



America's military is the only institution that can break the partisan deadlock on the worst threat the nation faces, Professor Anatol Lieven (pictured) wrote in the January 2018 edition of Foreign Policy magazine.

The precise extent of human-induced climate change is unclear, but the basic science is unequivocal, as is the danger it poses to the United States. This threat comes from the direct impact of climate change on agricultural production and sea levels but equally importantly from the huge waves of migration that climate change is likely to cause, on a scale that even the world's richest states and societies will be unable either to prevent or accommodate.

Yet for two out of the past four U.S. administrations, action on this issue has been frozen due to the refusal of a large section of the political establishment and electorate to accept the clear scientific evidence that this threat exists — and the Trump administration has now decided to remove climate change from the list of security threats to the United States under its new National Security Strategy (NSS).

The most urgent and important task facing climate change activists in the United States is to persuade the U.S. national security establishment of the mistakenness of this decision . If no serious progress can be made under this administration, then concentrated thought must be dedicated to placing climate change at the heart of the next administration's NSS and of U.S. security thinking in general.

This is because the most promising avenue to convince conservative American voters and to generate genuinely serious action in the United States against climate change would be to

firmly establish the link between global warming and critical issues of national security. The threat should be obvious, but even before Donald Trump took office, the security elites in the United States and other major countries had not yet really integrated it into their thinking. Thus the vast majority of reporting and analysis of security issues in the Persian Gulf relates to classical security threats: the future of the Iran nuclear deal, the geopolitical and religious rivalry between Saudi Arabia and Iran, the Saudi-led boycott of Qatar, and so on.

Almost unnoticed by security institutions has been a report from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, which states that by the last quarter of this century, climate change is likely to make it impossible for people in the Persian Gulf and South Asia to operate in the open for much of the year due to a combination of extreme heat waves and humidity. South Asia is currently home to the largest concentration of people in the world, many of them engaged in agriculture. If the MIT forecast proves true, what will future historians say about the current security preoccupations of the Gulf and South Asian governments and their Western allies?

Much of the failure to adapt comes from the security establishments themselves. These were established initially to meet the classical security threats of external invasion and domestic rebellion and evolved during the Cold War to meet the combined military and ideological threat of Soviet communism. Very little in their experience and structures equips them to think seriously about a completely new threat like climate change — especially since its worse impacts will hit far beyond the timescale of the usual military scenarios.

Sometimes they simply cannot even recognize the existence of these challenges, since to do so would be to risk admitting their own redundancy. There are honorable exceptions to this pattern, such as the American Security Project and the Center for Climate and Security. Unfortunately, however, their voices have too often been drowned out by those trumpeting the importance of traditional, but actually far less important, challenges to U.S. security. New threats from Russia and China have only worsened this problem.

Even European think tanks specializing in foreign and security policy, though they take climate change more seriously, generally place it in a separate box from security issues, thus ensuring that most security experts will never read their reports. I have personally experienced how experts on Pakistan who focus on short-term security threats to that country completely ignore the existential long-term threat posed by the combination of climate change, population growth, and poor use of water resources.

But climate change activists must also shoulder some of the blame. All too many have a visceral aversion to thinking about or recognizing the legitimacy of national security issues. All too many have a visceral aversion to thinking about or recognizing the legitimacy of national security issues

, national interests, and nationalism and patriotism as motivating and mobilizing forces. Thinking of themselves as "citizens of the world," they forget that while the challenge — and the coordination needed — is global, the actual actions have to be taken by nation-states with the power to act and the legitimacy to persuade their citizens to support these measures.

But the case for a security role is a vital one. Only security establishments and national militaries have the capacity to mobilize resources on the scale required. Only they can make the link between the threat of climate change and patriotic duty and convince ordinary voters that the sacrifices required are necessary for the future safety of their countries.

Integrating security into this debate would also bring with it a better understanding of how to address the risks involved. Climate change deniers such as the Heartland Institute are apt to

call for absolute scientific certainty about climate change — a guarantee that any action will come far too late. On the other hand, some activists falsely assert absolute certainty about detailed future impacts — a certainty that simply cannot be justified scientifically.

But no soldier or military analyst thinks about threats in this way. They operate on the basis not of certainties but of risks, the scale of risks and the balance between different risks

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. As a Rand Corp. report states:

In the case of nuclear weapons, terrorism, and cyber issues, each offers more uncertainty than climate change. However, vast amounts of resources are dedicated to the sponsoring of research, understanding the threat, and the preparations for potential consequences. The contrary is true for the potential security impact of climate change.... The lack of engagement at NATO headquarters on this point is more appropriate for the management of a tolerable or acceptable risk, while the literature suggests that climate change presents risks that likely won't be tolerable or acceptable. That NATO has not evaluated the tolerability of the potential risk is unrelated to a formal risk assessment, as discussion of climate issues was seemingly prevented by political opposition.

If the attitude to risk of the climate change deniers were transposed to other areas of national security, then we would have to wait until there was a certainty that terrorists would acquire nuclear weapons before taking action or to wait until there was a certainty that the Russians would invade the Baltics before deploying forces to deter them.

Meanwhile, the scientific consensus behind the reality of human-induced climate change has become so overwhelming that in any other area of public policy, it would already be accepted as a basis for immediate action. The U.S. defense establishment can also play an important role in returning science and the scientific method to their proper place in the U.S. public debate.

One of the impediments until now to approaching this issue rationally has been that the issue of climate change has become miserably entwined with the cultural-political divide now splitting American society. In recent years, all too many conservative Americans have begun to deny climate change not on the basis of evidence or debate but because their cultural allegiance rules it out. "We aren't the kind of people who believe in climate change."

This is where the role of the U.S. military is so crucial. It is the one American institution that retains the confidence and respect of the great majority of Americans from both political parties. It is also an institution whose culture depends on a sober and realistic appreciation of threats and which can talk to conservative patriotic Americans with conviction and in a style they can understand. No "citizen of the world" will ever persuade a Republican voter to vote against his or her immediate interests. A U.S. soldier talking about threats to America would have no problem doing so.

It may be a mistake in this context to emphasize the long-term direct physical impacts of climate change and their apocalyptic nature. While the appalling scale of these risks genuinely should prompt radical action, these long-term predictions are by their nature highly uncertain.

Moreover, they fall so far outside the bounds of normal thinking by militaries and security elites that they produce an automatic aversion in such circles; talk of doom switches people off from practical thinking.

Far better therefore when seeking the attention and commitment of national security elites to concentrate on threats that already fall within the remit of security studies. These would be

dangers that are medium term rather than long term and predictable with very high levels of certainty — indeed, in many cases they are already occurring problems. The consensus among experts is that at least for several decades to come, the effects of climate change will not produce sudden and apocalyptic change but rather gradually will worsen already existing and observable problems.

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, with consequent increases in the threats to liberal democracy and social peace in developed countries, including the United States and its key allies. In the words of the 2010 Quadrennial Defense Review, "While climate change alone does not cause conflict, it may act as an accelerant of instability or conflict, placing a burden to respond on civilian institutions and militaries around the world."

The danger posed by migration to Western democracies is already obvious. In the United States, anger at illegal immigration (especially from Central America) played an important part in the election of Trump. In Europe, where many migrants are arriving from Muslim-majority countries in the Middle East and Africa, the effects have been even more dangerous and dramatic. Across the continent, fears of migration have led to the rise of populist nationalist movements, undermining or even destroying the mainstream parties of the moderate left and right and endangering the future of the European Union.

The most water-stressed countries of the world are heavily concentrated in the greater Middle East. Already, the drought that gripped Syria from 2006 to 2011 has been widely blamed for increasing the social tensions that led to the Syrian revolution and subsequent civil war. This conflict led to a wave of refugees to Europe that gave another massive boost to nationalist extremism in several countries including Germany.

In Pakistan, rural migrants driven from the land by water shortages have moved to Karachi, worsening ethnic violence and further weakening the country's industrial and financial core. Pakistani migration to Britain contributed to the anxieties of the country's working class that led to Brexit. South Asia is now rapidly overtaking East Asia as the world's most heavily populated region. According to World Bank estimates, Pakistan's population, which is more than 200 million today, will be some 350 million by mid-century. If the MIT report is correct and temperatures rise to the point where agriculture becomes impossible and much of the region uninhabitable, then the resulting flows of refugees will involve hundreds of millions of people. Not only would this bring regional states themselves down in ruins, but many of these migrants would try to head for Europe.

So even leaving aside the direct effects of migration on the United States itself, it should already be obvious — given existing political trends — that the results of such climate-driven migration in Europe would be shattering to the geopolitical and ideological interests of the United States.

At best, European countries would adopt ferocious external and internal measures of control that would end liberal democracy. At worst, Europe would fall into ethno-religious conflict

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, destroying the basis for America's most important geopolitical, economic, and ideological alliance. NATO would either become totally irrelevant or be forced into sides in civil war.

Migration exacerbated by climate change is also likely to worsen irretrievably the divisions among present EU and NATO members. Northern European members are already trying to

isolate themselves from the migrants crossing the Mediterranean and Eastern Europeans trying to prevent even the initial emergence of non-European populations on their territory — a development that can already be seen in their response to the wave of migrants from Syria. Long before the direct physical effects of unchecked climate change become so great as to disastrously affect the United States itself, in other words, the effects of climate change on migration will likely have weakened America's key alliance systems and the democratic ideals that are the moral foundations of America's global leadership. This is precisely the outcome that U.S. military engagement in Europe and East Asia has been striving to avoid since 1941. Why worry about the threat of Chinese hegemony in the Far East or Russia's undermining of NATO in Europe when you are allowing climate change to produce the same U.S. withdrawal and isolation by different means?

The internal divisions in U.S. society and politics concerning climate change are obviously serious barriers to the security establishment's playing a bigger role — as witnessed by the Trump administration's NSS.

However, the sheer scale of the threat to the security of the country means that the U.S. military has an institutional and patriotic duty to instruct Americans concerning this threat, just as it has influenced them in the past on other threats falling within the military's sphere of competence. Incidentally, this also involves education on the likely security consequences of mass migration, a subject on which liberals are as irrational in their way as conservatives are concerning climate change.

Two wider issues are involved here. The first is that as an institution that depends on science for its weapons and intelligence systems, the U.S. defense establishment not only has a keen understanding of its importance, but can remind the American public of the vital urgency of reckoning with scientific fact.

The second relates to the role of patriotism and nationalism in America. At present, climate change has been turned — quite unnecessarily — into an issue that divides Americans rather than unites them

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. Nationalism is the only force in the United States and elsewhere that can motivate the masses to make sacrifices in the struggle against climate change not on behalf of abstract ideas of planetary responsibility but on behalf of a commitment to the future of their countries. This involvement of patriotism is vital, both because the economic sacrifices required will indeed be very considerable and because they will have to be made by present generations on behalf of future ones.

The military can play a key part in mobilizing these feelings and turning this struggle into one that unites Americans and reduces the divisions and hatred that are beginning to pose a threat not only to the working of the U.S. political system but even the long-term survival of U.S. democracy. Without this engagement, successful action against climate change will be impossible, and the consequences for the United States and the world will be disastrous.

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