

Climate Security in East Asia: New Opportunities for Non-traditional Cooperation by Michael Davidson

Michael Davidson [mdavidson@jiaponline.org] is a Visiting Fellow at Asia Policy Point

Later this month, US Commerce Secretary Gary Locke goes to China to promote US clean energy technologies while Treasury Secretary Timothy Geithner and Secretary of State Hillary Clinton follow for the second round of the US-China Strategic and Economic Dialogue. All will discuss ways to strengthen the US-China relationship by combating environmental degradation.

The security implications of climate change offer promising areas of cooperation between the US and China. Both countries agree on the potential damaging effects of climate change as well as on the need for coordinated international responses. However, US defense planners have not fully recognized the many benefits to be gained by cooperating with China on this front. Given the scale of the problem, a US-China climate security partnership could dwarf existing military cooperation and help stabilize the bilateral relationship.

“Securitization” of Climate Change

Global climate change threatens to increase the frequency and severity of natural disasters. Mitigating and adapting to these effects has significant security implications that defense ministries have only begun to acknowledge. The 2010 *Quadrennial Defense Review (QDR)* noted that “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.”

This year’s *QDR* – the first-ever to mention climate change – highlighted two important effects of climate and energy security: (1) the changing “operating environment, roles and missions” of US forces; and (2) the impact on military facilities and capabilities.

The changing roles and missions refer to the new and unpredictable requirements of providing disaster relief and humanitarian assistance. According to a 2007 report by the Center for Naval Analyses on which the *QDR* drew heavily, climate stresses can undermine public health infrastructure, destabilize economies, and contribute to a rise in terrorism.

The latter impact refers to, for example, the high price tag of delivering oil to the frontlines and the responsibility for mitigating climate change effects. The Department of Defense (DoD) has singled out military installations as a test bed for renewable energy and energy efficiency technologies. Furthermore, as part of President Obama’s executive order on

federal sustainability, noncombat activities are to reduce greenhouse gas emissions by 34 percent in 2020.

In its 2008 white paper on defense, China highlighted energy conservation and ecological projects but failed to list their security implications. In other venues, such as the ASEAN Regional Forum, however, China has indicated the need to look beyond traditional security threats.

In a recent article, People’s Liberation Army (PLA) Maj. Gen. Luo Yuan called noncombat military activities overseas a “new mission for a new era” of the PLA. However, China has failed to keep up with the US, Japan, and other major powers in standardizing key elements of these activities such as personnel training and logistics support. This substantially restricts the PLA’s future presence abroad. He further emphasized that cooperation and dialogue are fundamental to these types of activities.

Existing Military Environmental Security Partnerships

As these reports indicate, the two countries are looking beyond their current capabilities in managing the potential conflicts over access to natural resources and the effects of environmental degradation. Where there are shared interests, these authors suggest, there should be cooperation, because the benefits to be gained – building trust, sharing best practices, and developing responsive capacity – are too great to ignore.

Given the unease with which many defense ministries view the rise of China, a cooperative initiative on climate security between the US and China would take advantage of its confidence-building components, while paving the way for engagement on other areas traditionally managed by militaries.

Besides using existing frameworks, however, there is a dearth of ideas on how to implement the necessary military exchanges, such as joint training exercises and research programs. The *QDR* only calls for a “multidimensional” US-China relationship that manages the risks of conflict while strengthening areas of mutual interest.

This oversight is in large part due to the lack of examples of environmental security partnerships applicable to China. The DoD’s only large-scale environmental cooperation project is in the Baltic Sea Region (BALTDEC, better known as the “Riga Initiative”) begun in 2003 to focus on shared water resources. As it depended on the NATO framework and only concerned water management, however, the lessons learned do not transfer well to East Asian climate change cooperation. The Arctic Council, created in 1996, has also gained new significance in light of global warming effects in the Arctic Circle, but has been unable get past core issues of sovereignty and sea lanes.

Of sufficient scope and ambition, in light of the extreme consequences of inaction, is the Desertec Industrial Initiative

among Europe, the Middle East, and North Africa. This German-based \$550 billion program will use European and US technology to create an intercontinental grid of renewable electricity. It pairs recognized regional and technological advantages, thus opening the door for future cooperation among the otherwise distinct regions.

Envisioning a US-China Partnership on Climate Security

To meet the new transnational threat of climate change, the *QDR* calls for collaborations with “both traditional allies and new partners.” The US and China are natural new partners. Neither can confront alone the human dislocation and resource competition caused by environmental degradation. Furthermore, of all the governmental agencies examining climate change, only militaries have the necessary logistical structures to react cooperatively and quickly.

A new US-China security partnership would complement the 2009 inter-governmental *MOU to Enhance Cooperation on Climate Change, Energy and the Environment* that established a regular policy dialogue on these topics. It could also build on the Strategic and Economic Dialogue (S&ED). The S&ED was designed to address a large range of shared concerns, including regional security and global issues such as climate change. A new track on climate security cooperation can strengthen ties in both dialogues.

Cooperation has already begun. For example, last May, China and the US participated multilaterally in the ASEAN Regional Forum’s First Voluntary Demonstration of Response on Disaster Relief. The US and China should go the next step to initiate a joint exercise focusing specifically on climate change-induced disasters.

In addition, climate security extends beyond traditional disaster preparedness, into climate change mitigation and scientific research. The Office of Naval Research wants to establish scientific exchanges with the Chinese on alternative energy and other basic science through its proposed joint forces Hong Kong office. The Office of Naval Research, the Air Force Office of Scientific Research, and the US Army Research, Development and Engineering Command already support basic science research projects with other Asian countries on superconductors and biofuels.

By focusing on scientific research and disaster preparedness, the US and China can reframe existing military exchanges to focus on areas of critical cooperation: energy security concerns as well as human security needs such as cheap energy, food shortages, and refugee relief. Instead of bickering over borders and air space, it is first better to establish a working day-to-day relationship over matters of mutual concern and interests. A US-China climate security partnership can draw on the best instincts and science of both countries, both of which are firm ground to build trust and understanding.

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