



Biden Administration Names Climate Change a Priority National Security Issue

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A new set of Biden administration strategic documents confirms that the one of the U.S. priorities is limiting the harm and risk of climate change to its national security. Especially novel are the topics of two of the reports, one by the U.S. intelligence community and a second by the Defense Department. They imply a new approach to U.S. strategic planning, which likely will be reflected in the work of the U.S. military commands in Europe and in the American position on the NATO Strategic Concept.

On 21 October, the White House published a set of official documents about climate change, [recognised previously by President Joe Biden as one of the most important challenges for U.S. national security](#). These reports are by U.S. intelligence on the impact of climate change on global security, the Department of Defense on the risks and impact on military plans, Department of Homeland Security on plans for improving infrastructure resilience, and the National Security Council on immigration implications for the U.S. The Treasury Department published a separate report by an advisory panel on the impact of climate change on the stability of the economy and financial institutions. From allies' point of view, the conclusions in the intelligence and Pentagon reports are especially important. Both could be used in the ongoing drafting of the U.S. [National Security Strategy](#) and National Defense Strategy, and might be reflected in the U.S. position on the [new NATO Strategic Concept](#).

U.S. Intelligence Report. The report was prepared by the National Intelligence Council with experts from 17 intelligence agencies, supported by scientists and officials from a few other research institutions mainly supervised by the Department of Energy. The report is the first such public intelligence analysis of climate change, but also expands on [topics touched on in the latest "Global Trends" report](#). The intelligence report focuses on three main expected strategic implications projected into 2040, based on American scientific models and the analyses of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate

Change (IPCC). The first implication is that climate change will lead to increased political tensions due to social and economic effects of heat waves, heavy flooding, drought, sea level rise, Arctic ice melting, tropical cyclones, and biodiversity threats. These effects will affect health care and security, production of food and infrastructure, with more frequent humanitarian catastrophes. These tensions will sharpen diplomatic disputes between developed and developing countries, especially over the costs, scale, and pace of implementation of the Paris Agreement. The report also notes China and India—the largest total emitters of CO₂—as crucial countries for influencing the direction and pace of global warming. [China is also recognised in the report as a country oriented on competition for mineral and resources used in key renewable energy technologies](#). The report also stresses the resistance of Russia and other fossil fuel exporters to the implementation of their obligations to reduce greenhouse gas emissions.

The second implication of the forecasted trends is the likelihood for increased border disputes and more flashpoints around the world. [In this context, the Arctic is recognised as one of the regions most at risk](#), as sea ice melt is encouraging a greater military and economic presence of many countries, new sea lanes, and opportunities to exploit hydrocarbons and fishing. [These might force an adaptation of the existing Arctic Council](#) or the creation of alternative multilateral cooperation forums. Without adequate international agreements in place, there might also be new challenges and disruptions from

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“solar geoengineering”—control of weather for cooling the temperature in the atmosphere—and unilateral interventions into the biosphere. The third expected implication of climate change might be worsening situation for many vulnerable, developing countries. The report also indicates a higher risk of conflict over access to fresh water, especially between Pakistan and India, Vietnam and China, and many countries in the Middle East. Moreover, during the period 2030-2040, the report anticipates increased uncontrolled mass migration from conflict zones and dysfunctional states. U.S. intelligence has identified 11 countries where it expects a culmination of negative climate and political phenomena: Afghanistan, Columbia, Guatemala, Haiti, Honduras, India, Iraq, Myanmar, Pakistan, Nicaragua, and North Korea. Internal instability caused by climate change also might be also observed in future in Central Africa, Iran, a few provinces of China, and small island states in the Pacific.

U.S. Military Planning. The Defense Department report is focused on guidelines for military planning, which should mitigate climate change. It cites existing Pentagon orders, and foretells of climate change as a topic in the new [U.S. National Defense Strategy](#), National Military Strategy, and regional strategies. The Pentagon report notes Hurricane Florence’s impact on the Tyndall Air Force Base and Marines’ Camp Lejeune as an example of infrastructure damage from extreme weather phenomena resulting from climate change. It stresses the growing impact of climate change on the strategic calculations of U.S. rivals and allies, as well as on the tasks, missions, bases, equipment, and capabilities of the American armed forces. However, the unclassified version of the Pentagon report consists only of a simplified map marked with risks expected in the area of responsibility of regional commands. For the European Command (EUCOM), the report indicates higher needs regarding humanitarian assistance, natural disasters, and the Arctic with new requirements for potential military operations.

The Defense Department report also announces that climate change issues will be considered in contingency planning, guidelines for military operations, and within the U.S. planning and budgeting plans. Moreover, [it stresses the importance of international military cooperation and partnerships with regard to the climate change impact on regional situations and allies’ security](#). As an example of this cooperation, it mentions the NATO documents adopted in June 2021, including the 2030 Security Agenda and Action Plan for Climate Change and Security. Regional military plans should also take into account—apart from strictly military tasks—support for U.S. diplomacy and civilian agencies, as well as for the authorities of U.S. allied and partner states. The Pentagon also is developing broader analytical cooperation on climate change

with intelligence agencies and the scientific community. Moreover, the budget of the Department of Defense will be more focused on the impact of climate change on the effectiveness of military sensors, air force capabilities, the mobility of land forces (for instance in monsoon conditions in Asia) and in humanitarian aid planning. Based on this, climate change will be a planning factor for institutions and forces under Pentagon control for big exercises and war-gaming.

Conclusion. The new U.S. reports released by the Biden administration are the next steps in a broader review of White House and federal department planning documents. This shows that regardless of the COVID-19 pandemic and the rivalry with China, one of the U.S. priorities is the reduction and management of climate change effects. These issues played a role in evaluating nominees to the Biden administration, and by climate-sceptic Republicans in Congress.

The U.S. intelligence report illustrates how an understanding of global long-term issues are crucial to avoid [surprises from new threats to U.S. interests and citizens’ security](#). Even if U.S. intelligence is not responsible for national security policy formulation, the issues or flashpoints discussed in the report might draw the attention of future administrations away from European security. Also important are the intelligence expectations of military tensions with Russia in the Arctic and need for humanitarian missions in Asia, Africa, and the Middle East. Increased forced migration caused by climate change in Latin America might further polarise the American political scene and society.

[Climate change issues might move up the agenda of transatlantic relations](#) and could form a new area of U.S.-Poland cooperation, beyond the current administration’s goals and actions involving the security of NATO’s Eastern Flank. The Pentagon report announces more attention to climate change issues in planning and exercises of U.S. forces in Europe. Accepted in June this year, NATO’s Climate Change Action Plan also assigned new tasks to the Alliance, including an annual assessment of the climate impact of adaptation of capabilities, installations, missions and forces of NATO, and environmental protection and reduction of greenhouse gases. The Alliance will also prepare a separate report on this topic and will incorporate its conclusion into the text of the NATO Strategic Concept due in 2022. The main global implications for likely humanitarian missions involving the U.S. and NATO forces are quite clear; nevertheless much more study is necessary to improve “green defence” needs in the training, standards, weaponry, and equipment of NATO countries to protect the natural environment.