

Intelligence Needed on Climate Change

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By Anna G. Eshoo

In April of this year, a Military Advisory Board of 11 retired admirals and three- and four-star generals led by retired Gen. Gordon R. Sullivan, a former Army chief of staff, examined global climate change through the prism of their national security experience. Their report, "National Security and the Threat of Climate Change," provides a sobering perspective on the climate-related security challenges facing the United States in this century.

The report warns that climate change will act as a "threat multiplier in some of the most volatile regions of the world" and "seriously exacerbate marginal living standards in many Asian, African, and Middle Eastern nations, causing widespread political instability and the likelihood of failed states."

"The chaos that results," the report said, "can be an incubator of civil strife, genocide and the growth of terrorism."

Recognizing these potential threats, I challenged the director of national intelligence, Michael McConnell, to integrate global warming into U.S. intelligence planning. McConnell expressed his support, saying, "I believe it is entirely appropriate ... to prepare an assessment on the geopolitical and security implications of global climate change."

The House Permanent Select Committee on Intelligence took the Military Advisory Board's findings seriously as well. Acting on one of the board's major recommendations, the committee included a provision in HR2082, the Intelligence Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2008, to require a National Intelligence Estimate on climate change.

The estimates reflect the ultimate collective judgment of our nation's 16 intelligence agencies. As such, they provide critical guidance to policymakers in order to keep America safe.

The House of Representatives voted on May 11 to affirm the need for an estimate of the geopolitical effects of climate change on national security before passing the authorization bill, which provides the highest authorized level of intelligence funding in our nation's history. Even so, opponents protested that such an estimate would undermine covert operations and leave America vulnerable to attack.

Such an NIE will not divert any resources from front-line intelligence programs. Spies will not be reassigned to measure ocean temperatures and spy satellites will not be trained on melting glaciers. Why? Because the NIE is not a study of the science of global warming.

Rather, it is an authoritative assessment. The NIE will consider the political, social, agricultural and economic risks to national security over a 30-year period. Emphasis will be placed on regions of strategic importance or at significant risk of large-scale humanitarian suffering, which are likely to produce the greatest threats to our security.

Land loss from rising sea levels in low-lying Bangladesh could increase border tensions with India if millions of people attempt to flee to higher ground. We've already seen how extreme weather can lead to mass humanitarian crisis in the Indian Ocean tsunami and, closer to home, after Hurricane Katrina. Extended drought has been cited as a contributing factor to conflicts in Darfur and Somalia. And any combination of climate-related stresses can help turn a fragile state into a failed state, which we all learned on 9/11 can become breeding grounds for terrorists.

Vigilance cannot be shortsighted. The intelligence community has to be able to see beyond the horizon to prepare for long-range threats to our security. An assessment of climate change by our best intelligence experts will do just that.

As Gen. Sullivan, the Military Advisory Board chairman, said: "There is a relationship between carbon emissions and our national security. ... We have to start paying attention." And pay attention we will.

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