

BRIEFER

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Responsibility to Prepare: A Whole of Government Approach to Climate and Security in Three Steps

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In [excerpts](#) from Secretary of Defense James Mattis's written testimony to the Senate Armed Services Committee (responses to follow-up "questions for the record"), the Secretary stressed the need for the United States to take a whole of government approach to climate change. His quote in full:

“As I noted above, climate change is a challenge that requires a broader, whole-of government response. If confirmed, I will ensure that the Department of Defense plays its appropriate role within such a response by addressing national security aspects.”

As climate change impacts all facets of society, it makes sense for the Secretary of Defense to suggest that a range of departments and agencies across the U.S. government should work together to respond to it. Leaving the issue siloed within one department or another would leave the United States fundamentally unprepared to adequately manage and prepare for the problem. If one agrees that a core function of the U.S. government is to protect its citizens and its critical institutions from physical harm, then it can be argued that the U.S. government has a "responsibility to prepare" for climate change risks to national security.

The Department of Defense (DoD) will undoubtedly fulfill this "responsibility to prepare" under the leadership of Secretary James Mattis, continuing the military's no-nonsense approach to climate change during both the GW Bush and Obama administrations. The DoD will prepare for climate risks to its critical infrastructure, to force readiness, and to U.S. interests in the global operating environment, because that's all part of the job. However, the DoD cannot go it alone.

In this context, a Presidential Memorandum (PM) was [issued last September](#) to set up U.S. inter-agency coordination on addressing climate change risks to national security. In other words, an important step in achieving the "whole of government" approach Secretary Mattis referred to in his written testimony. The PM called for the creation of a "Climate and National Security Working Group," the job of which would be to coordinate information-sharing on climate change and national security risks across the government, as well as "inform the development of national security doctrine, policies, and plans."

That PM was recently revoked by the White House before it could really get off the ground, thus leav-

ing the United States government without a plan for achieving a government-wide response to this national security challenge. This leaves the U.S. unprepared for risks to our critical civilian and [military infrastructure](#), unprepared for a future of cascading natural disasters at home and abroad, unprepared for [shocks in the global security environment](#), and unprepared to [support our partners and allies](#) in key regions of the world.

That's a problem. However, it doesn't have to be. The White House has a chance to develop its own whole of government response to climate and security that achieves similar ends. This would help the U.S. government fulfill its responsibility to prepare for these risks, something that the American public, regardless of party affiliation, [expects](#).

It would not necessarily be difficult, and would garner support in the military and national security communities. In the [Climate and Security Advisory Group \(CSAG\) Briefing Book for a New Administration](#), released last September and penned by 43 senior U.S. military and national security leaders, we lay out a number of actionable steps the White House can take to meet a whole of government standard. These include, but are not limited to, three actions that could have a significant impact (pg 10):

1. Elevating leadership on climate and security.

Appoint a Senior Climate and Security Director on the National Security Council (NSC) staff, ensuring that she or he reports directly to the National Security Advisor, includes both international and domestic security considerations in her or his

mandate, has the mission and staff to address the climate change and security nexus from a “whole of government” perspective, and works with other agencies to assess and address these risks;

2. Creating and leading a robust interagency on climate and security.

Establish an interagency Climate Change and Security Group, led by the Senior Climate and Security Director at the NSC, that includes officials of relevant departments and agencies at the Assistant Secretary level or equivalent with an emphasis on strengthening data monitoring and assessment methodologies, and integrating approaches within and across agencies to better anticipate and respond to climate change and security issues;

3. Enhancing staff capacity on climate and security.

Ensure that all DoD, DoS and Intelligence Community (IC) leads within the NSC Staff have the capacity and resources to address the climate-security nexus within their scope of responsibilities.

If the White House is interested in ensuring that the U.S. government does not have any blind spots on national security, such actions - or something like them - are critical.

For the full CSAG Briefing Book for a New Administration, click [here](#).

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