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*“Climate is not stationary and neither is national security.”<sup>i</sup>*

## **Can Climate Change Act as a Force Multiplier and as a Catalyst for Peace to USPACOM’s Theater Strategy?**

**Jennifer Ruth Taylor Raisanen**

As the oldest and largest U.S. Combatant Command, United States Pacific Command’s (USPACOM) area of responsibility (AOR) embraces the entire Asia-Pacific region.<sup>ii</sup> The Asia-Pacific region remains, unequivocally, the region in the world most susceptible to natural catastrophes – disasters negatively impacted more than one billion people in the last ten years alone.<sup>iii</sup> Despite its volatility, the Asia-Pacific region encompasses two of the three leading global economies, and hosts the most congested sea lanes in the world through which more than eight trillion USD pass every day.<sup>iv</sup>

The Asia-Pacific’s disaster-prone qualities and massive size suggest that the region is especially vulnerable to the repercussions of climate change, which would no doubt exacerbate the intensity and frequency of natural catastrophes and would inevitably impact the economy and way of life for many nations, including the United States. Due to the intricacies and close economic relationships between the U.S. economy and that of China, Japan, the Philippines and other ally and partner Asia-Pacific nations, if the Asia-Pacific suffers from the harmful effects of climate change, then the U.S. is vulnerable to the disruptive impacts of climate change as well. In fact, retired CDRUSPACOM ADM Locklear identified climate change as the number one threat to a stable Asia-Pacific, and current CDRUSPACOM ADM Harris concurred that the influence of climate change on natural disasters will have a “destabilizing effect” on the region.<sup>v</sup>

In January 2012, U.S. foreign policy pivoted, rebalancing toward the Asia-Pacific region. Given President Obama’s announcement that the U.S. intends to rebalance to the Asia-Pacific region, USPACOM published its theater strategy on January 22, 2013. Consistent with national guidance, the theater strategy emphasized USPACOM’s desired end state, which stipulates that

USPACOM will ‘maintain an assured presence in the [Asia-Pacific] region, effectively communicate [USPACOM] intent and resolve to safeguard U.S. national interests, and strengthen alliances and partnerships.’<sup>vi</sup>

Climate change can directly threaten USPACOM’s ability to achieve its desired end state of maintaining a presence in the Asia-Pacific and safeguarding U.S. national interests. Just as importantly, climate change can act as a catalyst for peace by reinforcing USPACOM’s desired end state of strengthening alliances and partnerships. Without a doubt, climate change is both a force multiplier that poses security challenges to USPACOM’s theater strategy, while simultaneously acting as a force multiplier to strengthen alliances and partnerships. Although the effects of climate change weaken USPACOM’s ability to maintain an assured presence in the Asia-Pacific region and safeguard U.S. national interests, climate change strengthens alliances and partnerships.

### ***Climate Change Weakens USPACOM’s Ability to Maintain an Assured Presence in the Asia-Pacific***

As one of six geographic Unified Combatant Commands, USPACOM is headquartered in Hawaii and is supported by four component commands, two Marine Expeditionary Forces, a Joint Interagency Task Force, and forward deployed forces and assets that are located in Seoul, South Korea, Yokota, Japan and throughout USPACOM’s AOR.<sup>vii</sup> Roughly speaking, 49 non-U.S. bases, 392,000 U.S. military, Special Operations and civilian personnel, 200 ships (includes five aircraft carrier strike groups) and nearly 1,100 aircraft are assigned to USPACOM’s AOR.<sup>viii</sup> In total, USPACOM represents an overseas presence that is unmatched by any other country’s military on the planet. No enemy of the United States has ever been able to completely destabilize U.S. overseas presence in the Asia-Pacific across the entire USPACOM AOR, but the unmitigated effects of climate change may accomplish just that.

Flooding, erosion, rising sea levels, storm surges and intense heat all retain the capacity to render airstrips, roads, piers, critical equipment, supply lines and entire bases unusable for

extended and unknown periods of time. Environmental degradation to military infrastructure impairs readiness and makes it difficult for USPACOM to train, fight and deploy. In essence, a loss of access to infrastructure is the same as anti-access/area denial to USPACOM capabilities and diminishes USPACOM's ability to sustain a presence in the Asia-Pacific region.<sup>ix</sup> In order to maintain an assured presence in the Asia-Pacific, it is imperative that USPACOM safeguard assets and personnel against the harmful effects of climate change, and this includes infrastructure.

Since nearly 80 percent of all natural disasters around the globe occur within the USPACOM AOR, the risk of damage to infrastructure and the loss of American lives is high.<sup>x</sup> There is no mistake that in the USPACOM AOR, climate change is a force multiplier that poses security challenges to the theater strategy. In fact, a large part of USPACOM's regional plan now addresses the non-traditional security risks of climate change.<sup>xi</sup> These non-traditional security risks, otherwise known as extreme and intense weather events, have claimed the lives of more people in the Asia-Pacific region than any military action.<sup>xii</sup>

The security risks associated with climate change affect the performance and life cycle costs of USPACOM infrastructure. Climate change causes extreme and intense weather events and translates into requests for additional fiscal, monetary and environmental resources via the Department of Defense (DoD). Once infrastructure becomes incapacitated and operational readiness has been degraded, the security risks of climate change act as a domino effect, crippling USPACOM's theater strategy and reducing its ability for USPACOM to maintain an assured presence in the Asia-Pacific region.

To counter the debilitating effects of climate change, USPACOM should request from DoD state-of-the-art weather detection equipment to enhance climate forecasting capabilities. An investment in technological monitoring equipment will afford USPACOM more time to respond, evacuate or deploy. A technological investment would subsequently enable

USPACOM to maintain a show of force, preserve freedom of navigation, and continue to exert a presence in the region.

Moreover, when new infrastructure is constructed, the infrastructure should be fabricated to withstand worst-case scenario extreme weather events, per the guidance set forth in the 2010 and 2014 Quadrennial Defense Reviews.<sup>xiii</sup> Climate-resilient infrastructure and technological investments that enhance force structure, weapons systems and platforms are inherently necessary to USPACOM's ability to maintain an assured presence in the Asia-Pacific region.

### ***Climate Change Weakens USPACOM's Ability to Safeguard U.S. National Interests***

It becomes impossible for the poorest of the poor to sustain a basic lifestyle when their livelihoods are directly impacted by increasing quantities of salt seeping into their fresh water supply, which has been attributed to rising sea levels. Climate change has caused record-breaking natural disasters restricting access to natural resources and prompting entire populations to migrate in search of better economic opportunities. Climate change weakens USPACOM's ability to safeguard U.S. national interests because environmental migration doesn't just affect the relatively poorer nations of the Asia-Pacific; the effects would be felt by richer nations in the Asia-Pacific region, as well as the United States.<sup>xiv</sup>

The International Organization for Migration assesses that economic and environmental calamities have displaced more than 31 million people in the Asia-Pacific region.<sup>xv</sup> It should come as no surprise that migrants prefer to relocate to places that offer the best economic opportunities. As a result, migrants without legal means pose the most dangerous threat to the larger and more stable economies of the Asia-Pacific and to the United States due to the nefarious risks of exploitation, human trafficking, and even disagreements concerning how to care for the migrants.<sup>xvi</sup> Environmental migration is a transnational threat which may lead to conflict if climate refugees migrate into a region where they are unwanted; therefore,

USPACOM security planners should work with ally and partner Asia-Pacific nations to manage migration and reduce the likelihood of conflict.

USPACOM security planners should request through DoD the means to coordinate with international and non-governmental organizations to build consensus regarding climate migration. USPACOM should take the lead to identify agreeable resolutions and formulate a contingency plan to respond to displaced climate refugees in the Asia-Pacific region. Planning should include rehabilitation for displaced persons as well as advice to allies and partners on how to mitigate the security challenges of migration caused by climate change. Doing so would better prepare USPACOM for the inevitability of being called upon to respond to the national security risks associated with migration, and would serve to strengthen the United States in the rebalance toward the Asia-Pacific by enhancing coalitions with strategic ally and partner Asia-Pacific nations.<sup>xvii</sup> In other words, a well-formulated environmental migration policy would enrich USPACOM's theater strategy and strengthen USPACOM's ability to safeguard U.S. national interests.

***Budgetary Uncertainty is a Greater Force Multiplier than Climate Change and Weakens Alliances and Partnerships***

Budgetary uncertainty is not only a greater force multiplier than climate change because it poses a security challenge to USPACOM's theater strategy, weakening alliances and partnerships critical to achieving USPACOM's desired end state. Budgetary uncertainty diminishes longstanding training prospects with Asia-Pacific allies and partners, which weakens USPACOM alliances and partnerships. Lawmakers involved in the budgetary process have politicized the role of the U.S. military and have failed to understand that a lack of a forward deployed presence equates to outdated intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance capabilities, a defense posture that is not always at the ready, and a military force that cannot be recalled at a moment's notice to train, fight, and win.

2014 was ripe with budgetary uncertainty. Due to sequestration, DoD was required to sacrifice the readiness capabilities of follow-on forces at the expense of maintaining readiness standards of forward deployed forces and vital mission-critical investments necessary to maintain a decisive advantage.<sup>xviii</sup> In fact, DoD placed USPACOM in the awkward position of reducing and even abandoning beneficial training maneuvers, which negatively impacted multinational training schedules as well as crucial unilateral training essential to sustain USPACOM's "high end warfighting capabilities."<sup>xix</sup> In the absence of a collaborative effort to continue improving upon U.S. skills and proficiencies, the U.S. jeopardizes overlooking significant indications and warnings in a world where situational responsiveness influences decision space.<sup>xx</sup>

Be that as it may, policymakers should fully fund military programs and grant DoD the ability to achieve and maintain 100 percent operational readiness and interoperability. If not, the greater force multiplier of budgetary uncertainty will overpower USPACOM's theater strategy with insurmountable security challenges and USPACOM's desired end state in the Asia-Pacific region will not come to fruition. More importantly, USPACOM will lose the historical asymmetric advantage of surging and maneuvering ready forces on a global scale.<sup>xxi</sup>

### ***Climate Change Reinforces USPACOM's Ability to Strengthen Alliances and Partnerships***

Due to the increase in extreme natural disasters caused by climate change in the Asia-Pacific region in 2014, ADM Locklear advised junior commanders upon their arrival to USPACOM that the likelihood of engaging in an armed conflict was low, while the likelihood of coming to the humanitarian aid of USPACOM's allies and partners remained high.<sup>xxii</sup> While it is true that climate change and budgetary uncertainty pose severe security challenges to USPACOM's theater strategy, some may be surprised to learn that climate change commands the power to bolster USPACOM's alliances and partnerships.

The rebalance to the Asia-Pacific region represents multiple opportunities for USPACOM to demonstrate American leadership and military expertise on humanitarian assistance/disaster relief (HADR) and reemphasizes to USPACOM allies and partners that the U.S. is a Pacific nation.<sup>xxiii</sup> Actually, HADR is a USPACOM mission capability, and one that USPACOM has demonstrated to its allies and partners in the Asia-Pacific region more and more frequently, thanks to climate change. USPACOM HADR contingency planning occurs on both a military-to-military and a civilian-to-military level.<sup>xxiv</sup> As an added bonus, USPACOM leans on the Center for Excellence in Humanitarian Assistance and Disaster Relief to provide information on disaster relief and preparedness efforts to allies and partners in the Asia-Pacific region.<sup>xxv</sup>

Truth be told, USPACOM is the only entity that is able to respond to allies' and partners' requests for assistance, because none of the Pacific nations maintain either single or combined militaries that are able to provide HADR.<sup>xxvi</sup> USPACOM presence throughout the Asia-Pacific region demonstrates visible and tangible reassurance that USPACOM is pre-positioned to provide HADR, as well as traditional military power, to allies and partners.

In 2013, more than 13,000 U.S. military personnel stationed in the USPACOM AOR delivered HADR to the Philippines.<sup>xxvii</sup> Although USPACOM distributed food, water, medical and other critical supplies, HADR underpinned U.S. "soft power" in a region that typically views USPACOM as a staunch military power.<sup>xxviii</sup> In actuality, if USPACOM had not distributed HADR to the Philippines, then the U.S. may have suffered harsh criticism which would have weakened USPACOM's ability to strengthen alliances and partnerships in the Asia-Pacific region.

Not only has USPACOM provided HADR to Asia-Pacific allies and partners, USPACOM sponsors bilateral and multilateral training exercises to improve host nation capabilities, which builds mutual trust.<sup>xxix</sup> Host nations are then able to incorporate tailored USPACOM advice into their contingency plans. USPACOM training exercises build strong



relationships with allies and partners, and are a strategically viable way of displaying USPACOM capabilities that are able to function as a deterrent against future conflicts.<sup>xxx</sup> Beyond a doubt, climate change is a catalyst for peace and reinforces USPACOM's ability to strengthen alliances and partnerships in the Asia-Pacific region, which is crucial to the success of USPACOM's Theater Strategy.

It is clear to see that climate change can act as both a force multiplier and as a catalyst for peace to USPACOM's theater strategy. In spite of the fact that climate change weakens USPACOM's ability to maintain an assured presence and to safeguard U.S. national interests, climate change fosters new opportunities for USPACOM to strengthen alliances and partnerships in the Asia-Pacific region. Climate change creates a platform for USPACOM to collaborate with allies and partners on shared issues, and climate change is definitely an issue of great importance to Pacific nations.<sup>xxxi</sup>

In fact, the Council for Security Cooperation in the Asia-Pacific considers climate change to be a threat to national security.<sup>xxxii</sup> Should USPACOM be unable to carry out its theater strategy in the Asia-Pacific region, allies and partners would find it difficult to address the security risks associated with climate change. Recognizing the shared security risks attributable to climate change supports USPACOM's desired end state to maintain an assured presence, safeguard U.S. national interests, and strengthen alliances and partnerships in the Asia-Pacific region.

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