Interview - Sherri Goodman

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Sherri Goodman is a Senior Fellow at the Woodrow Wilson Center's Environmental Change and Security Program and Polar Institute. She is also Chair of the Council on Strategic Risk and a Senior Fellow and Founder of the CNA Military Advisory Board. Sherri is credited with educating a generation of US military and government officials about the nexus between climate change and national security, using her famous coinage, "threat multiplier," to fundamentally reshape the national discourse on the topic. A former first Deputy Undersecretary of Defense (Environmental Security), CEO of the Consortium for Ocean Leadership, and staff member on the US Senate Armed Services Committee, Goodman has founded, led, or advised nearly a dozen research organizations on environmental and energy matters, national security, and public policy. She has degrees from Harvard Law School, Harvard Kennedy School, and Amherst College, from which she also received an honorary degree in Humane Letters. Sherri also studied at the London School of Economics and Political Science.

Where do you see the most exciting research/debates happening in your field?

The most exciting current research and debates on climate security are occurring in three inter-related areas: First, the emergence of the "Responsibility to Prepare" concept, developed by the Center for Climate and Security, is enabling both deeper research and more consequential action on the unprecedented risks and unprecedented foresight we face in the climate era. We now live in an era of unprecedented threats from climate change, nuclear, biological and chemical weapons, cyber attacks, hyper-nationalism and other disruptive trends. At the same time, we have access to unprecedented foresight from technological advances in improved predictive capabilities, data analytics, artificial intelligence, quantum computing, virtual reality and other advanced technologies. As we acquire capabilities to better predict alternative futures, we have a responsibility to prepare for these unprecedented risks. The goal of the Responsibility to Prepare agenda is to build an international security architecture at all levels (national, regional and international) that is resilient to systemic threats. Researchers and scholars of climate security will be better able to assess and analyze these risks as governments and others begin to mobilize to deploy these advanced predictive capabilities.

Second, and related to the Responsibility to Prepare, are the exciting developments in predictive capability that better link short-term weather predictions to medium to longer-term climate trends. Sometimes referred to as "subseasonal-to-seasonal forecasting," this emerging capability will enable whole sectors of society, from agriculture to real estate to urban and military planners, to incorporate better forecasts about weather and climate, from short-term forecasts to 12-month predictions, into their business planning. This capability can also be used better to evaluate climate security risks on a regional basis, integrating ecological, political, security and social risks into more accurate foresight tools.

The third exciting area of new research and debate is the growing convergence among core systemic risks to security in the 21st century. Cross-sectoral risks including climate change, nuclear, biological and chemical weapons, cyber-warfare and other advanced technologies to control and disrupt data connectivity and markets, as well as hyper-nationalism, are combining into dynamic new threats to the liberal world order. The relationships among core nuclear, biological, climate and security risks are growing more complex and interconnected, and these issues are likely to begin converging in new ways. A new field of research is emerging to explore the convergence of these risks and how to devise management methods and solutions that account for multiple, intersecting threats and

opportunities from new nuclear and climate technologies.

How has the way you understand the world changed over time, and what (or who) prompted the most significant shifts in your thinking?

In the Cold War, when I came of age, the existential threat to our planet was widely thought to be a "bolt out of the blue" nuclear attack by the Soviet Union. We devoted billions of dollars to deterring and defending against an all-out nuclear attack. We characterized this as a "low probability, high consequence" event. In today's climate era, we recognize that climate risks pose an equally existential threat to human existence. Indeed, climate risks are "high probability, high consequence" events, for which we, as nations and communities, are largely unprepared today. The shift in my own thinking occurred during the course of leading and writing the first CNA Military Advisory Board (MAB) study in 2006-07. I learned from both world-class climate scientists and some of our most distinguished military leaders that climate risks pose serious national security threats.

How did your government service influence your thinking about climate security?

My service in the US Department of Defense and on the staff of the US Senate Armed Services Committee influenced my thinking by giving me the experience of assessing risks in terms of types of national security threats, levels of risks and ranges of solutions. It also enabled me to appreciate the importance of engaging military and national security leaders to address one of the most important threats of our time. At the same time, a whole of government approach and response, including science and technology, energy, foreign policy, development, disaster planning and response, agriculture, transportation, health and education, is essential to address the challenges of climate security.

How does climate change act as a threat multiplier? What are the implications of thinking about climate change as a threat multiplier for the international security landscape?

Climate change acts as a "threat multiplier" by exacerbating other security risks, from terrorism, weapons of mass destruction, mass migration and other preconditions of human desperation. When people lack adequate food and water, exacerbated by prolonged droughts, water scarcity, extreme weather events and sea level rise, they will seek to fulfill their immediate human needs by either fleeing into the hands of terrorists or migrating towards perceived safety. In this way, climate risks multiply other threats we already face.

Considering climate change as a threat multiplier prompts us to integrate climate risks throughout the international security planning framework, from risk assessment and characterization, to consequence management and disaster relief. Rather than isolating (or denying) climate risks from other security risks, the "threat multiplier" framework opens up new avenues of analysis, predictive risk assessment, response and action.

What value does a national security framework bring to climate change that other frameworks might not? How has the field of climate security changed since your CNA report?

First of all, it's important to note that the national security implications of climate change are not a "framework" in a communications sense. These risks are actually already happening, and we should deal with them as we do other national security risks. Nobody asks, for example, about how the national security framework brings value to terrorism or nuclear proliferation concerns. They are simply accepted as national security risks, and climate change should be as well. Acknowledging these real climate security risks enables clear-eyed thinking about some of the most serious risks from climate change. It also enables citizens who do not identify as environmentalists to appreciate the risks of climate change in a national security context. Furthermore, climate security risk assessment enables militaries to assess climate risk to operations and installations, to training and to capacity-building, and then to develop climate resilient responses for military operations, training, equipment and installations.

The CNA report launched the field of climate security, which did not previously exist. This report gave birth to a whole new field of research and analysis on climate security risks and enabled a new generation of climate security

professionals to emerge. Their work is now integrating various dimensions of climate and security risks into the thinking and practice of a wide range of disciplines.

What is the connection between climate change, water security, and national security? In what ways might climate change force us to reconsider traditional notions of national security in this context?

Climate change as a "threat multiplier" will exacerbate already-scarce water and food resources (combined with population growth in some regions and other factors) and could exacerbate security threats, particularly where institutions and governance are weak or lacking. This causes the US to focus on new or additional areas, thereby stretching our defense resources. In addition, having to use our military resources for humanitarian purposes post-disasters at home and around the globe also stretches our limited resources.

Moreover, to date, more cooperation over resources has occurred than conflict. However, the impacts of climate change could mean that climate will be more of a "catalyst for conflict" over time, as CNA's MAB has noted in a 2014 report that updates its 2007 findings. China controls the headwaters of many of Asia's most important rivers. China's demand for water continues to grow with its population and economic development. It could be in a position to monopolize key water resources in Asia in the future. These resources are made even more scarce by dams that divert upstream waters from downstream riparian users in the lesser developed countries of Bangladesh, Vietnam, Cambodia, Laos and others, as well as by overuse of existing groundwater. China also faces significant climate risks, from prolonged droughts in the north to sea level rise, extreme weather events and inundation in the south. China could, in the future, both weaponize its water power by exerting further leverage over its downstream neighbors and geoengineer the climate through various emerging technologies that will enable it to reduce climate impacts to its people. In other words, Asia could become the frontline for the offensive or asymmetric use of climate engineering technologies for national purposes.

What is the most exciting project you are currently working on, and how will it impact our understanding of climate security?

I work on a variety of projects, all of which are very exciting. One of them involves the Woodrow Wilson Center's Polar Institute where we are exploring geostrategic change in the Arctic, from the potential for major powers to compete for both resources and influence in the region of the world changing fastest from climate change to the opportunity to develop resilient and sustainable Arctic infrastructure. The goal is both to better understand Arctic change from an integrated national security, science and policy perspective, and to help prepare people and institutions to operate in this region as it opens to greater human activity.

What is the most important advice you could give to young scholars or practitioners of international politics?

If you have a good idea, pursue it with passion and don't take no for an answer. But always work constructively with others to move concepts and actions forward. Recognize that sometimes, only in hindsight, do we see the fruits of our labor. Sustainable progress takes sustained personal investment.