

# BRIEFER

No. 43 | July 15, 2019

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## Latin America: Climate Change, Security and the Role of Regional Militaries

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The Center for Climate and Security published several analyses this year explaining how climate dynamics have contributed to migration crises emanating from the Northern Triangle (i.e. Honduras, El Salvador and Guatemala) and Venezuela. See [here](#) and [here](#). These crises continue to affect neighboring states, especially states that vulnerable populations perceive as offering greener pastures. Though the ways in which environmental trends affect at-risk populations is well known, how these trends affect national stability and security is largely underappreciated and under-discussed. More specifically, how climate-related trends might disrupt military capabilities and facilities, including military training ranges and bases, within contexts increasingly defined by the fallout of climate related/driven crises, has yet to fully permeate military thought and strategic planning. This article briefly explores the climate – security linkages within the Latin American context, and discusses what regional militaries need to do to stay ahead of strategic risks that put their effectiveness at risk.

### *A Good Start, but Not Enough*

The good news is that researchers, legislatures, business communities, civil society and publics across the region have [become sensitized](#) to the

impacts of climate change on not only basic resources such as food, water and energy, but on development processes. All regional states (minus Nicaragua) are [signatories to the Paris Agreement](#) and the majority have expressed (within their respective national strategies) not only their commitment to curb carbon emissions, but also to adapt to the impacts which cannot be mitigated. The bad news is that the defense and security domains have yet to join the discourse in ways that demonstrate a genuine appreciation of the severity of the risks to not only military facilities, but also to national, regional and global law and order processes of which they are important stakeholders.

Given that key military leaders are largely absent from the debate across the region, it's not surprising that few have yet to publically acknowledge, much less advocate for, climate change risks to be addressed in formal defense plans/strategies even though recent history and evidence paint a rich picture of these linkages and the security consequences. Further, there is a growing body of evidence-based research that indicts [climate change as a contributor to recent crises](#), and which forecasts climate-driven outcomes that [could require military involvement](#).

Because of these forecasts, it is paramount that regional militaries begin to acknowledge the security risks in formal threat assessments and the strategic plans that they inform.

### ***Security Risks Already in Play***

The linkages between climate change and security are complex, but they fall into two broad categories. The first are risks to military/security installations, facilities and operational readiness such as the [risks posed to military infrastructure](#); the second are risks of the [kinds of crises that may demand a military/security response](#). These "risks" could be natural disasters, but also encompass a broader range of scenarios such as displacement of communities due to drought/deforestation/soil erosion. There is enough research to justify concern for both categories of risk but it is the first category that should be of proximate concern to regional military/security leadership since the unmitigated outcomes can gravely harm militaries' vital infrastructure – ports, bases, and facilities. If not addressed in time, damage to these vital organs may reduce the capacities of military forces to accomplish disaster response, peacekeeping, missions, and to support "law and order" operations in the near to intermediate terms.

In an article published in Dialogo magazine in December, 2014, I explained that "Floods, droughts, forest fires and tropical storms" were a few of the [impacts reported in a multi-national military joint assessment](#) published by the United States Southern Command earlier that year. I argued that "a convergence of these impacts" could cause instability in rural communities, and form a more permissive environment for crime and violence across South America. Further, given that many South American bases are located along coastlines, and across extensive riverine environments, exposure to sea level rise, glacial melt, and extreme weather risks are already significant, and so should be taken more seriously.

However, beyond operational and readiness risks related to military facilities, any number of scenarios could require that the military be deployed as "first responder" and "peacekeeper." As explained in a 2019 article published by Brazilian independent think tank, Igarapé Institute, United Nations peace missions may also be affected by resource scarcities driven by climate change and "given the Brazilian history of participation in peace operations, [these impacts \(climate change\) are also highly relevant to Brazilian foreign policy](#)." Brazil and other neighboring states' longstanding tradition of supporting peace in far-flung regions of the globe may become increasingly exercised closer to home as crises domestically, and in neighboring states, exceed civil capacities to contain and resolve.

### ***Impediments to Progress***

There has [been little progress in sensitizing Latin American military institutions](#), and key security leaders, to the threats posed by both anthropogenic forestry destruction and climate change. As a consequence, current security sector policies and strategies do not give due consideration to environmental factors in security affairs for several reasons. Chief among them are: 1) Biases towards traditional threats/challenges; 2) A resistance to "non-traditional" security risk narratives; 3) Political sensitivities surrounding climate change matters; 4) National authorities and institutional doctrines that restrict how resources can be spent; and 5) Lack of policy-ready climate information that can be integrated into security policy/strategies. Imbuing a broader and richer understanding of climate risks across regional security communities will require more energetic advocacy by academics, analysts and activists to elevate the regions' policymaking and security communities understanding of the risks, and the consequences of inaction.

### ***What Should Happen Next?***

Regional defense departments/ ministries should be encouraged to participate in the climate-security discourse to learn more about what the research says about the impact of environmental trends on military infrastructure and operating

contexts. A next step to these kinds of exchanges should be regional assessments/studies that examine precisely how these trends are likely to change the demands made on military forces. It is noteworthy and relevant to share that the United States' Department of Defense released a climate change study in January, 2019 stating that the majority of U.S. military installations are at risk, specifically, 53 of the 79 for flooding; 43 of the 79 for drought and 36 of the 79 from wildfires. It would be helpful for regional bodies such as the Inter American Defense Board to commission similar studies as a means to spur debate and action. Country and region-specific plans and strategies that enable climate-

sensitive responses, commensurate to the forecast threats, would then be natural outcomes of new knowledge and would also be implemented in concert with those of civilian authorities. Taking these kinds of actions in the near-term will ensure that regional militaries stay ahead of the risks and demonstrate to the hemisphere's increasingly climate vulnerable populations that the armed forces are being proactive in their role of national security guardian.

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