

Presidential Views of Climate Change as a National Security Concern



American Security Project

Perspective

—
Alicia Orr

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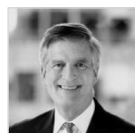
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In this Report:

Climate change is a national security concern as it threatens U.S. military infrastructure and readiness, fragile governments and stability, and the U.S.' position as a global leader. Despite the risks, the U.S. has rarely recognized climate change as a threat in national security strategic assessments. This report will examine the National Security Strategies (NSS) of President George W. Bush, President Barack Obama, and President Donald Trump for recognition of climate change as a security threat. The NSS is important because it sets the national security priorities for each administration, offers insight into each administrations' views on the most important threats facing the U.S., and provides strategic guidance for national security agencies, such as the Department of Defense (DoD).

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IN BRIEF

- Climate change is a threat to U.S. national security: it negatively affects our military infrastructure and readiness, is a “threat multiplier,” and feeds great power competition.
- Despite this threat, climate change has not been a national security priority.
- Neither President Bush nor Trump acknowledged climate change as a national security threat in their NSSs.
- In contrast, President Obama’s NSSs identified the threat climate change poses to U.S. national security and outlined steps to mitigate the threat.
- President Biden, despite having yet to release his first NSS, has already elevated climate change as a national security priority and directed many of the national security agencies to begin incorporating climate change in strategies, plans, and directives.

About the Author

Alicia Orr is a recent graduate of the University of Colorado at Boulder with a bachelor's degree in Political Science. She specializes in climate science and policy and has focused on climate security at ASP. Alicia believes in a cooperative international solution to climate change and is pursuing a career in international diplomacy.

Introduction

Climate change is a threat to national security. A changing climate—rising sea levels, melting sea ice, worsening storms, extreme heat, and drought—threatens U.S. military infrastructure and readiness, fragile governments and stability, and the U.S.’ position as a global leader. Despite the risks, the U.S. has rarely recognized climate change as a threat in national security strategic assessments.

This report will examine the National Security Strategies (NSS) of President George W. Bush, President Barack Obama, and President Donald Trump for recognition of climate change as a security threat. The NSS is important because it sets the national security priorities for each administration and offers valuable insight into each administrations’ views on the most important threats facing the U.S. at that time. The document also sets the strategic guidance for the national security agencies, such as the Department of Defense (DoD), Department of State (DoS), and others.

Climate Change: A Threat to National Security

Climate change impacts U.S. national security interests in a myriad of ways.

First, climate change impacts the physical infrastructure and readiness at U.S. military installations. A recent report published by the DoD¹ details how many strategic U.S. military bases are under serious risk of infrastructure damage, including—but not limited to—sea-level rise, flooding, wildfires, and droughts. For example, the Norfolk Naval Base is considered the fifth most at-risk military base in the U.S. due to the rising sea level.² Readiness is also threatened by climate change. Extreme heat impacts troops’ ability to train outdoors and pilots’ ability to fly training missions.³



Carriers and amphibious assault ships docked at Naval Station Norfolk in 2012. U.S. Navy photo.

Second, climate change has been described as a “threat multiplier.” For instance, crop failure and food insecurity may force people to migrate in search of food and jobs, and if migrants are unable to find food and jobs, or take jobs away from more established residents, protests may break out. If this happens in areas where the government is fragile, such civil unrest may lead to political instability and ultimately a failed state. The U.S. and the rest of the global community have a stake in ensuring peace and stability, as instability and failed states threaten U.S. national security interests.⁴

Third, it also plays a role in great power competition. In recent years, the U.S. has withdrawn from its position as a global leader on climate change, and China has attempted to fill the gap left by the U.S.’ absence.⁵ As a result of the U.S.’ retreat from climate leadership, the U.S.’ ability to exert influence on a variety of issues is threatened. For example, as Arctic sea ice continues to melt, new oceanic pathways for trade, resource mining, geopolitics, and potential military conflict are opening up.⁶ Russia’s stake in the region has been of particular attention in recent years, as they have a powerful icebreaker fleet⁷ and the most maritime claims under the UN Law of the Sea Treaty. Additionally, China has labeled itself a “near-Arctic state” and has more icebreakers than the U.S..

Climate Change: Past Administrations' View

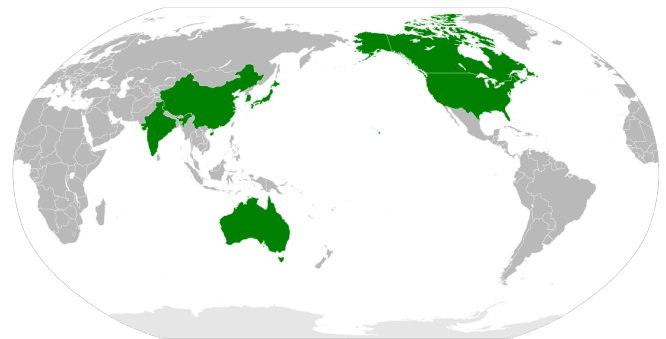
Bush Administration

September 11th happened less than a year into President Bush's first term, and the World on Terror (WoT) dominated President Bush's tenure. As such, Bush's NSSs (2002 and 2006) place a strong emphasis on combatting terrorism. While there is no use of the phrase "climate change" in either NSS, there are references to emissions reductions and the importance of limiting human impact on the climate.

In the 2002 NSS, there is a subsection, titled "Enhance energy security," that references clean energy generation:

"Economic growth should be accompanied by global efforts to stabilize greenhouse gas concentrations associated with this growth, containing them at a level that prevents dangerous human interference with the global climate."⁸

This language recognizes the role humans play in the global climate and the importance of controlling our emissions. The NSS suggests a few strategies with which to achieve these reductions including a cap-and-trade system, improved emissions standards, and regulations, and assisting developing countries with their growth to mitigate global emissions.



Members of the Asia-Pacific Partnership on Clean Development and Climate.

The 2006 strategy similarly maintains a strong focus on the WoT; however, the section on enhancing energy security and clean development references efforts toward international cooperation to address climate change:

"[The U.S.] joined with Australia, China, India, Japan, and the [Republic of Korea] in forming the Asia-Pacific Partnership for Clean Development and Climate to accelerate deployment of clean technologies to enhance energy security, reduce poverty, and reduce pollution."⁹

In a following discussion on the unsustainable reliance on foreign oil, the report suggests strategies for increasing our energy security, including investment in "revolutionary solar and wind technologies [as well as] clean, safe nuclear energy;" and developing "clean coal and... zero-emission coal-fired plants."¹⁰

Ultimately, neither of Bush's NSSs directly identify climate change as a threat to U.S. national security interests. Rather, his NSSs emphasize the need to find economic growth strategies that do not increase global carbon emissions and bolster America's energy security.

Obama Administration

Unlike Bush, both of President Obama's NSSs (2010 and 2015) link climate change to U.S. national security interests. The 2010 NSS makes the direct connection between U.S. national security interests and climate change:

“The danger from climate change is real, urgent, and severe... a warming planet will lead to new conflicts... and the degradation of land across the globe. The United States will therefore confront climate change based upon clear guidance from the science, and in cooperation with all nations.”¹¹

This NSS also emphasizes the need to confront the climate threat through international cooperation: “...an effective, international effort in which all major economies commit to ambitious national action to reduce their emissions.”



The 2015 COP21 Conference. Photo credit: Presidencia de la República Mexicana / Flickr CC by 2.0

The Obama emphasis on climate change helped pave the way for the 2015 Paris Climate Accords: “...we are working toward an ambitious new global climate change agreement to shape standards for prevention, preparedness, and response over the next decade.”

The 2015 NSS identifies climate change as one of the top eight most important national security threats facing the U.S..¹²

“Climate change is an urgent and growing threat to our national security... The present day effects of climate change are being felt from

the Arctic to the Midwest. Increased sea levels... threaten coastal regions, infrastructure, and property. In turn, the global economy suffers, compounding the growing costs of preparing and restoring infrastructure.”¹³

Overall, Obama’s NSSs go beyond Bush’s in recognition of the national security threat climate change poses and efforts to mitigate the threat.

Trump Administration

In stark contrast to his predecessors, President Trump removed any mention of climate change from his 2017 NSS. Trump’s NSS mentions Middle Eastern terrorism, rogue nuclear states, unfair trade practices, U.S. immigration policies, and “unfair burden-sharing with our allies” as threats to national security, but not explicitly climate change.¹⁴

Similar to Bush’s NSS reports, however, the need to bolster America’s energy security and the connection to economic growth is referenced:

“America’s central position in the global energy system as a leading producer, consumer, and innovator, ensures that markets are free and U.S. infrastructure is resilient and secure. It ensures that access to energy is diversified, and recognizes the importance of environmental stewardship... Unleashing these abundant energy resources—coal, natural gas, petroleum, renewables, and nuclear—stimulates the economy and builds a foundation for future growth.”¹⁵

Additionally, there is a brief mention of emissions: “The United States will remain a global leader in reducing traditional pollution, as well as greenhouse gases, while expanding our economy.”¹⁶

Beyond the references to energy security and reducing pollution and emissions, there are no references to climate change and its role in U.S.' regional security, operational security, or great power competition strategies. Ultimately, Trump's NSS fails to recognize the connection between climate change and U.S. national security.

Climate Change: Biden Administration

While President Biden has yet to issue a NSS, it is clear he believes climate change should be a national security priority. Prior to his inauguration, Biden announced his intent to appoint Secretary John Kerry as the Special President Envoy for Climate, a newly created position with a seat on the National Security Council. Furthermore, during his first weeks in office, President Biden signed three Executive Orders (EOs) and recommitted the U.S. to the Paris Climate Agreement, clearly demonstrating the administration's recognition of climate as a national security issue.

The first EO,¹⁷ signed on January 20, 2021, directs the heads of all agencies to review all existing regulations, orders, guidance documents, and policies, and update as needed, to ensure that all documents are guided by the best science available.

The second EO,¹⁸ signed on January 27, 2021, identifies climate considerations as an essential element of U.S. foreign and national security. Specifically, the EO:

- Requests a National Intelligence Estimate (NIE) on the national and economic security impacts of climate change;
- Directs the Secretary of Defense and Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff to consider the security implications of climate change in the "National Defense Strategy, Defense Planning Guidance, Chairman's Risk Assessment, and other relevant strategy, planning, and programming documents and processes;"
- Directs the Secretary of Defense, in coordination with a number of other agencies across the government, to develop an analysis of the security implications of climate change, a "Climate Risk Analysis," that can be incorporated into modeling, simulation, war-gaming, and other analyses; and
- Directs the Secretary of Homeland Security to consider the implications of climate change in the Arctic and along our Nation's borders.

Finally, the third EO,¹⁹ signed on February 4, 2021, addresses the international security implications of climate-related migration. The EO directs the Assistant to the President for National Security Affairs, in consultation with various agency secretaries, to prepare a report addressing:

- the international security implications of climate-related migration;
- options for protection and resettlement of individuals displaced directly or indirectly from climate change;
- proposals for how these findings should affect use of United States foreign assistance to mitigate the negative impacts of climate change; and
- opportunities to work collaboratively with other countries, international organizations, and localities to respond to migration resulting directly or indirectly from climate change.

Conclusion

Climate change threatens our national security; yet, in recent decades the connection between climate change and national security has rarely been identified in the NSS. Bush acknowledged the importance of climate change, but not as a security threat, and Trump sanitized climate change from the NSS. Comparatively, Obama recognized the threat posed by climate change, and the Paris Climate Agreement was a monumental step in attempting to mitigate the threat. Given the Biden administration's early emphasis on climate security, it is expected that it will be a central feature of his first NSS. Early indications are that climate change finally will get the whole-of-government and national security attention it deserves.

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The American Security Project (ASP) is a nonpartisan organization created to educate the American public and the world about the changing nature of national security in the 21st Century.

Gone are the days when a nation's security could be measured by bombers and battleships. Security in this new era requires harnessing all of America's strengths: the force of our diplomacy; the might of our military; the vigor and competitiveness of our economy; and the power of our ideals.

We believe that America must lead in the pursuit of our common goals and shared security. We must confront international challenges with our partners and with all the tools at our disposal and address emerging problems before they become security crises. And to do this we must forge a bipartisan consensus here at home.

ASP brings together prominent American business leaders, former members of Congress, retired military flag officers, and prominent former government officials. ASP conducts research on a broad range of issues and engages and empowers the American public by taking its findings directly to them via events, traditional & new media, meetings, and publications.

We live in a time when the threats to our security are as complex and diverse as terrorism, nuclear proliferation, climate change, energy challenges, and our economic wellbeing. Partisan bickering and age old solutions simply won't solve our problems. America – and the world - needs an honest dialogue about security that is as robust as it is realistic.

ASP exists to promote that dialogue, to forge that consensus, and to spur constructive action so that America meets the challenges to its security while seizing the opportunities that abound.



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