

# FROM OBSCURITY TO ACTION: WHY CANADA MUST TACKLE THE SECURITY DIMENSIONS OF CLIMATE CHANGE

Presentation by Margaret Purdy, University of British Columbia  
Canadian Association for Security and Intelligence Studies  
2009 International Conference, Ottawa  
October 29, 2009

## Opening

When my former colleagues here in Ottawa ask me what I am doing at UBC, I tell them that I am researching the security implications of climate change.

Some assume that what I really meant to say was that I am working on Arctic security – or energy security – issues. I tell them No. I am focusing on a much broader question: How could a changing climate affect Canada's security interests between now and 2030?

Some ask me why I abandoned really important, mainstream research topics – terrorism, cyber security, organized crime. I don't hesitate to tell them that I consider climate change potentially more important than any of the threats and risks which preoccupied me for the 28 years I was in government. I tell them that I chose to focus on this issue for three reasons:

- First, because the security dimensions jumped off the pages of every credible scientific report I read about climate change
- Second, because government officials, academics, journalists, and think tankers in many other countries are paying serious attention to this topic.
- Third, because I am curious why the climate change-security nexus is not being discussed, debated or analysed in any serious, sustained or comprehensive way in Canada – inside or outside government.

This attention deficit puzzles me – particularly because two recent reports provide almost 1,000 pages of Canada-specific climate change projections

- Natural Resources Canada engaged hundreds of Canadian scientists in the production of a 2007 document entitled *From Impacts to Adaptation: Canada in a Changing Climate*, while
- Health Canada followed in 2008 with a similarly impressive document entitled *Human Health in a Changing Climate: A Canadian Assessment of Vulnerabilities and Adaptive Capacity*.

These reports represent an extraordinary advantage which most countries lack. Yet, paradoxically, Canadian security organizations have not leveraged this exceptional advantage.

### **Possible explanations for Canada's inaction**

Why not? I think inaction may be rooted in one or more of the following assumptions:

- that the climate science is imprecise and scientists cannot agree on the existence, origins or consequences of a changing climate.
- that individuals who are framing climate change as a security issue are scaremongers who are exaggerating the risks and dangers.
- that climate change projections are not serious enough to translate into "real" security concerns for Canada – at least not yet.
- Finally, that Canada's security arrangements are adequate to handle whatever happens, and therefore it is okay to wait and see.

All these assumptions are wrong. Scientific uncertainty can no longer be cited as a legitimate reason for ignoring the security implications of climate change. An unprecedented consensus now exists among the world's leading climate scientists – as evidenced by the work of the Nobel Prize-winning Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (the IPCC).

### **Actions in other countries**

But it is not just climate scientists who are identifying security concerns.

Think tanks and research institutes in the US, Europe, Asia, New Zealand and Australia have released major reports on the transformational potential of climate change -- the Council on Foreign Relations in New York, the Center for Strategic and International Studies in Washington, the Royal United Services Institute in London and several others.

The United Kingdom has consistently been the most progressive with respect to tackling the climate change-security issue, as we will learn from the next speaker, Sabrina Schulz of the British High Commission.

Meanwhile in the United States, Barack Obama's arrival in the White House marked a dramatic American reengagement on the whole climate change file.

Obama's aggressive approach stems from worries not only about economic and environmental impacts, but also about security risks. During his first week in office, he warned that unchecked climate change "could result in violent conflict, terrible storms, shrinking coastlines and irreversible catastrophe". His top advisors – including Hillary Clinton and Stephen Chu – speak regularly of climate change in security terms. The National Intelligence Council has assessed the issue and the CIA just announced the establishment of The Center on Climate Change and National Security – as an intelligence community resource. The Defense and State Departments are including climate change in their quadrennial reviews.

In Australia, research entities/think tanks have been focusing on the topic for several years, as have Australian intelligence and policing organizations. The Australian Prime Minister has described climate change as "a most fundamental challenge". At the multilateral level, NATO and the European Union are both engaged at the most senior levels. Take a look at an October 1 speech by the new NATO Secretary General. He argued in a speech in London that climate change should be seen as threat like any other, and nations should prepare for the possible consequences.

By any measure then, the list of individuals, organizations and governments taking the climate change-security linkage seriously is impressive.

### **High degree of consensus**

Also impressive is the degree of unanimity among them about the five most serious implications:

- population displacements and climate migrants;
- resource scarcity and water competition, possibly contributing to conflicts;
- state fragility and global instability;
- effects on human health, including the spread of diseases; and
- more frequent and severe natural disasters.

Broad consensus also extends to what these security projections mean for policy making and priority setting, notably:

- Many impacts are inevitable; mitigation efforts can only change their severity.
- No country is fully prepared to deal with the consequences of climate change

- Poor, unstable countries are going to feel the brunt and they will be the least able to cope.
- Climate change will create problems on its own, but will also trigger, exacerbate and multiply other sources of instability and insecurity.
- Downplaying the threat of climate change when it is competing with other items on a security agenda is dangerously short-sighted.

## **The Canadian Situation**

With the Copenhagen negotiations just around the corner, Canada lags far behind not only in terms of curbing emissions, but also in understanding and acknowledging the security risks of unchecked climate change.

Why do I feel so strongly that Canada needs to look at climate change through a security lens?

Because Canada spans seven climate zones – from temperate to arctic – as well as 40 degrees latitude. Given our huge land mass and unique footprint, we will experience a broad range of climate change impacts – much broader than in most European countries, for example.

And because, in addition to domestic impacts, we will also be affected directly by what happens in the rest of the world.

So we need to think about how climate change could affect our *public safety*, *national security* and *international security interests*.

A few words about each.

The region-by-region projections in the 2007 NRCan report raise many public safety questions.

- Will our contingency plans be adequate to deal with more frequent and serious natural disasters, including severe storms, drought and water scarcity situations?
- Are nuclear power plants, hydroelectric dams, airports or other critical infrastructure vulnerable under any of the future climate scenarios? If so, is anyone thinking about relocation or redundancy plans?
- Will we be able to deal with the arrival of pests and diseases currently thought to be rare or exotic to Canada, along with rising rates of illness and death due to extreme temperatures, increased smog, and wildfires?

- Will social unrest increase, and if so, will Canadian police be able to cope? Will new criminal activity follow increased access and major economic changes in the Arctic?

Turning to national security, we may see new or expanded workloads for intelligence, police, border security and military institutions.

Climate change activists participate regularly – usually peacefully – in protests at major events and around specific projects. But some security experts expect that perceived inaction on climate change could fuel a transition from non-violent to radical protest movements, direct action, even eco-terrorism.

Other security analysts see a causal connection between climate change and international terrorism. They caution that extremists could exploit climate change inequities to further their causes, and remind us that weak states rank high not only in terms of vulnerability to climate change, but also as breeding grounds for terrorist movements.

Some of Canada's largest *diaspora* communities are linked to regions expected to be among the most devastated by climate change. A significant flow of climate migrants to Canada could generate social or economic tensions, especially if the country is already experiencing climate-related or other serious challenges.

In the Arctic, rising sea levels and melting ice caps in the Arctic raise the possibility of territorial disputes between major powers over the legal status of the Northwest Passage, independence and sovereignty, oil and mineral access rights.

Finally, any one of many international security scenarios could affect Canada:

- Scarce supplies of water, food and other resources could ignite or intensify conflict between or within states.
- Tropical storms, floods and drought are projected to increase in frequency and intensity, and could destabilize already-fragile states.
- Temperature increases could accelerate the spread of human and animal diseases.
- Energy concerns could spark a nuclear power renaissance, generating concerns about the adequacy of international nuclear safeguards and control mechanisms.

Taken together, these scenarios prompt questions about

- the coping capacity of international security institutions,

- the preparedness of humanitarian mechanisms,
- the protection of refugees, and
- the responses of countries such as Canada to catastrophic situations around the world at a time when specialized resources may be stretched as a result of climate change-induced situations at home.

### **Canada's readiness**

Do I think that Canada's security arrangements and capacities are adequate to handle whatever happens? Probably not.

Climate change-induced events will not be "security as usual". The *frequency, severity, and duration* of events will be unprecedented. The *concurrence and pervasiveness* of these events will exacerbate their impact. Even developed states such as Canada may struggle to cope as multiple events occur simultaneously – at home and around the world – compounding crises and straining the resilience and capacity of governments, communities and individuals.

### **RECOMMENDATIONS FOR ACTION**

So, what should we do about all of this? Let me make five suggestions.

#### **# 1 Accept climate change as a mainstream security concern**

No more time should be wasted arguing over whether climate change deserves attention as a security issue.

#### **# 2 Start taking it seriously now**

I know that the Ottawa security agenda is already crowded with here-and-now problems and priorities -- Afghanistan, a growing cyber threat, crime gang activity, security for the 2010 Olympics, and so on. And I know that, especially in minority government situations, decision makers are firmly focused on the near term, the tactical, and initiatives which generate immediate results. In this environment, it is tempting to dismiss climate change as a down-the-road issue for somebody else.

But the impacts of changing climate are already evident in every region of Canada. And, regardless of the outcome of emission reduction efforts, many impacts are expected to persist for at least 1,000 years. We have already waited too long to think about what this means for Canada's security.

### **# 3 Start by assessing the risks**

To the extent that discussions do take place in Canada around the security consequences of climate change, they are anecdotal and vague. More serious and systematic assessment is long overdue. Here again, Canada has a comparative advantage. Risk assessment and risk management are well understood and practiced widely within the Canada's security community.

Federal security officials should take the lead and engage a cross-section of internal and external experts to examine credible scenarios – including worst cases – as the basis for taking informed decisions.

### **# 4 Take concrete action**

- Embed climate change considerations in policy making, intelligence assessments, the development of long term security strategies
- Establish a dialogue among scientists and security experts

### **#5 Engage internationally**

Canada should join other nations in assessing countries most at risk, and how their vulnerabilities could affect regional and global stability

Canada should help vulnerable states enhance their mitigation and adaptation capabilities, and

Canada should work multilaterally on contentious issues, including the legal status of “climate refugees”.

## **CONCLUSION**

I do not want to leave the impression that no work is under way in Canada. Several eminent Canadian scholars are analyzing Arctic security issues – as are federal and territorial governments. Many federal public servants are thinking about the broader range of security issues associated with climate change. Some are meeting informally to exchange ideas. A couple of Canadian journalists are paying attention. The International Development Research Centre is conducting valuable research on climate-related vulnerabilities of countries in Africa, Asia and the Middle East.

But I remain puzzled by the overall scarcity of attention in the public, academic and political debate around climate change in Canada. I was somewhat comforted to learn that Paul Krugman is similarly puzzled.

Writing about climate change, Krugman said he feels that we're hurtling toward catastrophe but nobody wants to hear about it or do anything to prevent it. The Nobel Prize-winning economist recently cited the boiled frog theory in his *New York Times* column. A frog, placed in a pot of cold water that is gradually heated, never realizes the danger it's in and is boiled alive. Krugman used the hypothetical boiled frog as a metaphor for what he described as "a very real problem – the difficulty of responding to disasters that creep up on you a bit at a time". As Krugman put it, climate change is a creeping threat, not an attention-getting crisis.

And yet it deserves attention, certainly much more attention that it is receiving today in Canada. As the new NATO Secretary General put it: "We may not know the precise effects or the definite dates of how climate change will affect security, but we already know enough to start taking action."