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CLIMATE COMPLACENCY IS NO OPTION FOR DEFENCE AND NATIONAL SECURITY

Although the recent Shangri-La Dialogue showed that awareness of the nexus between climate and security is high within the defence and national security establishments across the Indo-Pacific, climate adaptation and mitigation measures have yet to be sufficiently developed by militaries, either at national or regional level. If climate security is not adequately integrated into defence and national security planning, resources could be diverted away from core defence functions as climate disasters continue to wreak havoc in the region, warns ***ALISTAIR D. B. COOK****.*

Devastation typical of that wrought by Super Typhoon Odette across a wide area of the Philippines in December 2021, shortly before the start of the country's steepest ever spike in Covid-19 cases to date. *Photo by Carl Kho on Unsplash.*

Climate change has taken a more prominent position as defence and national security establishments across the Indo-Pacific recognise its impact upon their respective

countries. What has become clear during the global pandemic is the convergence of different generators of insecurity such as pandemics and climate change; the need to build trust and cooperation between countries across the Indo-Pacific to avert the exacerbation of disaster impact in the world's most disaster-prone region; and the need to rethink the sustainability and readiness of the defence and national security sectors.

Profiling Climate Security

At the recent 2022 International Institute for Strategic Studies Shangri-La Dialogue, Delfin Lorenzana, then-Secretary of the Department of National Defense of the Philippines, acknowledged that Manila's major capital acquisitions such as ships, air assets, and engineering equipment are also extensively used for humanitarian assistance and disaster response (HADR) in the typhoon-prone country. These assets allow faster reaction, which could save lives and property. For his part, General Phan Văn Giang, Vietnam's Minister of National Defense, identified the role that the Vietnam People's Army plays as the "vanguard" in disaster prevention and response to Covid-19.

What became clear through statements such as these is the increasing priority placed upon converging risks in national security discussions in Southeast Asia.

The impact on the wider Indo-Pacific took centre stage when Inia Batikoto Seruiratu, Fiji's Minister of Defence, National Security and Policing, profiled the devastation of human-induced climate change as the primary existential security threat facing the Pacific island states. He argued for a broader understanding of security to better grasp the implications of climate change for security. He mentioned also that for Pacific islanders, the Covid-19 pandemic has simultaneously illustrated that health security is another critical intersecting element of national and regional security. Seruiratu noted that the pandemic and the disinformation and misinformation spread about it highlighted the need for inter-agency and whole-of-society approaches to tackling such transnational security threats. From a review of the environmental threats facing the Pacific island states, the minister called for greater collaboration and cooperation to meet the demands of a changing security landscape, and improve defence and security mechanisms at the national and regional levels.

In sum, it was clear that the impact of climate change on national security is recognised by defence and security establishments across the Indo-Pacific region. However, climate adaptation and mitigation measures have yet to be sufficiently developed by militaries, either at national or regional level through forums like the Association of Southeast Asian Nations.

Defining Defence Priorities

A special session on climate security and green defence at the Shangri-La Dialogue brought together representatives from Germany, the Maldives, New Zealand, and the United Kingdom. Notably absent from the panel were representatives from Southeast Asia. Mariya Ahmed Didi, Minister of Defence for the Maldives, reiterated the existential threat faced by small island developing states and highlighted the need for defence diplomacy to be coupled with humanitarian assistance to support climate

mitigation and adaptation. The minister's call outlined three aspects through which the defence and national security sector can contribute to climate security: investment, defence procurement, and adaptation.

Investment

With the long lead time needed for defence procurement, there is a need today for militaries to consider the climate implications of purchases, to contribute to a reduction in carbon emissions and be ready for future scenarios. Admiral Sir Ben Key, First Sea Lord and Chief of Naval Staff in the Royal Navy, UK, highlighted the need for kit adaptability that embraces new technologies. He recognised that newly purchased assets must have open architecture systems, so that when technological advances are made these developments might be integrated to reduce the carbon footprint. Such investments in technology would require moving beyond the established defence industry to engage the wider private sector and scientific community.

Procurement

In the special session it was cautioned that the commitment to defence procurement would have to be tempered with a dose of realism since many armed forces in the Indo-Pacific are relatively small, with insufficient budgets, and may be dependent on ageing equipment donated by third countries. In other words, there is a potential risk transfer for many militaries in the region in that they could be saddled with donations of environmentally unfriendly assets. One way to offset this risk is by investing heavily in defence diplomacy and encouraging openness on the part of the more developed countries, to share technological advancements with the region's smaller and less developed militaries. While some participants argued only for shorter procurement terms than the current 30- to 40-year cycles for military hardware, options with greater openness and adaptability will offer a degree of assurance to militaries in the region.

Adaptation

The third component focused on an important criterion in guiding acquisition decisions: the capacity of assets to provide HADR in a changing climate. This will require, for instance, assets tailored for the delivery of HADR in densely populated urban areas. Evaluation and adaptation of military training will also be needed to meet new scenarios of exposure to extreme heat, storm surges, and other extreme weather conditions. In addition, integrating climate change considerations into militaries will require the development of emergency response platforms to be shared with civilian agencies; preparation for changes in mission profiles, military tasking, and standard operating procedures to include HADR planning and execution; and an investment in supply chain resilience through anticipatory logistics. These adaptation measures are explicitly recognised in the latest 2022 report Climate Change & Security Impact Assessment by Jens Stoltenberg, Secretary General of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization, and are more broadly applicable to the global defence and security sector.

Next-Generation Impact

As welcome as they are, those proposals do not go far enough as they remain focused on the direct impact of climate change, and pay inadequate attention to converging risks, such as how climate change can affect health security by exacerbating emerging diseases. In the Indo-Pacific it is now overdue for militaries and national security establishments to profile and integrate these scenarios into decision-making. Doing so is necessary if they are to be better prepared for these new realities, which made themselves abundantly visible in the recent examples of the Covid-19 pandemic and the concurrent disasters faced in the region.

Ultimately, the integration of the climate component must take into account its convergence with health and other emerging security issues, if it is to make the necessary impact on the design and implementation of policies in the defence and national security sector. Further, it is a matter of self-interest for militaries because if they do not have clear and tangible climate commitments, they may find it harder to attract a more climate-conscious younger generation to join their ranks. Likewise, for conscription militaries in the region, they may also face a significant retention challenge if their efforts are deemed out of step with climate realities.

If climate security is not adequately integrated into military and national security planning and preparedness and climate complacency sets in, it will work against the sustainability of the defence sector, divert resources away from primary defence functions, and continue to expose countries across the Indo-Pacific to emerging destabilising threats.

Alistair D. B. COOK *is Coordinator of the Humanitarian Assistance and Disaster Relief Programme, and Senior Fellow at the Centre for Non-Traditional Security Studies (NTS Centre), RSIS. He is currently leading a research project on Climate Security in the Indo-Pacific.*

S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies, NTU Singapore
Block S4, Level B3, 50 Nanyang Avenue, Singapore 639798
T: +65 6790 6982 | E: rsispublications@ntu.edu.sg | W: www.rsis.edu.sg