

# BRIEFER

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## If Climate Change is a Security Threat, Who's Qualified to Fight It? Hint: Everyone

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A [recent piece in AlertNet](#) raises some fair questions about the “securitisation of climate change,” including the dangers of fear-based sensationalist messages and the need for additional research into the links between climate change and violent conflict. It also goes on to make a debatable assertion about the risks of linking climate change to security - one which assumes that framing climate change as a security issue risks overshadowing important social and environmental concerns. Below is the full quote:

Deciding action based on the engagement of a limited pool of security institutions risks sidelining or missing out completely issues such as adaptation, mitigation, development, economic growth, equity, justice and resilience, which do not figure as priorities on the security agenda but which are integral to addressing climate change.

While the danger of half-measures in response to climate change exists (see the past two and a half decades), placing climate change in a security context does not seem to be a likely culprit. The implicit assumption in the above statement, oft-repeated elsewhere, is that defining climate change as a security threat is a slippery slope that will ultimately lead to a narrowing of the scope of responses to traditional security solutions through

traditional security institutions. This warrants a closer look.

That the “security agenda” is primarily concerned with traditional, so-called “hard security” threats, like conflict, war and international terrorism, and does not prioritize “soft security” threats, such as economic stagnation, lack of resilience, absence of justice, and environmental degradation, is debatable. This perspective seems to stem from a misreading (or a mistrust) of the modern security discourse, which in recent years has come to address far more than hard security. In reality, security agendas and “national security strategies” are fast evolving to incorporate soft security concerns, and the requisite civilian agencies that deal with them.

Take the [2010 U.S. National Security Strategy](#). The document includes a major section devoted to the advancement of “prosperity” including “accelerating sustainable development,” achieving “balanced and sustainable growth,” strengthening “education and human capital,” and supporting “the resilience of the poorest nations to the effects of climate change.” In other words, the definition of security in this agenda is very broad. To be sure, more can be done to improve the content and implementation of such security strategies, including further and more nuanced integration of human

security elements, but security agendas go far beyond fighting bad guys.

Furthermore, there is little reason to conclude that the placement of an issue on the security agenda will result in it being handled primarily by armed forces. The security agendas of nations and collective security institutions, like the UN Security Council, are evolving in such a way that recognizes the crucial role of civilian agencies and institutions in combating non-traditional security threats including poverty, water scarcity, food insecurity, and climate change. Indeed, the UN Security Council's recent [Presidential Statement on Climate Change](#) identifies a non-security intergovernmental institution, the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC), as the "key instrument for addressing climate change." In the U.S. Department of Defense's Quadrennial Defense Review (QDR) Report, a major [section on climate change](#) suggests that *civilian agencies*, including the Department of State, the Department of Ener-

gy, and the Environmental Protection Agency, should play the lead roles in addressing the climate risk. The U.S. military, in this case, recognizes that some security threats are best mitigated by non-military entities.

Rather than narrow the field of action, the climate and security dialogue broadens the scope and scale of action. In doing so, it helps ensure that few rocks are left unturned in the effort to mitigate, and adapt to, the effects of climate change. The next step will be to engage the world's security institutions in order to improve the climate and security discourse, and ensure that efforts to combat climate change are responsive to the full range of unprecedented risks we face.

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