FOREWORD

Environmental Security Heats Up

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"We are not your traditional environmentalists," General Gordon Sullivan (USA, Ret.), former U.S. Army chief of staff, wryly told reporters as he presented the Center for Naval Analysis' (CNA) report *National Security and the Threat of Climate Change* in April 2007 (Eskew, 2007). Arguing for more aggressive U.S. action on climate change, Sullivan said the incomplete scientific understanding of global warming was no excuse for delay. Military leaders make battlefield decisions based on partial information all the time—otherwise, more lives would be lost. Penned by Sullivan and 10 other former U.S. generals and admirals, the launch of the CNA report is but one event that marked the return of environmental security to the world stage in 2007 and 2008.

The list is long: The UN Security Council, chaired by the United Kingdom in April 2007, devoted a session to climate change as a security risk. High Representative for the Common Foreign and Security Policy Javier Solana and the European Commission (2008) delivered the report "Climate Change and International Security" to the European Council. The U.S. National Intelligence Council conducted a government-wide assessment of climate change security risks (Fingar, 2008). UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon (2007) pointed to climate change, desertification, and the increased conflict between pastoralists and agriculturalists as underlying explanations for the conflict in Darfur.

Since I began working in the environmental security field 19 years ago, climate change has never drawn this much attention from the security community. We are flooded with reports from foreign policy think tanks, military strategists, and scientists around the world on climate. This unprecedented level of interest represents the dawning of a new era for environmental security—especially in the United States, where the field is emerging from the shadows of the Bush administration's distaste for many things environmental.

During environmental security's salad days in the mid-1990s, climate change was often dismissed as a low-priority issue. It was commonly portrayed as a long-term and gradual process that would not play a direct role in triggering conflicts or state failure. Climate change took a back seat to more immediate links between population growth, environmental degradation, and violent conflict, as in headline-dominating crises in Haiti, Liberia, Rwanda, Sierra Leone, and Somalia.

Reflecting its rise in larger scientific, public, and policy debates, climate change is now the headline issue in the environmental security field. Moreover, I would argue that the powerful images of climate's potential security effects—from sea-level rise swamping cities and naval bases to waves of "environmental migrants" crossing borders—are partly (but certainly not solely) responsible for the new sense of urgency in the world's capitals. It is sad to say, but the thermometer ticking up one or two degrees is not nearly as intuitively scary—or as motivating—as the specter of millions pushed across borders from the effects of climate change.

So we can thank climate change for making environmental security "hot" again. Our challenge now is to utilize this attention wisely and avoid overplaying our hand by fueling false fears. We can view climate change as an existential threat to our security and trace its impacts on local conflicts or community vulnerability. Yet we must avoid a range of pitfalls that could undermine our progress.

Don't oversell the links between climate change and violent conflict or terrorism: While climate change is expected to exacerbate conditions that can contribute to intrastate conflict, it is neither a necessary nor a sufficient cause of conflict. For example, simply labeling the genocide in Darfur a "climate conflict" is both wrong and counterproductive: It ignores political and economic motivations for the fighting—and can be perceived as a way to let the regime in Khartoum off the hook. To fully understand how the conflict between Sudanese pastoralists and agriculturalists reached this extreme, we must not only examine the interplay between environmental issues like desertification, drought, and declining agricultural productivity, but also political relationships, power struggles, and ethnic grievances. Oversimplification could ultimately backfire, lending credence to accusations that environmental security is overly deterministic.

Beware of knock-on effects: Policies designed to confront climate change can have unanticipated effects. Promoted as a mitigation strategy, demand for biofuels has increased the use of agricultural land for "growing energy"—and spurred rising food prices and riots. Deforestation in Indonesia for palm oil plantations has, for example, increased social conflict around forest resources, exacerbating existing tensions between companies and local people (Painter, 2007).

Don't ignore existing, pressing problems: Our research and policy docket is already crowded with serious conflicts (as well as opportunities for cooperation) over resources, whether they are minerals, water, timber, fish, or land. While climate change certainly poses a large—and potentially catastrophic—threat, we must not overlook the ongoing problems of rapid population growth, persistent poverty, lack of clean water and sanitation, and infectious diseases that threaten lives daily. Climate change may multiply these threats, but they will continue to exact a high toll, whether climate change affects them or not.

If we avoid these pitfalls, we can find other approaches that could float all boats as the seas rise. A proactive, multidimensional agenda could, and should, leverage the unprecedented attention to climate change to refocus efforts on the long-term problems of population growth and resource consumption. Such a diverse strategy requires broadening our concept of mitigation and adaptation efforts. Policymakers and practitioners cannot allow the increased focus on climate change to reduce attention to more "routine"—and too-often tolerated—problems.

In addition, the all-encompassing, global threat of climate change provides an opportunity to promote new approaches that recognize the links connecting issues and to create integrated programs that address them. We must overcome our preference for the clear borders and stovepipes of single-sector approaches, which ignore the complex realities of an interdependent world. Embracing—not shying away from—this complexity is our only hope for solving these problems.

Finally, progress requires new partnerships and breaking down traditional barriers between the environment, health, development, and security communities. As General Gordon Sullivan said, "Many of us entered the project as what you might call climate skeptics—but we have come out united around the conclusion that climate change is a serious threat to our national security" (Eskew, 2007). The environmental security field should not miss this opportunity to welcome, guide, and learn from powerful new partners in the fight against climate change and other challenges.

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UN peacekeepers help Haitians cross a river after floods near Port-au-Prince September 7, 2008. Officials said at least 61 people had died in floods in impoverished Haiti on top of 500 killed the previous week by Tropical Storm Hanna. (@ REUTERS/ Evens Felix)

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