

## U.S. National Security and Climate Change

Written by Bela Romer

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# U.S. National Security and Climate Change

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BELA ROMER, JUL 13 2013

Without doubt the threat that climate change poses to the earth and its inhabitants is profound. In spite of this, political and public debate with regards to addressing climate change seems to lack a sense of urgency. Concerted and effective action to address climate change is absent, hamstrung by economic and political imperatives. Perhaps, reframing climate change as a security issue may provide the immediacy that is required. In October 2003, Peter Schwartz and Doug Randall released a report titled *An Abrupt Climate Change Scenario and Its Implications for US National Security*, which was commissioned by Andrew Marshall, Director of the United States Department of Defense's Office of Net Assessment. The report presents a scenario where climate change has greatly impacted the carrying capacity of states and consequently poses a threat to national security. In this essay, I will provide a brief summary of the report and argue that it was successful insofar that it achieved the aims of its authors, to generate discussion about the potential security threats that climate change poses. However, I will also argue that the content of the report is flawed. Flawed in the way it oversimplifies the underlying causes of conflict and how the key assumption of the report is based upon misinterpretation. In addition, I will argue that the recommendations in the report are narrow in focus and fail to advocate solutions which would be more appropriate and effective in reducing conflict.

Schwartz and Randall paint a bleak picture of a potential scenario in which abrupt climate change, based upon climatic events 8200 years ago, dramatically undermines the carrying capacity of states, resulting in severe resource scarcity. The resource constraints (Schwartz & Randall 2003, p. 2) they identify are food shortages due to reduced agricultural production, declining supplies of fresh water and increased difficulties in accessing energy supplies due to adverse weather conditions. They argue (Schwartz & Randall 2003, p. 14) that resulting from these conditions, military conflict may occur between states as they compete to obtain and secure vital resources, thus redefining the traditional threats to national security. Considering the alarming nature of the report, it is understandable that the purpose of the report may have been misconstrued by some readers. What they intended on achieving with the report was clearly defined. Schwartz and Randall acknowledged that modeling could not accurately predict the effects of climate change. It was never their intention to predict the future but rather "dramatize the impact climate change could have on society if we are unprepared for it" and the aim of this report was to "further the strategic conversation" (Schwartz & Randall 2003, p. 7).

The intention of the report may have been to stimulate broader dialogue, however the methods employed by Schwartz and Randall were criticised. Allan Shearer acknowledges (Shearer 2005, p. 446) the benefit and importance of fostering public debate around the issue, however argues that the "sensationalist tenor" of the report may have been counterproductive. Shearer points out (Shearer 2005, p. 446) that in a radio interview Schwartz admits that due to a combination of high publicity and misconceptions of its content, the report may have been deemed too controversial, thus contributing to its ultimate shelving. Joshua Busby (Busby 2008, p. 482) argues that although the report was commissioned by the Department of Defense and sought to ground itself in science, he considered the report to have more in common with the Hollywood film *The Day After Tomorrow*. For Busby (Busby 2008, p. 482), the nature of the discussion in the report is too "alarmist" and draws attention away from the actual effects of climate change that are occurring now. In defence of the report, Shearer (Shearer 2005, p. 458) makes an interesting argument that the report may have provided an opportunity for a layperson to engage with the issue and express concerns about the future impact of climate change. Furthermore, Shearer suggests (Shearer 2005, p. 458) that sensationalised reporting by the press at the time may have indicated that the scenario had "struck a collective

## U.S. National Security and Climate Change

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nerve”.

Alan Dupont (Dupont 2008, p. 44) suggests that Schwartz and Randall should be commended for “thinking the unthinkable”, arguing that although the probability of the scenarios described being realised are low, such events are not outside the realm of possibility and should be considered by policymakers.

Whilst Dupont does commend Schwartz and Randall, he also highlights the misinterpretation of a key argument within the report. Citing (Dupont 2008, p. 43) the work of Harvard archaeologist Steven LeBlanc, Schwartz and Randall argue that when the carrying capacity of an environment is exhausted, violence will occur and when given the choice of either starving or raiding for resources, humans will always choose to raid. Dupont indicates (Dupont 2008, p. 44) that this argument is a misinterpretation of LeBlanc’s. For LeBlanc (Dupont 2008, p. 44) the citizen of a state does not always have the choice to either fight or starve due to the fact that they are subject to state authority. According to Dupont (Dupont 2008, p. 43), the assumptions that Schwartz and Randall make regarding scenarios of the conflict arising from resource scarcity are informed by their misunderstanding of LeBlanc’s argument. Dupont points out, “Many of these projections are highly speculative or simply misleading, betraying the authors’ lack of specialised knowledge of the realities of international security” (Dupont 2008, p. 43).

A fundamental error made by the report is its one dimensional view of why conflict occurs. Jon Barnett, citing the work of Homer-Dixon Blitt and Baechler, argues (Barnett 2003, p. 10) that it has not been demonstrated that environmental factors are either the sole or leading cause for conflict. For Barnett, citing the work of Baechler, there are (Barnett 2003, p. 10) many factors that contribute to conflict, such as “poverty and inequities between groups, the availability of weapons, ethnic tensions, external indebtedness, institutional resilience, state legitimacy and its capacity and willingness to intervene”. For Neil Adger, the argument that scarcity leads to conflict is “highly contested” (Adger 2010, p. 279). Citing the work of Nordas and Gleditsch, he argues that it is “violence and the absence of appropriate institutions”, that are the main sources of conflict (Adger 2010, p. 279). Ragnhild Nordas raises an interesting point (Nordas & Gleditsch 2007, p. 635) that although climate change has been partly attributed to conflicts in Africa and Darfur, the overall the number of conflicts is declining. According to Nordas and Gleditsch (Nordas & Gleditsch 2007, p. 635), climate change may play a part in future conflict, however thus far climate change has not arrested the decline of conflict.

The scope of the recommendations made in the report are quite narrow and focus primarily on steps the United States should take to safeguard its interests. An emphasis is placed on developing vulnerability metrics and improving predictive models, for the purpose of predicting and mitigating potential conflict. In the scenarios that Schwartz and Randall present (Schwartz & Randall 2003, p. 2), states adopt either an offensive or defensive posture. States with poor adaptive capacity are forced into conflict in the pursuit of scarce resources whilst nations such as the United States take steps to preserve their resources and prevent the entry of climate refugees. Furthermore, the report does not recommend that the United States assist nations with poor adaptive capacity to tackle climate change. It proposes that the United States adopt an approach that is based upon self interest and self preservation, which would ultimately be counterproductive in addressing climate change and preventing conflict. Idean Salehyan (2008, p. 323) argues that the use of military forces to prevent the migration of climate refugees and to secure resources will be unsuccessful and costly. For Salehyan, developed states must assist developing states develop their adaptive capacities and suggests that investments be made in “improved irrigation systems, better seeds and fertilizers, and strategies for managing urban growth” (Salehyan 2008, p. 323). In addition, Salehyan argues that by assisting states in this way it can “reduce the likelihood of armed conflict” and “If climate change and resource scarcity lead to warfare, then the lack of ingenuity and proper planning- at the local, national and international levels- is to blame” (Salehyan 2008, p. 324).

Salehyan’s argument is compelling, highlighting the inherent weakness of the argument that the securitisation of climate change will provide an effective solution. Shirley Scott argues (Scott 2012, p. 226) that developing states, in particular the Group of 77 and the Non-aligned Movement, are resisting attempts by developed states to securitise climate change. For Scott, developing states regard climate change as an issue which needs to be framed in the context of sustainable development and that the securitisation of climate change is an attempt by developed states to “shirk their international development commitments and to avoid ambitious emissions reductions” (Scott 2012, p.

# U.S. National Security and Climate Change

Written by Bela Romer

226). Benjamin Habib argues “Harmful disruptions to human wellbeing and the patterns of daily life for individuals in vulnerable areas are said to lie at the heart of the underlying reasons why conflict occurs” (Habib 2009, p.2). For Habib, conflict is much more likely to occur when individual safety is threatened and access to necessities such as “food, water, housing, employment and health care” cannot be provided (Habib 2009, p.2). The supply of these necessities (Habib 2009, p.2) are usually the responsibility of civilian institutions and it is the ineffectiveness of or complete lack of these institutions which are a much better indicator of potential conflict. Therefore, (Habib 2009, p.2) the use of military forces to address climate change will not be effective, rather, focusing on the individual security and the ability of civilian institutions in developing countries to provide the aforementioned necessities, would be more suitable and much more likely to produce the desired result.

In conclusion, in this essay I have argued that Schwartz and Randall achieved their desired result which was to generate a broader discussion about the potential implications abrupt climate change may have on national security. However, I have also demonstrated that the report itself is fundamentally flawed. The scenarios that Schwartz and Randall present in the report are frightening to say the least and may have been the reason why the report was misconstrued. Schwartz and Randall do make it clear in the report that the scenarios were dramatisations and it never was their intention to make predictions. In spite of that, the sensationalised nature of the content in the report forced policymakers to put it aside. The misinterpretation of LeBlanc's argument casts doubt on the validity of Schwartz and Randall's key assumptions about human nature and conflict. Their understanding of why conflict occurs is rudimentary and fails to take into account the multiple factors that must be considered when determining why conflict occurs. Rather than just environmental factors or resource scarcity, lack of appropriate institutions that deliver essential necessities and human insecurity are much more pertinent. The recommendations made in the report advocate measures that are limited in scope and serve only the interests of the United States. Measures that would ultimately reduce the likelihood of conflict, such as investing in the institutions and adaptive capacity of developing states, are ignored. For developing states, climate change must be addressed through sustainable development and they regard the securitisation of climate change as nothing more than developed states avoiding responsibility. Military forces by nature of their traditional purposes are ill-suited in dealing with climate change. Rather, investing in the institutions and adaptive capacity of developing states will be much more constructive in addressing conflict and climate change.

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## **U.S. National Security and Climate Change**

Written by Bela Romer

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