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Climate Change and the Military

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MICHAEL BRZOSKA, MAR 16 2012

Climate Change and the Military: The Cases of China, Russia, the United Kingdom, and the United States

Climate change and its consequences have become a major public concern and policy issue in many countries. In some countries this also includes national security actors, particularly the armed forces. In particular, in the US and the UK, climate change policies are major issues for the militaries. While knowledge about the impact of climate change on the role of armed forces, military operations and installations is scant, planning for a future with climate change has begun. Furthermore, there has already been some action, particularly with respect to mitigation efforts, in these two countries. In both countries, for instance, specific targets for reductions of greenhouse gases have been laid down for most of the activities of the military (excepting those related to current wars).

Still, there are distinct differences. In the US, the military, specifically the Navy, has been a leader in climate change policies. Both former and active US Navy commanders were early proponents of taking climate change seriously, at a time when official US policy was still skeptical about the reality of climate change. The leading role of the Navy in the US seems to be more one related to general concerns about the direction of US policy on climate change than immediate interests of the Navy. However, these also exist, for instance with respect to the possibility of needing to better protect or even move naval bases. Compared to the US Navy, other branches of the US armed forces have been late in joining in. Furthermore, they have somewhat different priorities. The prime focus of the Air Force and the Army is on reducing energy consumption and energy security, with reductions of greenhouse gases as a welcome side-effect.

In the UK, the link between climate change and energy policies is less strong than it is in the US. Rather, the UK military has adopted a detailed and specific climate change agenda. It includes, in addition to mitigation efforts, studies on the future implications of climate change and a general commitment to better preparedness for meeting these challenges. Probably not very surprisingly in view of the uncertain predictions of the consequences of climate change on security and conflict, the UK military is not very concrete on particular contingencies and actions it is preparing for. This somewhat vague position may also be predicated by the UK-military's more passive role in developing UK climate change policy. In contrast to the US, where the armed forces at least during the Bush Administration, were a driving force of climate change policy, the UK national security actors have not been at the forefront of the climate change debate in the UK. Rather, they have largely been implementers of decisions taken at the center of political power, at the Prime Minister's Office and in the Cabinet. Within the UK government, the UK military are at best showing an average level of activity.

Although there are a few smaller countries where the military has also taken a strong interest in climate change, in most other countries of the world, climate change has not yet reached the military. In some countries this stance is due to other more immediate priorities. But there are also a number of countries where the military is actively discouraged from – at least publicly – thinking about climate change. Russia and China provide examples of these two approaches, respectively.

Both the Russian and the Chinese military seem to have only paid minor attention to the consequences of climate change for their future activities. However, again there are distinct differences. In the Russian case, other, immediate issues have much higher priority on national security actors' agendas. First among these is the rebuilding of the

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Russian armed forces, their modernization and reform. Furthermore, climate change is not a good argument for those pushing for modernization because of little concern with the consequences of climate change in public and political discourse in Russia. However, this is different with respect to the Arctic – here there is a keen interest in Russia. But for the time being cooperative approaches are preferred in the Russian Arctic policy. Contrary to the Russian case, in China, the military leadership seems to be quite aware of potential effects of climate change on its role, operational demands and installations. However, public pronouncements, and possibly even internal debate, are largely limited to tree planting and disaster relief. These operations, if one can call them so, are important for the Chinese military, but more decisive for the Chinese debate are the limits set by the political leadership. A more active stand of the Chinese military on climate change issues would undermine the official Chinese position, that climate change is a development, but not a security, issue.

While adaptation of armed forces' strategies and operations are in the study phase, even in the US and the UK, analyzing the threat of climate change to installations, particularly sea-level rise, has more urgency. Both the US and the UK, and possibly also China, are currently investigating this issue in detail. The most immediate activity for armed forces is reducing their carbon footprints. While the US and the UK military have become active participants in mitigation efforts, it is less clear whether this is also occurring in China, and is not likely in Russia, with its low energy prices.

Unsurprisingly, national security actors in a good number of countries are seeing growing roles for the militaries with regard to climate change – in domestic disaster relief in all four countries, in missions in crisis situations in the case of the US and the UK, in the Arctic for the US and the Russian military. But as of now, available documents do not show much urgency or aggressive stands by national security actors. Remarkable in view of much of the public discourse on potential future conflict over resources in the Arctic for example, both the US and the Russian military proclaim their interest in cooperation, and clearly not confrontation. On the other hand, the idea that military spending might drop as a priority in government spending because of increasing costs of climate mitigation cannot be found in documents discussing climate change emanating from defense ministries or armed forces. Clearly, fears of “militarization” of climate change have not become true. But neither has the hope of thinking “out-of-the-box” in armed forces or by military planners. Where the consequences of climate change are discussed in such circles, traditional ways of thinking in terms of military capabilities prevail.

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