



Why Cities and National Authorities Must Cooperate to Meet the Security Risks Posed by Climate Change

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In times of war, cities feature prominently in national decisions about strategy and defense, which makes sense, given that they are typically packed with people and resources that need to be protected and mobilized. To meet another set of threats, to the environment, cities are also vital to national security — a reality insufficiently realized. In fact, to ensure the United States is equipped to respond to climate change — and to the increasing number of security threats climate change presents — policymakers and security professionals must learn to see cities as the key resource hubs they are. To anticipate and respond to environmental security threats, cities and national authorities must collaborate.

How Climate Change Threatens National Security

To fully appreciate the increasing importance of cities, one must understand the serious threats climate change poses to national security. These include:

- **A threat to military operations.** Extreme weather events, such as hurricanes, fires, and flooding, are occurring with increased frequency and intensity and can seriously damage military bases and equipment. Many U.S. Navy bases are on the coast and are thus threatened by rising sea levels. In fact, the Defense Authorization Act, which allocates funds for the Department of Defense, lists threats from climate change to the operations of more than 128 military sites – including the likely submergence of \$1 billion's worth of radar equipment on the Marshall Islands; damage to military roads and runways due to droughts and wildfires in the west; and damage to radar communication and training areas in the Arctic caused by melting sea ice and thawing permafrost.
- **Exacerbating conditions for civil unrest.** Severe weather spurred by climate change such as floods, droughts, and fires impacts access to food, water, and shelter. Severe weather also forces vulnerable people to migrate. For instance, researchers have linked the long droughts, caused by global temperature rises, to the length of the prolonged conflict in Syria.
- **Stirring conflicts among nations.** Severe weather events related to climate change can trigger large waves of immigration and strain ties between the countries sending immigrants and the countries receiving them. For example, China argues that developed countries' overreliance on fossil fuels has impacted the climate, which has spurred rising sea levels and forced migration to China's coastal cities. These migrants sometimes face hostility when they move into culturally different communities, leading to violence and instability.
- **Triggering trade conflicts.** As ocean levels rise, take, for example, the tension developing over the Northwest Passage – the Arctic Ocean route between the Atlantic and Pacific Oceans. The passage is expected to become an important shipping route as the Arctic ice pack melts. Canada claims that the passage constitutes "internal waters," therefore, falling under its national jurisdiction, while the United States maintains the assertion that this passage should be considered part of international waters and be maintained and regulated by the international community.

Why Cities Matter

To meet the pressing challenges climate change presents, cities must help assess local environmental effects and create both response plans and pre-emptive strategies. Most countries, however, leave city leaders and city governments out of national discussions about the security implications of climate change.

On the other side, many cities around the world are forging ahead despite a lack of national action, but have not planned sufficiently for how they might accomplish their ambitious goals without support from their national governments. The Mayor of Caracas, Venezuela emphasized the need for cities to have “autonomy and funding for climate and sustainability projects,” noting that her city can best execute these plans with “decentralization and empowerment.” In some cases, cities and national governments fail to communicate because cities are seen as competitors in climate strategy development. In others cases, there is simply a lack of coordination between levels of government.

Recommendations for Coordination in the United States and Beyond

To prepare for more severe weather episodes, city and national governments need to cooperate in areas where cities already have the clear advantage or capacity. In such areas, national governments can delegate and fund tasks. For instance, city and country level cooperation is essential for effective evacuation and relocation planning. Cities can play an important leadership role here by hosting regional conferences where national military specialists could plan for, practice, and discuss the region’s environmental risks. City and national cooperative investment on infrastructure, a key self-reported city priority, could also create significant financial advantages similar to the financial benefits cities enjoyed in the development of the interstate highway system in the 1950s. The federal government would also be wise to invest in disaster insurance to be able to offset the devastating regional economic impacts of hurricanes.

Although many of the coordination solutions discussed thus far are specific to U.S. domestic policy, there are also opportunities for city-state cooperation at the global scale. Namely, countries that provide foreign aid can look for global climate cooperation opportunities in their aid programs. Colin Busby, a researcher for the Center on Foreign Relations, explains: “a modest investment in adaptation in poor countries will likely be much more cost-effective than responding to state failure or humanitarian disasters through military and relief operations.” Countries that provide foreign aid should consider setting aside a portion of the aid they give for adaptation efforts, as exemplified by the European Union. It is high time that climate change be removed from the partisan landscape and reframed as what it is – a serious national security threat.

Read more Devon Cantwell, “Exploring Alternative Frameworks for Global Cooperation in Human Security,” University of Utah (working paper, 2018).