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Despite What Trump Says, Climate Change Threatens Our National Security

The president is trying to subvert the science that informs the intelligence community.

By John R. Allen and David G. Victor

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Once again, the Trump White House is publicly crossing swords with the intelligence community in ways that are likely to harm American security.

The latest salvo is an effort taking shape over the next few weeks to “red team” the science of climate change — in effect, to challenge it and investigate it for uncertainties. The backdrop for the scheme is President Trump publicly questioning the accuracy of the nation’s most extensive and scientifically robust assessment by 13 federal agencies that showed how stronger storms, higher sea levels, more heat waves and sundry other effects of climate change will harm the nation. This same science has also informed a new intelligence community report that identifies climate change as a significant threat to national security.

Impacts typical of a changing climate are already buffeting the front lines of America’s military presence. Some are palpable and easily trace back to warming. For example, in Alaska, erosion from warmer weather is undermining the foundations at some radar facilities that are critical early-warning networks for attacks on the United States. They are among dozens of facilities the

Pentagon has tagged as at risk from recurrent flooding, drought, desertification, wildfires or thawing permafrost resulting from shifts in climate that are happening much faster than expected. To some degree, better engineering — although often at substantially higher cost — will help reduce these impacts.

Much more insidious are the effects of warming on the social fabric and confidence in government in countries whose stability matters to American security. As commander of United States forces in Afghanistan and other locations, one of us (General Allen) dealt regularly with insurgencies and failed states that created direct dangers to American security. In Afghanistan, for example, the failure of the state is linked in part to weaker agriculture (the main source of income in most communities).

What makes climate change such a pernicious problem is that it increases the odds of those adverse conditions arising — especially in places where government already does not function well. When the stress of climate change multiplies, so will the problems the military must handle.

While it's always a good idea to look at uncertainties in any scientific assessment, the White House red-teaming is poised to investigate the wrong questions. The scheme, anchored in the climate-denier community, is designed to generate talking points for a president who is skeptical of climate science and thus will focus on whether climate change is happening at all and whether a little warming is all bad news.

A useful red team would investigate uncertainties in the opposite way, by focusing on the evidence that the climate is changing much more rapidly than originally expected. Getting serious about the odds that global warming could be much more harmful than expected could amplify previous assessments for the nation's security.

Uncertainty is endemic to climate science because the exact level of future changes in climate are hard to pin down. The pathways that lead from warming

to tangible harm to the nation's coastlines, crops, military and overseas interests are highly complex. Some of the best scientific studies on these impacts — including last fall's assessment by 13 federal agencies — have begun to look at how uncertainty and complexity interact in ways that make climate dangers look much scarier. Good intelligence estimates must grapple more fully with this as well, but doing that properly will be a lot harder now that the White House is instructing the rest of the government to avoid serious analysis of climate dangers.

This week, 58 former military and intelligence officials sent a letter to the president warning him that “imposing a political test on reports issued by the science agencies, and forcing a blind spot onto the national security assessments that depend on them, will erode our national security.”

This is hardly the only place where the Trump White House is visibly undermining its own intelligence community. Recent examples abound — North Korea, Russia and Iran, among many other locations — of the White House taking issue with its own appointed intelligence officials on vital national security issues. With that as precedent, the White House warning shot across the intelligence agencies on climate change is hardly surprising yet still alarming.

Ignoring the anti-science noise in the White House is dangerous for the nation. Climate change is arguably America's and its allies' longest-term security crisis. But the immediate national security crisis is a White House browbeating our scientific and intelligence community into its political line or seeking to tamper with the science and intelligence itself.

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