreign Policy* blogger Stephen Walt of Harvard looked at the policy report behind the news story (prepared by the CNA Corporation, "a DoD-funded think tank") and found that it "reads like an exercise in threat-inflation."

This is a familiar political tactic: when you want to do something expensive, try to convince people that it is a critical national security imperative...

Worse, from Walt's point of view, few important U.S. interests are at stake:

Climate change might also foster instability in various "volatile areas," but it does not immediately follow from that observation that U.S. interests will necessarily be affected in any significant way...the more closely you look at the report, the clearer it is that the actual national security implications of climate change are modest, at least for the United States. The likely demands on U.S. military forces will be for humanitarian relief, not for the protection of vital U.S. interests.

If thousands of people flee Bangladesh for India, he says, "isn't this first and foremost *India's* problem (emphasis in original)"?

Right-leaning blogger Michelle Malkin calls the story an obvious effort to re-brand climate change and American University Communications professor Matthew Nisbet similarly says the story is an example of re-framing. However, in truth, international relations scholars like Thomas Homer-Dixon of Waterloo University have been researching the links between environmental change, resource scarcities, and security for nearly two decades. Even the specific climate-security nexus has been addressed for twenty years.

Over the years, prominent political leaders have also linked climate and security in order to elevate climate on the international agenda, including former UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan and British PM Tony Blair. During the George W. Bush years, those efforts didn't resonate in the U.S. — but the branding or framing efforts are clearly not new. Even officials in Bill Clinton's State Department used to talk about climate change as a security issue in the 1990s.

In the *Times* story, Senator John Kerry (MA) adds a noteworthy twist to the basic thesis. Rather than focusing on potential conflict caused by mass migration, or the possible use of U.S. military forces, Kerry notes the "human security" dimension of the problem:

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Mr. Kerry said the continuing conflict in southern Sudan, which has killed and displaced tens of thousands of people, is a result of drought and expansion of deserts in the north. "That is going to be repeated many times over and on a much larger scale," he said.

I'll close this first post with a quote from blogger Matt Yglesias, who provides a compelling political argument for the human security approach:

human tragedy is still pretty tragic and anything to help draw attention to the fact that "climate change" means honest-to-god major problems and not just somewhat warmer weather is useful.

About the author:

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